

The Last Things

People are interested in the future. (Most secular magazines contain horoscopes and many have entire pages dedicated to advertisements for clairvoyants, tarot card readers, and so on.)

It has been estimated that a quarter of the Bible is prophecy, much of it still in the future. Where are we headed? “Eschatology” is theology’s attempt to put the complex jigsaw together.

1. Death

Life is short, like a breath, or a vapour. “The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10). We want to remain forever young, but the Bible reminds us that the years pass and death is inevitable (Psalm 49:10; Hebrews 9:27).

There is a Positive Christian view of approaching old age:

- “Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. (Isaiah 46:4).
- Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet “His eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.” (Deut. 34:7).
- We need the same attitude about serving the Lord in our later years as Caleb, never quitting, but asking the Lord to continue giving him more challenges to conquer and overcome with the Lord’s help (Joshua 14:12).
- David declared that the righteous will “flourish in the courts of our God, They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green” (Psalm 92:13, 14).
- God will keep us: Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death , I will fear no evil, for you are with me....(Psalm 23: 4)

Recommended reading: *Nearing Home: Life, Faith and Finishing Well*, Billy Graham, 2011

Two paradigms about death:

- Christian viewpoint - “Death is the separation of soul and body and the introduction of man into the unseen world” (Pearlman, p. 369)
- Secular viewpoint - “The ending of life.” (Oxford Dictionary)

Death is described in the Bible as:

- sleep (not “soul sleep”, which some cults teach) - John 11:11; Deuteronomy 31:16
- the earthly house of this tabernacle being dissolved - 2 Corinthians 5:1
- putting off this tabernacle, or tent - 2 Peter :14
- God requiring the soul - Luke 12:20
- going the way from which there is no return - Job 16:22
- being gathered to one’s own people - Genesis 49:33
- going down in silence - Psalm 115:17
- giving up the ghost/spirit - Acts 5:10
- returning to the dust - Genesis 3:19; Psalm 104:29
- being cut down - Job 14:2
- departing - Philippians 1:23

Solomon put it this way: "...the silver cord is severed ... the golden bowl is broken ... the pitcher is shattered at the spring ... the wheel is broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Ecclesiastes 12:6, 7)

Death is the outward and visible sign of the impact of sin in the human race. Adam was created to be immortal, but after he disobeyed God he and his descendants were destined to die - Romans 5:12-14. Death occurs in the midst of life and is certain - Ecclesiastes 8:8. Even infants are subject to the physical reality of death, because of sin in the human race.

Satan uses the fear of death to keep people in bondage. Jesus came to destroy his works - Hebrews 2:14-15.

The good news is that Christ has "abolished death and brought light and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10).

Death is the last enemy from which we (as Christians) will be saved - Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:26.

"Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it."
(2 Corinthians 5:6-9, cf Philippians 1:23)

2. Resurrection

"If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14).

The New Testament records six resurrections:

- Jairus' daughter - Matthew 9:24, 25
- young man of Nain - Luke 7:14, 15
- Lazarus - John 11:43, 44
- Jesus Christ - all four Gospels
- Dorcas - Acts 9:40, 41
- Eutychus - Acts 20:9-12

Resurrection is important to Christians

- represents the redemption of the body from the effects of sin - 1 Corinthians 6:13-20 teaches that the body can be set apart for God's dwelling. We have seen how some religions teach that the body is evil and that salvation comes from leaving the body. The resurrection of Jesus Christ proved the body can be a temple for God. Physical resurrection is the final fulfilment of Christ's work - Romans 13:11; 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54; Philippians 3:20, 21
- confirmation of the Bible's teaching about immortality
- we grieve when someone close dies, but not like those without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Grief is a reality; Jesus knew grief (Isaiah 53:3; John 11:35). God has promised to comfort us (Matthew 5:4).

According to the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:13-19), if there is no resurrection:

- our preaching is useless
- the faith of all Christians is in vain
- God's ministers are in effect false witnesses
- we are all still in the grip and guilt of our sins
- Christians who have died are "lost"
- we are to be pitied more than all people
- we might as well give up and live for ourselves, with no restraint, because we will all die

"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

The nature of the resurrection

"How are the dead raised? With what manner of body do they come?" (1 Corinthians 15:35)

According to the Bible, the resurrection will be characterised as follows:

1. we will have (recognizable) but different bodies (1 Corinthians 15:44), just like Jesus, in His post-resurrection appearances
2. the resurrection will be real/literal; people will know one another
3. incorruption/glory - the human body is very "corruptible" - Philippians 3:21; our new bodies will not decay - 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; Revelation 21:4.
4. in heaven there will be no death - Luke 20:36; Revelation 21:4
5. our new bodies will have the same properties as the resurrected Jesus, no longer bound by time, space and natural laws - John 20:36. We will be like Him in every way - 1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 15:49

3. The Future Life

Christians have eternal life now, with hope for the future - John 3:36; 11:25, 26; 1 John 5:11, 12

- "hope of a certain resurrection" - John 5:29; 1 Timothy 4:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17
- Christ is our life - Colossians 3:4
- His resurrection gives us "living hope and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for us" (1 Peter 1:3-4)
- death can never separate us from His love - Romans 8:38

The Bible teaches us about judgement - Matthew 16:27; Acts 17:31; 24:25; Romans 2:16; Hebrews 9:27, but offers the way out through Christ's substitutionary death.

What happens to Christians when they die?

The human soul instinctively believes in Heaven - "surely this is not all there is". Otherwise we are reduced to a materialistic, \$ per kilo approach?

The Bible shows an order:

- state of rest “with the Lord” while awaiting the resurrection
- resurrection
- “Bema” judgement for rewards for works performed in this life - 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Romans 14:10-12
- appearance of the “New Jerusalem” - Revelation 21
- with all Christians and with the Lord, for eternity - Ephesians 1:10; 1 Corinthians 15:58

Like Jesus, we can look forward to “leaving the world and being with the Father” (John 6:18).

What about Purgatory?

The Catholic Church (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2005) teaches that:

- Purgatory is the state of those who die in God’s friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter into the happiness of heaven.
- Because of the communion of saints, the faithful who are still pilgrims on earth are able to help the souls in purgatory by offering prayers in suffrage for them, especially the Eucharistic sacrifice. They also help them by almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance.

Muslims believe Hell is a temporary place of punishment for some, eternal for others. Sinning believers who end up in Hell will stay temporarily but eventually will be removed and admitted into Paradise, and those who reject God (Sura 91) will remain in Hell eternally (Sura 92). However, Islam offers no clear assurance as to the destiny of followers.

Evangelical Christians reject the idea of purgatory as unscriptural.

The Destiny of the Wicked

The Bible’s teaching about judgement and eternal separation from God is rejected by many as being inconsistent with their view of Him. “How could a loving God sent people to Hell?”

Jesus Christ (and the Apostles) taught that the wicked will be punished. We need to be clear about this so as to be able to:

- refute error
- understand the importance and urgency of the Great Commission
- answer people about their eternal destiny.

Known as the “second death” - read Revelation 20:12-15

The Bible teaches that Hell is a real place of:

- suffering - Revelation 20:10
- memory and remorse - Luke 16:19-31

- unsatisfied desire - Luke 16:24
- contempt - Daniel 12:2
- hopelessness - Proverbs 11:7; Matthew 25:41.

How do we (as Christians) respond to this teaching?

- encourage one another, because we have hope - Hebrews 10:25
- cease fearing death - Hebrews 2:14, (cf Psalm 49:15)
- keep ourselves from sin - 1 John 3:3; 1 Peter 3:11, 12, 14
- work for God while it is “day” - John 9:4
- seek God’s Kingdom priorities in our lives/decisions - 1 Corinthians 15:58
- rescue sinners, since we know the fear of the Lord and the reality of eternal judgement and punishment - Jude 22, 23; 2 Corinthians 5:11
- live as though we are waiting for new heaven and new earth - 1 Peter 3:13

4. The Second Coming of Christ

The second coming of Christ is the central event in Christian eschatology. Jesus promised that He would come again. This promise was one of the great themes of the early Church and gives a better understanding of the basis of Christian hope for the future.

(a) The Fact of His Coming

“Parousia” = appearing, presence, arrival. Mentioned 318 times in the New Testament - some whole books/chapters are dedicated to it. Paul refers to the Second Coming at least fifty times. Each time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we are reminding ourselves of His promised return:

“As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26)

Promised by:

- Old Testament prophets, eg Jude 14
- Jesus Christ - John 14:1-3
- angels at Jesus’ ascension, forth days after the resurrection - Acts 1:10, 11
- the Apostles - throughout the New Testament.

(b) The Manner of His Coming

Christ will come:

- Physically/literally- Jesus appeared to His disciples after his resurrection with a [physical (though glorified) body - Luke 24:39, 42, 43; He will return physically - Acts 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17; Revelation 1:7
- Visibly - Hebrews 9:28; Philippians 3:20
- Personally - 1 Thessalonians 4:14, 15
- Gloriously - Matthew 16:27, with angels - 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; Colossians 3:4; Matthew 25:41
- To usher in a new heaven and a new earth - 2 Peter 3:13

(c) The Timing of His Coming

Cults/individuals have long predicted the date of Jesus' return, often with publicity and embarrassing results. Jesus said that only God know the time of His return - Matthew 24:36-42; Mark 13:21, 22. It will be sudden - 1 Corinthians 15:52; Matthew 24:27; and completely unexpected - 2 Peter 3:4, 10, 11; Matthew 24:48-51; Revelation 16:15; Mark 13:23.

Passages in the Bible speak of a time of terrible tribulation; in connection with the rise of an "Antichrist".

Christians are not in agreement as to exactly what this means in historical terms and when it will occur. Many evangelical Christians hold to one of three positions:

Pre-Tribulation Rapture	God has not appointed Christians to wrath - 1 Thessalonians 5:9. The church and the Holy Spirit will leave the earth before the rise of the Antichrist.
Mid-Tribulation Rapture	The church will remain on the earth till the Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel and will be raptured at the 3 ½ year mark in a 7 year period.
Post-Tribulation Rapture	The church will go through the entire y-year period of the Antichrist's reign. They will either be supernaturally safeguarded or greatly suffer.

Other Christians do not believe a Tribulation will occur in this way.

(d) The Signs of His Coming

Signs of Jesus' return (pre-Tribulation approach to eschatology, or the End Times) include:

- moral decay - Luke 17:26-30
- apostasy and false cults - Matthew 24:11; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4
- powerless religion posing as Christianity - 2 Timothy 3:4; Matthew 24:12
- lawlessness and self-will - 2 Timothy 3:1-4
- world-wide evangelism - Mark 13:10

- increasing knowledge and travel - Daniel 12:4
- vast wealth held by a few - James 5:1-3
- famine, pestilence, earthquakes and wars - Matthew 24:6, 7
- distress and chronic fear of the future - Luke 21:25, 26
- talk of peace - 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3
- false Christs - Matthew 24:5

(e) The Purpose of His Coming

In Relation to the Church

To take the church to be with Him, in His presence forever - John 14:3; Matthew 24:40, 41

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Many evangelical Christians describe this climactic event as the “rapture” (although the word does not appear in the Bible). Christian believers who previously died will be resurrected and, together with living Christians, will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Paul believed the coming of Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the rapture would all happen at (more or less) the same time.

This event is:

- exclusive - unbelievers will have no part - Revelation 20:5
- a surprise; only for those who are ready - Matthew 24:42, 44; Hebrews 9:28

It will precede:

- the Judgment Seat of Christ, for Christians, for rewards - 2 Corinthians 5:10, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15
- the Marriage Supper of the Lamb = foreshadowed in Matthew 22:1-14; 25:1-11 and consummated in Revelation 19:7-9

What does all this mean for Christians? We are called to:

- purify ourselves - 1 John 3:2, 3
- do the work of Christ with fully committed hearts - 2 Timothy 4:1; looking forward to the Lord’s “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21)
- have our hearts set on His coming - 2 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 10:28
- take heart because God is in control - John 14:1
- have confidence in the fulfillment of God’s purpose in our lives - Philippians 1:6
- be faithful to God and His Word - 1 Timothy 6:13, 14
- be on guard - Mark 13:35-37

In Relation to Non-Christians

Unbelievers will be judged at the “Great White Throne Judgment”, where the “books” will be opened. The basis of the judgment against them will be their state of sin and the fact that their names are not written in what the Bible calls the “Book of Life” - Revelation 20:12-15

Approaching the Book of Revelation

The last book of the New testament has been the subject of great debate over centuries. It has been interpreted more than any other book in the Bible. There are four common theological approaches:

- Futurist approach - sees Revelation as referring to events which have not yet come to pass, but will occur at the end of the age.
- Preterist approach - looks back to the events of the first century, such as the struggle of Christianity in the face of the persecutions by the Roman Empire, the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the desecration of the temple that year.
- Historicist approach - sees in Revelation a broad view of history; passages in Revelation are identified with historical people and events.
- Idealist (or Spiritualist, or Symbolic) approach - the events of Revelation are purely symbolic, depicting the struggle, and ultimate triumph, of good over evil.

Internally, Revelation contains some important clues. It is:

- revelational - God wants us to read and understand it
- Christological - the “revelation of Jesus Christ” is the key
- heavily symbolical - signs, symbols, types, figures, emblems and metaphors, as well as literal events - only some are explained in the context
- eschatological - written to show “things to come”
- chronological - past, present and future culmination of the program of God
- prophetic - “what must soon take place”

What is the Millennium?

A thousand-year reign by Jesus Christ. This element of eschatology has also been debated at length and there are several key views among theologians

View	Position
Premillennial	Christ will return physically and personally, to set up His Kingdom over the earth. Christians who have died will be raised, and will reign with Him for 1,000 years. After this, there will be a final rebellion. God will prevail and the wicked will be judged.
Postmillennial	The idea of 1,000 years is probably figurative; it speaks of a long period of time before the coming of Christ. The triumph of the Gospel will usher in a period of peace that will endure until Christ returns.
Amillennial	The millennium is non-existent as a literal period; it represents the intermediate state of the dead. Christ may return at any time, judge the world and usher in new heavens and a new earth.

For further information, consult “Things to Come” by Dwight Pentecost.

The earliest Christians often greeted one another with “Maranatha”, or “The Lord is Coming. We need to keep this hope before us.

“Even so, come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20)