

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

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§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 1

The Second Return of Christ (Biblical Data)

Today we begin our final theological locus, or topic, in this course, namely, the Doctrine of the Last Things. I looked the other day on our website and saw that there have been to date 195 Defenders podcasts over the course of our time together. When you think that I am not here every Sunday, and that some Sundays we don't meet at all because of holidays, that means that we've been meeting for over four years going through this series of Christian doctrine. Now, at long last, we are coming into the home stretch and beginning our final locus. Then, for those who are so interested, we will start all over again. If you are a newcomer to the class and haven't been with us from four years ago, we are going to start anew, and you'll have a chance to survey the whole body of Christian doctrine with us over the coming years. So it is with a sense of accomplishment and gratitude to the Lord that we are completing our course. I am especially thrilled that during the course of this time, Rick and his team have started recording on high definition video the classes. They are going out on live stream over the internet. It is just really exciting to see what has happened in Defenders over the last four years.

However, before we begin our final locus, I promised last time that we would give an opportunity for any further discussion that anyone would like to raise over our study of the Doctrine of the Church and in particular the doctrine of the sacraments.

DISCUSSION

Question: I went back and checked. There are a couple of things that were brought up in the last couple of classes regarding the church fathers and the doctrine of the real presence. It was unanimous. There was no dissent among any church father recorded that did not accept and believe the real presence. Even the church father that I mentioned last week – Ignatius of Antioch – he was the Bishop of Antioch, and Antioch at the turn of the first century was the center of Christianity. He was taught by the apostle John. When I paraphrased his comments in the letter that he wrote to the Smyrnaeans on his way to Rome to be martyred, he said – I can read it, but it is not necessary – that it is the heretics – the Docetists – at the time that did not believe that what they ate was, in fact, the body and blood of Christ.

Answer: Do you have the passage? I would like to hear it. This is from his letter to the Smyrnaeans.

Followup: He said,

They [the Docetists] even absent themselves from the Eucharist and public prayers, because they will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, and which the Father in his goodness afterwards raised up again. Consequently, since they reject God's good gifts, they are doomed in their disputatiousness.

Every church father accepted the real presence. It wasn't even any objection of any note until the 11th century, and that was Berengarius who was a monk and he questioned it. But then he recanted before his death.

Answer: There was a 9th century dispute over this as well, right?¹

Followup: I don't believe so, unless I have the date of Berengarius wrong. I've read that it was the 11th century before there was any kind. But still, Jesus in John 16 says, "When the Holy Spirit comes he will guide you in all truth." Within a few years John, who recorded that, taught Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius, just one of the apostolic fathers, was adamant. Every other father was after that. Justin Martyr, who was the first great apologist of the church, when he was trying to convince the Emperor fruitlessly of what Christianity was all about, he described not only the Sunday worship service, but he went into talking about the change that took place of the bread and the wine.² The early Christians were even accused – and you can see this in the historical secular documents – of cannibalism in their services because they were in fact saying this is the flesh of their God.

Answer: Or that could have been a misunderstanding on the part of pagan unbelievers who didn't understand what they were doing. Right? You can't make that jump.

Followup: Correct. Pliny the Younger had brought Christians before him and he gave them opportunity after opportunity to deny what they were being accused of. John 6, which you said was not in your view Eucharistic, was another unanimous understanding that that was Eucharistic. You mentioned how could the Eucharist – Christ's body – be divided around the world. John 6 begins with the feeding of the five thousand where the bread is divided. That is the whole point of the feeding of the five thousand, just before John 6, the Bread of Life Discourse.

Answer: So you think that the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, his resurrection body, is literally multiplied in that way all around the world?

Followup: It is. Sacramentally, it is. Absolutely. Really, truly it is.

Answer: It seems to me that that is what you would have to say in order to hold to that. But that is an enormous inference to make from the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Followup: Well, that is the way the early church understood it, that's the way the fathers understood it, that's the way it is still understood. John 17:2, Christ says "the Father has given me power over all flesh for eternal life." That ties right in with John 6 where he is talking about "if you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will have eternal life."

Answer: Let me say that, with respect to the church fathers, if you look at a survey of Christian doctrine like Hubert Cunliffe-Jones' *A History of Christian Doctrine*, there he records a diversity of opinion with respect to the presence of the actual body and blood of Christ among the church fathers.

Now for us as Protestants this is to a certain degree an academic question because, unlike

¹ Dr. Craig is correct. There was a 9th century dispute between St. Paschasius Radbertus and a Benedictine monk named Ratramnus regarding the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

² 5:10

Catholics, we don't take church tradition to have equal authority with Scripture. So we are not averse to saying, well, the church fathers got it wrong with respect to this or that. Where it would be interesting, I think, and your argument would be important would be, for example, saying how could Ignatius have gotten this so wrong if he had been taught by the apostle John. That is a good question.

Question: With regard to Ignatius and the Docetists, I think his point there was that the Docetists were saying that Jesus didn't have a physical body at all. That was the core of their whole doctrine – Jesus was spirit only. That was the problem he had with them. They were absent in themselves of the Eucharist because they didn't believe that Christ had a body to begin with. So I don't know if we can really take that one statement as being indicative of transubstantiation when his issue with the Docetists wasn't specifically so much the Eucharist and more their views of Christ's physicality as a whole.

Answer: I think you are making a good point. Docetism denied that Christ came in the flesh at all. But the Ignatius text that was read did seem to suggest that there was something about the Eucharist that did involve the real flesh of Christ that then of course Docetists would also find offensive. So I would like to look at that passage some more. But I think that your caution is a good one. The Docetists' error was not denying the real presence; it was denying the incarnation. But then how Ignatius saw that played out in the Eucharist would bear looking into.

Question: I look at an issue like this and see sincere godly Christians on various sides.³ We have several views of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, and the question comes to mind, couldn't a reasonable position be that there is something to the real presence of Christ in the communion and yet there is also something to the commemoration to the spiritual presence and leave it as a mystery and not try to figure everything out?

Answer: Well, but in doing good theology you don't want to just sort of say, "Well, let's find the most common ground. Let's look for a view that will make everybody happy." That's not a good guide to doing theology. What you've got to do is look at the biblical text, do a good exegesis of it, and then see if it supports the idea that there is a real presence of Christ there. If you think so, well then you can hold to that. But as I shared last time, it seems to me that the exegetical basis for this is very weak. It is very slim. Clearly, when Jesus was sitting there at the table with them saying "This is my body, this is my blood" he didn't mean that literally because there he was physically. I gave examples of Semitic use of imagery, of a prophetic symbolization of the message that the prophet is giving. I think when you read it against that background, there isn't any good reason to say that this is meant to be the literal body and blood of Jesus. Then remember my second objection that this is incompatible with a serious doctrine of the resurrection of Christ, which is that Christ has a physical, humanoid, finite resurrection body that he appeared to the disciples in. I think what you are driven to by this real presence doctrine is just what was said, namely, this sort of miraculous multiplication of the resurrection body of Christ in order to make sense of this, which seems to me fantastic.

So I appreciate the point you are making. Certainly there are good Christians that

³ 10:01

disagree. If anything you've learned in the Defenders class when it comes to predestination and election, justification, attributes of God, of course there are good, sincere Christian people on all sides. We want to be united on the essentials and to be charitable on the secondary doctrines. We are not trying to put anybody in a box here on these doctrines. But I am giving my best opinion as a teacher about what is taught by the Bible about these things. You are certainly at liberty to disagree. But don't disagree just to make peace. Don't disagree just to say, "Well, everybody on all sides are good people, so let's find a golden mean." Don't do it that way.

Followup: I guess what I was saying is let's not find a golden mean. Let's just leave it as a mystery.

Answer: But when you say that there is a real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, and by that you mean his body and blood, you are taking a position then. That's not leaving it a mystery. The mystery would just be to say, "I don't know."

Followup: That is what I'm trying to say.

Answer: Oh, OK.

Followup: I cannot rule that out. And I think that there are some things – as we talked about, predestination and free will – that because we cannot agree on them, we could reasonably conclude that there are some things that we cannot figure out and ought to be left a mystery and not try to define a position.

Answer: All right. I certainly agree with that in principle. I know there are areas of Christian doctrine where I have no dogmatic view. I haven't studied them enough to be able to have a strong opinion. I think that there is a truth about those things even if it is unknown to me, but I can't take a position. If a person feels like that about this issue then that is certainly what he ought to do. Better to simply say, "I don't know" than to make up your mind too hastily and put yourself into a doctrine that you are not equipped to defend.⁴

Question: Could it be that it is a progressive revelation because based on when the Holy Spirit comes he will guide you to all truth, and it is the Spirit who gives life and flesh counts for nothing? So when God or Jesus tries to expand a spiritual principle to a flesh people or spiritual infants, as you write the children's book you couldn't go into the spiritual principle. You have to use a lot of physical ways for them to even grasp the essence of the message. So could it just be because the audience's spiritual maturity is not there and so there is a progressive understanding as one's spirit matures?

Answer: I thought that was the point that someone was making last week when we closed where she commented upon the hardness of heart of the people to whom the people Jesus was speaking in John 6. He said privately to the disciples the flesh counts for nothing and it is the spirit that gives life. But he knew those who didn't believe and they departed and there was in one sense no loss because he knew where their hearts were anyway. I thought that that was the point in a way that she was trying to make.

Question: In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul warns those who don't believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. If they don't discern the body then they cast judgment on

⁴ 14:55

themselves. It doesn't really make sense that if you were to cast judgment on yourself – which means death – then that wouldn't happen with a symbol.

Answer: Wouldn't it? Remember there were people in Corinth that were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper, right? They were abusing the Lord's Table and going ahead and selfishly eating and not caring for others. I could well imagine in a case like that that people who were taking the Lord's Supper without understanding its significance, and by that not meaning the real body and blood of Jesus but understanding that we are celebrating this supper to represent Christ's death on the cross for us, and that that sort of cavalier attitude would be one that would bring judgment on you because you don't take it with appropriate seriousness.

Followup: We also don't want to forget that Jesus converted the Passover into the Eucharist. He brought it forth from what it was in shadow and brought light to what it really meant. So he was the Passover Lamb, *the* sacrifice, but he was also the priest of that sacrifice. He was the sacrifice for that meal. He concluded the Passover for all time. So this is really what the Eucharist means. He becomes the Passover meal.

Answer: All right.

Question: I just wanted to say that there was an interesting comment over here about splitting the baby theologically. I think you've answered that. I think Molinism does that on another topic, sort of. It sort of tries to understand that. But I don't know if you could apply that here. On the doctrines of the Catholic Church, if you ever read – and I'm not saying that I agree with it all – Dr. John MacArthur has on his website some very shocking things that he says go with that. Not the least of which is, and where I have trouble with that, when Christ said two things about the ordinance – what he refers to as an ordinance – of communion which is “do this in remembrance of me.” That's the first thing. The second thing is we know from the book of Hebrews that it is once and for all, for all sins past, present, and future. And “it is finished.” The temple veil split, clearly delineating between the old covenant and the new covenant. There is no additional propitiation; there is no additional sacrifice that is needed because Christ and what he did is the new covenant.⁵

Answer: OK. Your comments have registered.

Followup: If you look at it in the context of that, it is very, very hard to understand that. But I will say this. In regard to the earlier comments regarding one thousand years ago being “wrong” and the evidence for that, I think that is a very interesting thing to explore and pursue. How could it have been that it was a thousand years or more without much evidence at least that there was a contrary view to this in the new covenant. That is something worth exploring to the extent that there is documented history on it.

Followup #2: There is a Semitic sense of remembrance where the Jews, when they celebrate Passover, they place themselves in that time period as if they had been there. Remembrance to Jews doesn't mean they are just simply recollecting and remembering and it's a nice thought. It is not that way. They are actually taught to place themselves as if they had been at the exodus. So we have to understand what Jesus and the Eucharist was doing at the same time. He wants us now to be there celebrating the Eucharist.

⁵ 20:09

Answer: OK.

Obviously, there are strong feelings on both sides of this topic. I hope that our discussion has been one that is fair and provocative and illuminating – hopefully.

Second Coming of Christ

Today we want to turn to a new and final theological topic which is the Doctrine of the Last Things. The fancy theological word for this locus is *eschatology*, from the Greek word *eschatos* meaning “last” or “final.” So this is the doctrine of the end of the world and the final state of man after death.

We want to talk first of all about the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ because it is the teaching of the New Testament that the eschaton – the final resolution and culmination of human history – will come with the return of Christ to earth.

Biblical Data

Let’s first look at some biblical data concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

First, some Old Testament material. In Old Testament Judaism there was the fervent hope of a glorious messianic kingdom that God would someday inaugurate upon the earth. In the Old Testament prophets, you have predictions of this coming messianic kingdom. For example, let’s look at Isaiah 9:6-7, some very familiar verses:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom,
to establish it, and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Here you see the prophecy of this Davidic king who would be in charge of the government of Israel and who would bring about this reign of peace and justice and righteousness that would endure forever.

Turn over to Isaiah 11:1-10.⁶ Here Isaiah says,

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,

⁶ 24:21

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and might,
 the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
 and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
 and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
 Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
 and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
 and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
 The cow and the bear shall feed;
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
 The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
 They shall not hurt or destroy
 in all my holy mountain;
 for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
 as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.

Here is this idyllic messianic king who will reign over the world and bring peace among the nations with justice and righteousness. This was the hope for the Jewish people – this messianic kingdom that God would someday deliver.

In the prophecy of Daniel 7 we have a very significant description of the deliverance of this kingdom to a human person. Daniel 7:13-14. In the other visions that Daniel sees, he sees images of beasts or combinations of beasts, but now he sees in verse 13 a human figure. In verse 13 of chapter 7, Daniel writes,

I saw in the night visions,
 and behold, with the clouds of heaven
 there came one like a son of man,
 and he came to the Ancient of Days
 and was presented before him.
 And to him was given dominion
 and glory and kingdom,
 that all peoples, nations, and languages
 should serve him;

his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
 which shall not pass away,
 and his kingdom one
 that shall not be destroyed.

Here is this human person presented before God to whom God delivers the kingdom and all authority over the peoples of the earth. This was the title that Jesus picked up on to describe himself as “the Son of Man.” Not just “a” son of man (a human being) but “the” Son of Man, with the definite article referring back to this prophecy in the seventh chapter of Daniel.

In the New Testament, the writings of the New Testament are pervaded with predictions of the Second Coming of Christ when he will return to establish his Kingdom over the earth. There are some 250 references in the New Testament to the return of Christ. Let’s look at a few of these, some of the most important.

Turn to Mark 13. This is Jesus’ so-called Olivet Discourse where he is seated with the disciples on the Mount of Olives and they ask him about the end of the world and the judgment. Then he gives this discourse on the end times.⁷ Let’s read Mark 13:

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.”

And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple,

[They went from the Temple Mount across the Kidron Valley up onto the Mount of Olives looking across at the Temple Mount with Herod’s beautiful temple there at the summit.]

Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” And Jesus began to say to them, “Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.

“But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

⁷ 29:09

“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything away; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if any one says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand.

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning— lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.”

In addition to this central passage in the Gospels on the return of Christ, we also find in the letters of Paul descriptions of this event which clearly echo the teachings of Jesus in the Olivet Discourse.⁸ Look with me at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:8. Paul writes to these Greek believers,

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of

⁸ 35:00

God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

Here Paul talks about this same event of the return of Christ and the in-gathering of the elect and the resurrection of the dead. He then ends with the same exhortation, “Watch, stay awake, be alert. You don’t know when this is going to happen.”

The final passage I would like to read from the New Testament is 1 John 3:2-3. John writes, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” Here John says that when Christ returns we are going to be made like him. Then he gives again the exhortation, “In the meantime, purify yourself in the same way that Christ is pure.”

Let me say a word about the New Testament vocabulary for the return of Christ because there are a variety of words that are used to specify this event. The most common of these is the word *parousia*. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8 we have this word used. “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him . . . And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming.” So *parousia* is often translated as the word “coming” or the “presence” of Christ – his appearing, his becoming present, or simply his coming.⁹

Another word that is used is *apokalupsis*. For example, this word is used in 2 Thessalonians 1:7. He speaks of granting “rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire.” The word *apokalupsis* is translated as “revelation” – the revealing of something. So Christ’s Second Coming is also referred to sometimes as the Apocalypse or the revealing of Christ when he comes again.

A third word is *epiphaneia*. This word is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 when Paul says, “the Lord Jesus will slay him [the lawless one] with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming.” The *parousia* is the coming of Christ; *epiphaneia* is the appearing of Christ. This will often be translated by the English word “appearance.”

⁹ 40:04

These are some of the principal words to refer to the Second Coming of Christ: *parousia*, *apokalupsis*, and *epiphaneia*. All are referring to this event when Christ will bodily and physically return to earth to establish decisively his promised Kingdom.

DISCUSSION

Question: Just a commentary. I've read that *apokalupsis* actually can also mean unveiling. There is a reference to the unveiling of a bride – the removal of a veil – to reveal the bride. I've also done a lot of research where we read that the book of Revelation is really the groom coming back for his bride. It is Jesus coming back for his church – the bride. So he comes for the marriage supper of the lamb.

Answer: Right. Although there the analogy would be a little bit reversed because there it is Christ who is being revealed rather than the bride, right? It is not the bride who is veiled. That is why the book of Revelation is very often called the Apocalypse. It is the Apocalypse. It is the revealing of Christ to the church. But your point is right. Another word (instead of “reveal”) is you could say “disclose.” You unveil or disclose something. That would be what an apocalypse would be.

Question: I'm happy to report that we agree on eschatology, OK? *[laughter]*. I just had one question. When you read from Mark 13 (which parallels Matthew 24), it mentioned that the generation that sees the fig tree bloom will be the generation that sees the end. Can you address that point? If that is somewhat literal?

Answer: This will be one of our major points in our outline that we will talk about in this class. This is the so-called Problem of the Delay of the Parousia. This is what scholars typically refer to regarding this problem. There are a couple of passages where Christ seems to indicate that this is going to happen during the lifetime of the disciples. We read one such verse where he says, “I say to you this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.”¹⁰ There is another passage where he says, “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man come in power.”¹¹ We will later deal with this Problem of the Delay of the Parousia.

Followup: *[off-mic]* Will you also address that some people believe that that actually refers to 1948? The rebirth of Israel.

Answer: I see. I understand. Yeah, we will look at various theories to try to see how those verses are best to be understood, and also the preterist view that these things in fact did take place prior to the death of the disciples. It took place in the first generation. So we will look at those views when we come to them.

What we want to do next time is take up the question, “Is there one Second Coming of Christ or are there more than one Second Coming of Christ?” Here we will talk about the so-called Rapture view as well as other views of the return of Christ which would say that Christ will not return simply once but more than once. That will be our subject for next

¹⁰ cf. Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30

¹¹ cf. Matthew 16:28, Luke 9:27

time.¹²

¹² Total Running Time: 45:57 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 2

The Rapture View, Part 1

We opened this section last time by looking at the biblical data concerning the return of Christ. We saw that in the Old Testament there was the expectation of a glorious messianic kingdom that would come to Earth by a sort of quasi-human-divine figure – the Son of Man. We saw that in the New Testament there is pervasive reference to the return of Christ especially in Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 and in Paul's Thessalonian correspondence. We will be looking more in detail at those passages today so you may want to put a bookmark in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and then also in Mark 13.

Again, by way of review, we saw that there is a range of New Testament vocabulary for the return of Christ. It is alternatively called the *parousia* which refers to the coming or the presence of the Lord, or *apokalupsis* which is the revelation of the Lord, or *epiphaneia* which is the appearing of the Lord.

The question that we want to address this morning is the question: Is there going to be one return of Christ or many? Is Christ going to return simply one time or he is going to return multiple times? There are a variety of views as you might well anticipate on this question among Christians.

Rapture View

Let's first talk about what I'll call the *rapture view*. According to this view there is going to be an invisible return of Christ to snatch away believers before the final visible return of Christ to establish his Kingdom. This invisible return of Christ – or rapture – is to rescue Christians from the Great Tribulation that we saw Jesus predicted in his Olivet Discourse.

This position, I'm sure, is very familiar to most of us, but it must be said that this is not the historic position of the Christian church. In fact, this view is one of relatively recent origin dating to a man named John Darby in 1827. So this view is sometimes called Darbyism after the originator of this interpretation. This view has been exceedingly influential in the evangelical church because of its endorsement by the famous Scofield Reference Bible. The use of the Scofield Reference Bible in fundamentalist and evangelical churches helped to promote this view of the rapture. Moreover, Dallas Theological Seminary, which is one of the flagship evangelical seminaries, is committed to this interpretation as well. Through the many pastors that it has trained and placed in American evangelical churches this view has become very widespread. Finally, the view has become enormously popular in pop culture through the writings of authors like Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (which some of you will remember), or more recently the series by Tim LaHaye called *Left Behind* which has been a runaway best seller. Because of the influence of these factors in the evangelical church and in popular culture, many of us never know of any other view than this rapture view. In fact, I would say that for many of us who have been raised in Christian homes or Christian churches we've absorbed this view with our mother's milk and have never really thought to

examine its biblical credentials to see if this is actually a biblical view and to assess the question whether the historic Christian church has for eighteen centuries been in error in thinking that there is but one return of Christ and it isn't preceded by this invisible return in which he snatches believers out of the world.¹³

So let's examine the biblical basis for this view. Turning to the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 which we read last time, I think in all candor we have to say you would never guess from Jesus' Olivet Discourse on the course of the end times that there is going to be an invisible return of Christ to rapture believers out of the world and extract them prior to the tribulation or at any other time for that matter. Look at Mark 13:19-20, 24-27. Jesus says,

For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.

There is no suggestion here that the elect are going to be snatched out of the world and spared from this Great Tribulation that Jesus here predicts. Then in verses 24-27 he says,

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Notice that this gathering of the elect that will occur when the Son of Man returns is a visible event. This is not some secret return of Christ invisible to the eye. They will see the Son of Man returning on the clouds with power and great glory and then he will gather the elect. This takes place after the tribulation and is clearly a visible event that people will see and experience.

So there is nothing in this Olivet Discourse, I think we have to say, that would suggest the idea of a secret rapture of the church prior to the return of the Son of Man to gather the elect and establish his kingdom.

So you might ask: Where does this idea come from? If it doesn't come from the Olivet Discourse, where does this idea of a rapture of the church come from? Well, it comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. There Paul writes,

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

The interpretation is that this is describing this rapture in which the elect will be snatched

¹³ 5:07

out of the world, taken up into the clouds to be with Christ, and so will be with him forever.

But is that in fact what this passage is describing? I don't see any reason to think that what Paul here describes is a distinct event from the Second Coming of Christ. There is no hint in the Olivet Discourse, you will remember, of any sort of a secret coming of Christ prior to the visible return of the Son of Man and the resurrection of the dead. Paul's teaching is obviously based on Jesus' teaching. It is reflected in the Thessalonian letters. So why would we see this passage as teaching something different than Jesus taught about the return of the Son of Man?¹⁴

What about the expression "meeting the Lord in the air?" The Greek word here is *apantesis*. In Greek literature this word is used to describe the going out of the people to meet a returning dignitary to his city and to welcome him back into the city. *Apantesis* is the going out and welcoming of this returning hero or figure to his rightful domain. This is what is described in 1 Thessalonians. Christ is returning and the elect will be transformed and rise, taken up to meet him and welcome him when he comes back. Look at Mark 13:27, back to the Olivet Discourse. This is, I think, the same event that is described in Mark 13:27: "And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." What Paul is talking about is exactly this – that the Son of Man, when he returns, will gather the elect and, as Paul says, they will rise to meet him and welcome him back on his return.

Also notice that this event is the time of the resurrection of the dead. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17a says,

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them . . .

So this event is the event of the resurrection of the dead. It is the eschatological, end-time resurrection toward which we look. This is not a secret snatching of the elect out of the world. Rather, this is the final resurrection of the dead. Compare this to what Jesus says in John 5:25-29. Jesus says,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man.

[The passage begins with the "Son of God" but then here it refers to this figure that we talked about in Daniel 7, the "Son of Man" who will execute judgment.]

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.

Here Jesus says that when he comes again as the Son of Man, both the righteous dead and

¹⁴ 10:05

the unrighteous dead will rise from the dead for judgment.

Compare this with 1 Corinthians 15:51-55 where you have some of the very same language that we saw in 1 Thessalonians with regard to the trumpet of God and the resurrection of the dead. Paul says,

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?”

Here Paul describes how death will be vanquished finally at the return of Christ when the dead in Christ will be raised and then those who are alive who do not sleep will similarly be changed and be transformed into their resurrection bodies to live with Christ forever, exactly as Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4.¹⁵

Notice that this moment of the resurrection is the destruction of death. This is the end of death. There will be no more death after this. Death is destroyed. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:22-26. Paul says,

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

[Christ's resurrection has already taken place in advance – he is the first fruits of the harvest. But “then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”]

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

So at the Second Coming of Christ, the dead shall be raised, both righteous and unrighteous, for judgment. Those who are alive will be transformed into their resurrection bodies, and death will be finally destroyed, the final enemy. This is, I think, the event that is being described in 1 Thessalonians 4, not some sort of secret rapture of the church.

Look also at Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians which, I think, cements this understanding. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8. Here Paul is describing the same event that he talked about in his first letter to the Thessalonians. He says,

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him,

[which was what he wrote them about in 1 Thessalonians 4-5]

we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit

¹⁵ 15:34

or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming.

Here Paul is talking about the return of Christ and our assembling to meet him and assuring the Thessalonians that certain events have to take place first before this final event will occur. This is, as I say, the same event described in 1 Thessalonians 4. The vocabulary is the same. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul refers to the *parousia*. He says, “until the coming of the Lord.” Until the *parousia* when Christ comes again. Then in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 he says, “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, that is the *parousia*. So the vocabulary is the same. It is the same event. He is talking about the *parousia* – the return of Christ.¹⁶

Notice that that event does not happen until the events described in the Olivet Discourse occur. All of those events that Jesus describes in Mark 13 have to happen first and then will be the *parousia* – the coming of the Son of Man. So go back to Mark 13 again and look at verse 14. There Jesus warns, “But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” Compare that with 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 where Paul says,

. . . that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Here Paul describes this man of lawlessness in similar terms to what Jesus predicts concerning this desolating sacrifice or abomination of desolation that will be set up. So this is something that will occur after that happens.

Also, notice the gathering that Jesus refers to in Mark 13:27: “And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” This gathering is the same event that Paul is talking about in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 where he says, “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him.” The verb that Jesus uses is *episunago* – “he will gather the elect from the four corners of the Earth.” Then in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 Paul uses the noun form *episunagoge* – “our gathering to meet him” or “our assembling to meet him.” So the event that Jesus describes in Mark 13:27 where the angels go out and gather the elect to be with Christ – with the Son of Man – is the same word that Paul uses to describe the *parousia* of Christ – the coming of Christ – and our assembling or gathering to meet him.

¹⁶ 19:57

So it seems to me that the biblical basis for thinking that there is some sort of an invisible return of Christ that is going to precede Christ's visible glorious return at the resurrection of the dead and the Judgment Day just doesn't have any biblical basis at all. It seems to me that there are no grounds for thinking there is such an event as John Darby and others have imagined.

DISCUSSION

Question: I know there is quite vigorous debate about Calvinism versus Arminianism among evangelicals but I am not aware of any debate about this topic so much among evangelicals. Is there debate about this? And if it is not right, does it rise to the level of heresy?

Answer: Oh, no! Of course not. I would never, ever suggest that someone who believes in the rapture is a heretic or not going to heaven. I think we need to be very careful about our words. A heretic is someone who has a doctrinal error so serious that it separates him from salvation. When you think about that, the bar is pretty low. I mean, it is pretty hard to be a heretic in that sense. You would have to deny something like the deity of Christ or his death on the cross for our sins or something of that sort. But getting it wrong about the rapture versus the Second Coming doesn't even approximate an error that serious.¹⁷

Yes, the first part, there certainly is debate about this. Reformed churches, mainline Protestants don't accept this rapture view. Neither do Catholics or Orthodox. This is a view that is widespread in the evangelical subculture, and it is just our lack of familiarity with these other views that leads us to accept it almost unthinkingly. I remember many years ago when Jan and I were at a Campus Crusade for Christ conference. This was when Hal Lindsey's book *Late Great Planet Earth* was big. And I noticed that it wasn't for sale on the book table at the conference. I spoke to the fellow who was running the book table who was Reformed in his theology. I said, "Marty, why isn't Hal Lindsey's book on the book table?" And he said, "Because we don't sell fiction." [laughter] That rather took me aback because I had just accepted this sort of rapture view. I never questioned it. I thought, "Gosh, here is this fellow, a staff member with Crusade whom I respect, and he thinks of it as fiction." I think that was, for me, the first time I had ever really asked myself, "What is the biblical basis for this?"

Question: Where do I begin? The Gospel writers did not address the rapture. Why? If you look at Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and all you do is you circle the "you's," you will find out he was speaking to Jews. He was speaking to Jews. Their history pretty much ended at 70 AD but it is going to be taken up again during Daniel's 70th week. But all in that interim is called the Times of the Gentiles – the time when Jerusalem would be trampled under. Paul called the rapture a mystery.

Answer: Where does he do that?

Followup: In 1 Corinthians 15.

Answer: Well, now, that is assuming that that is referring to the rapture, right?

¹⁷ 24:58

Followup: “I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” That is when this is going to happen.

Answer: Now, wait. Let me ask you a question. Do you think then that at the rapture the dead are going to be raised – all the graves are going to be emptied?

Followup: Yes. There was a type of that that occurred at the crucifixion where you had graves opened. We’ve seen this before.

Answer: So you think there is going to be a resurrection of all of the dead . . .

Followup: Yes, the dead in Christ. Not all the dead – “in Christ.” He makes it very specific – “in Christ.” Those who are raised in both Revelation 5 and 6 (or 6 and 7), you have the souls under the altar. Then you have the great multitude. There will be believers coming out of the tribulation period. That is kind of a misnomer. It is Daniel’s 70th week, the last seven years of history. Great tribulation is the last three and a half years. Daniel calls it “the time of great distress.” In getting back to your resurrection of Old Testament saints – that is covered in Daniel 12 when at the end of the tribulation, God will raise the Old Testament saints from the dead. We know that from Daniel. But the raptured church is going to come out of here. Why did he write 1 Thessalonians? Because a lot of the people that the Thessalonians knew had died and they were very worried about them. What is going to happen to them when Jesus comes back? So Paul gives them 1 Thessalonians that tells them about the rapture of the church. In Thessalonians 2 they are worried . . .

Answer: But you are assuming that it is about the rapture of the church. Isn’t he giving them assurance that those who have fallen asleep in Christ haven’t perished, they are with Christ, and they will come back again with him when Christ returns?

Followup: Right, but he says in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 that we are saved from the wrath to come. He then talks about the rapture. He said it was a mystery. It is something that was not given in the Old Testament. It is something that was brought. It was a new thing that was given to the church.

Answer: Wait, though. You are going so quickly.

Followup: I have to, Bill, I have so much to say. *[laughter]*

Answer: Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Followup: Yeah! For the rapture! For the rapture!

Answer: But why would you read that into that verse rather than saying he is going to deliver us from the final judgment? Jesus has been raised from the dead; we will be raised from the dead.¹⁸

Followup: Because the day of the Lord is a day of wrath. We know that from the Old Testament, from books like Joel. The day of the Lord is a day of wrath. We also know the day of wrath from Thessalonians begins when the antichrist takes his stand in the temple. Remember he said the day of wrath is not going to come until the restrainer is removed,

¹⁸ 30:00

and the guy is going to stand in the temple and claim to be God and the apostasy comes. By the way, I truly believe the apostasy is when the Jews say that antichrist is Christ. That is the great falling away. That is what the apostasy is. Apostasy is not a technical term. If I let go of Brad, the New Testament uses that word as “I apostatized.”

Answer: Let’s not get off the track here. We are talking about whether or not there is a rapture distinct from the return of the Son of Man at the end.

Followup: So we’ve got the day of the Lord coming. So in 2 Thessalonians, they are all upset because they think they are in the day of the Lord. That is why they are upset. They think – we missed the rapture! He didn’t come. We are in it. And he goes, no, no, no. The day of the Lord is not going to come until you have the antichrist standing in the temple, until you have the restrainer removed, until you have the apostasy. It is not here yet. Don’t get all crazy about this.

Answer: Right. That is clear.

Followup: Why were they upset? If they were living in the time of the day of the Lord, if they believed that what Paul referred to was the Second Coming, they would be rejoicing and say our salvation is near. They were upset because they believed they had missed the in-gathering – the rapture – and they are going through the wrath, and he already said you are not going to go through the wrath.

Question: The “day of the Lord” is a technical term that has at least six meanings. I think the meaning here in 2 Thessalonians 2 is the seven-year tribulation period. Now, where did that come from? It came from Daniel 9 where it says there are seventy sevens given to complete six goals for the Jewish people. 483 have been taken up in what I think is the most remarkable prophecy in the Bible, which we won’t get off on that. But the point is there are seven years left. I’ll agree: if they had been taught a post-tribulation rapture, why would they be upset? They were obviously taught that they were going to be removed in the day of the Lord and that seven years had begun and they missed the rapture. What is the sequence? The restrainer, which almost everybody thinks is the Holy Spirit (it is hard to imagine another entity other than the Holy Spirit), is removed. I take that as the rapture of the church. When that happens here in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 the man of lawlessness, which was first mentioned in Daniel 9, is revealed. How is he revealed? Because he makes a treaty with Israel that lasts seven years. That is Daniel 9:27. So here is the sequence. The restrainer is removed, which I think is the rapture of the church, and the man of lawlessness (i.e. the antichrist) identifies himself by making that seven-year treaty and the day of the Lord begins. These people were very upset because Paul had obviously taught them that they would not have to go through the day of the Lord. Why else would they be worried? If they had been taught a post-tribulation rapture (i.e. the rapture right at the time of Christ’s second return) then they should be OK with it.

Answer: The argument that I am hearing here is that we must think that there was a rapture taught by Paul because otherwise these assurances to the Thessalonians don’t make sense. But, and I am looking now for the verse and I can’t find it – I think it is in the correspondence with Timothy – where Paul refers to certain heretics in the early church who had said that the resurrection had passed already. They seemed to be thinking that there is some kind of a spiritual resurrection that has already occurred and they are

upsetting the faith of some, Paul says.¹⁹ I think that that would be an equally plausible explanation for what Paul is trying to correct here. It is that the resurrection hasn't taken place yet.

Followup: There is a distinction between Christ's Second Coming – which is what I think is referred to in the Olivet Discourse. He was talking to Jews.²⁰ There was no church at that time. He was talking to Jewish men. The Second Coming is like a lightning from the East to the West. It will be unmistakable. He says unmistakable to everybody on Earth. Now, the rapture is a very private thing.

Answer: Right, but the question is why think that there is such a rapture? The only argument that I've heard so far is that in 2 Thessalonians he wouldn't be assuring them that these events haven't passed already if he weren't talking about a rapture. And I can understand how that would make sense. You can read that into the passage if you kind of impose that on it. But when you look at the vocabulary, as I said, he is talking about the same event as in that Olivet Discourse and is in 1 Thessalonians, and it would make equally good sense of the passage to say that someone has communicated to them this idea that was being propagated in the early church that the resurrection has passed already as some sort of a spiritual event and not a physical event. Paul is correcting that. That would be an equally plausible explanation.

Followup: The purposes of the rapture are totally different from the purposes of the Second Coming.

Answer: If there is such a thing as the rapture.

Followup: But in the passages from 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Thessalonians, can't you see that these are totally different situations? Believers are called up to him – to meet him in the air. He does not touch down, as he does when he comes back. The rapture concerns only the church whereas the Second Coming . . .

Answer: That is what I am questioning. I am questioning with the historic Christian church that there is such a special event as the rapture that singles out the church as opposed to everybody. You never see that in the Olivet Discourse. You'd never guess that. It is only by imposing this interpretation on 1 and 2 Thessalonians that it seems to me that you can get such a separate event for the church.

Followup: The church didn't exist in the Olivet Discourse. He couldn't explain it to these Jewish men . . .

Answer: But he's talking about the end times. He talks in the Olivet Discourse about how the angels will go out and they will gather the elect to be with Christ. It is the same word that Paul uses when he is talking about our assembling to meet him. Paul is echoing the teachings of Jesus here.

Followup: *Parousia* can be used for either the rapture or, the ones who believe as I do

¹⁹ "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2:15-18).

²⁰ 35:01

(pre-tribulation), it can be used for either . . .

All right! Well, we are out of time but we can continue this discussion next time. I knew this would be controversial, but I think it is good, just as we exposed folks to different views on the Lord's Supper and the real presence, to expose ourselves to other views of the Second Coming of Christ and eschatology.²¹

²¹ Total Running Time: 38:32 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 3

The Rapture View, Part 2

We are talking about eschatology (or the Doctrine of the Last Things), and the last time we met we broached the question as to whether there will be a single return of Christ to the Earth or multiple returns of Christ. We began to look at one of the most prominent (in evangelical circles, at least) multiple views, namely, the Rapture view which says that prior to Christ's final advent to establish his Kingdom and judge the world there will be an invisible return of Christ to snatch away out of the world his elect and take them to be with him in heaven. I argued that this view is very difficult to square with the scriptural teachings on the Second Coming of Christ. When you look at the passages, especially the Olivet Discourse given by Jesus but also Paul's Thessalonian correspondence, there is simply no reason to think that there is such an event as a rapture prior to the Second Coming of Christ. Certainly one can read these things into the text, but I don't think one will naturally read them out of the text. We want to read out of the text what the text says – that is exegesis. If you read things into the text, that is eisegesis. That is reading between the lines. And before you can read between the lines you've got to learn to read the lines. I don't think that there is any good reason to think that in any of these discussions Paul is referring to a rapture event.

Let's continue our discussion of this from last time. Last time, some persons suggested that in 2 Thessalonians 2 there is, at least implicitly, the teaching of a rapture based upon what the heretics were saying to the Thessalonian believers. Let's turn to 2 Thessalonians 2 and look again at this passage. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Paul says,

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Paul goes on to explain that that day will not yet come until quite a number of things take place first.

We face here a methodological problem in that it is very difficult to reconstruct the teaching of Paul's opponents. We don't have the writings of these opponents and very rarely even have quotations from them. So it is difficult to know exactly what it was that Paul's opponents were teaching. For example, in Corinth there is a great deal of discussion among New Testament scholars as to exactly who the opponents of Paul were in Corinth and what it was that they were teaching. Therefore, any attempt to reconstruct the teaching of the persons that Paul is opposing is by its very nature speculative. It is going to be conjectural.

The question that we face here is what is meant by this expression "the day of the Lord" where Paul says don't be shaken or excited from anyone telling you that the day of the Lord has come. Whatever the Old Testament meaning of this expression may have been, it is clear that Paul interprets this expression Christologically. That is to say, Paul takes the day of the Lord to be the day of Christ's return. It will be on that day that Christ

returns, the dead are raised, the dead are judged, and particularly the wicked or unrighteous dead are judged.

In saying this, Paul is following the teaching of Jesus as given in the Olivet Discourse. Turn to Matthew 24:42-44.²² In Matthew's version of the Olivet Discourse we have this saying of Jesus,

Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Here he is talking about the coming of the Son of Man which will be a visible worldwide event to gather the elect and take them into his Kingdom. Jesus says it is going to come like a thief in the night. Now, turn over to Paul's Thessalonian correspondence – 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2, 4. You can see how Paul echoes this phraseology of Jesus. He says, "But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Here Paul refers to the day of the Lord in the same way as Jesus did – as coming like a thief in the night. Then in verse 4, "But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief." Here Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus with respect to his Second Coming. Now turn over to 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10. Paul refers to this day again. Talking about the unrighteous, he says,

They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Here Paul again is referring to that day when Christ will come again. He will inflict vengeance upon the unrighteous dead and be marveled at and be glorified in his church. Then in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Paul goes on to say,

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Here it is consistent that Paul is talking about that day of the Lord as being the return of Christ – the Second Advent of Christ. This is the same way that Paul uses the expression in other letters. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:7-8 he says,

so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing

[That is the other word we saw that is often used instead of parousia – the "revealing" or apokalupsis.]

of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²² 5:02

Here you see his Christological interpretation of the phrase “the day of the Lord.” It is not just the day of the Lord; it is the day of “our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Similarly over in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 he talks here about a man who he has put under discipline in the church of Corinth because of the immoral lifestyle he was leading. What Paul says is, “When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” That is that day when Christ will be revealed and when he will come again.

So I think that when Paul uses this expression “the day of the Lord” and wants to assure the Thessalonians it has not yet come, he is talking about the Second Advent of Christ – the return of Christ.

Now, ask yourself: do we have in the New Testament anywhere references to people who were teaching that the day of the Lord had come? That the Second Coming of Christ had already occurred?²³ Is there any place in the New Testament like that? Well, yes, there is. I alluded to it last time – 2 Timothy 2:15-19. There Paul talks about these persons that are teaching godlessness and unsound doctrine. He says in verse 17, “Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some.” So here are people who taught this bizarre doctrine that the resurrection has already past. Since the day of the resurrection is the day of Christ’s return, in effect they were saying the Second Advent has already occurred and the resurrection is past already. Now, obviously they could not have meant this in a literal sense. The graves would be emptied if the resurrection were past already. There wouldn’t be any corpses. So they must have meant this in some sort of a spiritualizing sense. We know that Gnosticism was a threat in the early church. It was a Greek doctrine which depreciated the value of the material and exalted the value of the spiritual. It could very well be that there are some kind of Gnostic teachers here that are saying that the resurrection is not a physical, bodily event but it is a sort of spiritual event and it has already past. We know from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that in Corinth there were people who objected to this idea of a physical resurrection. Therefore, Paul goes to great lengths in chapter 15 to answer the question: With what kind of a body do people who are raised from the dead come? What sort of body is it that they have? Because for the Greek mentality the idea of the resurrection of the body was disgusting and revolting. It was the spirit or the soul that was to be preserved and be immortal. So it could be that what Paul is confronting here in Thessalonica would be something similar, some kind of Gnostic teaching that the resurrection and the day of the Lord has already past. What he wants to say to them is that this is not true. A lot has to happen yet before the day of the Lord will occur. I see no reason to think that the Thessalonians had fear that, say, the rapture had already occurred and they had missed it. There just isn’t anything in this passage to suggest that the problem here is either that the rapture occurred and they were left behind or that it didn’t occur as they had expected and now they were in the last days. If the rapture had actually occurred, Paul would be gone and not writing to them. They would know that the graves are empty. So, I just don’t see any reason to read into this any sort of rapture doctrine.

²³ 10:00

Having said that, again as I say, this is conjectural. We don't know what Paul's opponents in Thessalonica were saying. But it is possible that they were not saying that the Second Advent of Christ and the resurrection had already occurred. It might mean, by this expression, that it is "present." That is to say, the Greek word here, which is *enistemi*, means "to be present, to arrive." It could be that what the Thessalonian heretics were saying was that the day of the Lord is present. It has arrived. This word *enistemi* can even mean "be imminent." So they are saying the day of the Lord is imminent; it is almost upon us. And what Paul is saying is: No, no, that is not right – it is still a good ways off and a lot has to happen first. But perhaps they thought the day of the Lord was just around the corner, it was imminent, and therefore they were living in the last days. Paul wants to correct that error. But there is nothing in the passage to suggest that they thought the rapture was near or that it was past or that it failed to take place.²⁴

Whatever Paul's opponents were teaching in Thessalonica – whether they were saying the return of Christ is already past or whether they were saying it is about to happen or it's imminent – Paul's teaching, at least, is clear. If we don't know what his opponents taught clearly, we do know what Paul taught. And what Paul says is: Christ's return is still a good way off. A lot of things have got to happen first. Therefore, the day of the Lord, the return of Christ, is neither past nor imminent. It still lies sometime into the future.

I say all that in response to the discussion with which we ended the class last time. Let me now re-open that discussion and invite you to give your response.

DISCUSSION

Question: Is there not reference in the book of Acts to the actual day of Christ's crucifixion when it says the temple curtain was torn in two, there was a great earthquake, and graves were opened, and people were raised?

Answer: That is in Matthew.

Followup: OK, that is in Matthew. And it says, "Some of you have seen that."

Answer: Matthew reports that they were seen in Jerusalem – these Old Testament saints that had been raised at the time of the crucifixion.

Followup: Could that not be what Paul was referring to when he said it hasn't come yet but the people knew that people had seen people raised from the grave? Wouldn't that have given them pause to think, "Oh, it's over."?

Answer: We don't know the sources of the error in Thessalonica. I highly doubt that it is from reports that are peculiar to Matthew's Gospel about the resurrection of these Old Testament saints. I don't think that is referred to anywhere else in the New Testament. So we don't know what prompted the Thessalonians to think this. I think we just don't have enough information.

Question: Just trying to follow the discussion. In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 Paul tells the Thessalonians that there is no need that he should have to write you for you yourselves

²⁴ 15:00

know perfectly well that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. I guess that is a reference to the Olivet Discourse – you know perfectly well because Jesus taught this.

Answer: I think that is right. Or he could be reflecting on the fact that he said these things to them. It is in 2 Thessalonians 2:5, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this?” So he could be referring simply to his prior visit to Thessalonica when he preached the Gospel to them. But I suspect you are right in that these Jesus traditions were passed on and were well known in the church. Remember what we said about Paul’s knowledge that the Last Supper occurred on the night that Jesus was betrayed. He knew the historical context of the traditions that he passed on. So it is very likely here, I think, that the Thessalonians were aware that Jesus had said that his Second Coming would come like a thief in the night. But it is clearly an echo of that saying that I read in Matthew, I think.

Interestingly enough – I didn’t mention this – it also appears in 2 Peter 3:10. I didn’t mention it because Peter isn’t one of the writers that we are dealing with here. But it does show that this motif was well-known: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.” Here, again, is the final dissolution of this world that will happen when the day of the Lord comes like this thief. So this motif of coming like a thief in the night was one that was known not only to Paul but to other New Testament writers.²⁵

Question: From what I understand of the usual pre-trib timetable is that you have the rapture, the church is taken away, then you have the antichrist, tribulation, and all that. But in 2 Thessalonians it says you cannot have the day of the Lord until the rebellion comes and the man of lawlessness (which would be the antichrist) is revealed. So that alone would seem to indicate that this day of the Lord occurs at the end. It is after all the tribulation and antichrist and the rest of it.

Answer: This was one of the things that I was confused about that reading the transcript helped me to understand. When I read the comments, it was clear to me that they don’t think the expression “the day of the Lord” refers to the rapture. Because otherwise it would be post-trib, right? It is afterward that the day of the Lord occurs. They said that the day of the Lord refers to the day of God’s wrath. It is the tribulation, in effect. But that is why I spent several moments talking about how Paul uses this expression. I think he uses it to refer to the Second Coming of Christ and not to the tribulation. But I think you are right. What that emphasizes, I think, is this: he is not talking about the rapture here even by the pre-trib point of view. This isn’t the rapture. This is talking about the day of the Lord – the coming of Christ – when he is going to slay the lawless one and destroy him by his appearing and coming. So the rapture, if it occurs, has got to be read into this. It is not there. You’ve got to say something like what was said last time: well, what is restraining him is now out of the way. Maybe that is the church, and the church has been yanked out of the world, or something. It is reading it in, I think,

Question: Last time you said that Darby had basically started the rapture. He actually got the idea from a fifteen-year-old visionary mystic named Margaret McDonald. He was so

²⁵ 20:00

taken with that vision that he developed the rapture theology around it and it grew from there.²⁶ But you also mentioned that Dallas Theological Seminary has been a source of a lot of teachers on the rapture and dispensationalism. Dr. John Walvoord was the president of the seminary there for a number of decades and he was a leader of the rapture theology proponents. He wrote a book in 1957 called *The Rapture Question*. He said in there that “the question of the rapture is determined more by ecclesiology than eschatology.” In other words, it is your view of the church that determines whether you believe in the rapture at all. He went on to say that neither pre-millennialism nor post-millennialism is explicitly taught in Scripture. This was in the first edition of that book. It caused such a stir, such an uproar, in the rapture community that from then on he took it out. This was the leader of the rapture believers that actually said it is not taught in Scripture.

Answer: I am not familiar with that background. I take it you are sure of those facts.

Followup: Positive.

Answer: I wonder what he meant when he said, *Your view of ecclesiology determines this*. What is he thinking of?

Followup: It is your view of the church. If you separate the church from Israel, you have to have some way to get the church out of the picture in order for Israel to participate in the thousand-year reign after Christ’s second coming. It is all intertwined.

Answer: OK. I don’t want to open that can of worms! *[laughter]* This is replacement theology – the idea here is that all the promises made to Israel in the old covenant are now the church’s, and the church replaces Israel as the chosen people of God and is heir to all the promises. Whereas others would say: no, no, God still has a plan for Israel. Israel remains God’s chosen people and he is not done with them yet.

Followup: But rapture theology and dispensationalism go hand-in-hand.

Answer: I understand that. But it is an issue that I think we better not open. Not because it is too controversial. We are not afraid of that, but simply because it would take us too far astray. This is on the Doctrine of the Last Things, not Doctrine of the Church.²⁷

Question: I asked last time about the actual passage and whether in Thessalonians it actually says “meet him in the air;” whether the Greek word “air” is actually used. I was just wondering if you could comment on that and exactly what it does say in the Greek. My understanding has always been that Darby misunderstood what was actually written in the original Greek.

Answer: I am not familiar with what he said about that. This is in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The word in the Greek there is *aera*, which is just “air.” So he says we will meet the Lord in the clouds in the air.

Followup: So it is air?

Answer: Yeah, it is air.

Question: First of all, when the rapture does occur and we are all caught up to be with the Lord, I am going to resist the temptation of saying I told you so because I will be

²⁶ This is a highly controversial and disputed claim.

²⁷ 25:02

perfected and I won't do that.

Answer: I wouldn't mind if you did because I'll be perfected, too! *[laughter]*

Followup: One thing that I would question – I did not know that you saw “day of the Lord” as somehow different in the New Testament than in the Old. I don't think it is different. I think it is the same. I think it almost becomes a technical term. It is twenty-six times spoken of directly in Scripture – day of the Lord. I will say I agree with you that the day of Christ is not the same as the day of the Lord. I will differentiate those two.

Answer: That would disagree with me.

Followup: You said it was the day that he came. I agree with you – I think you are right about that. When you read those texts, I think that is. One thing – if the day of the Lord was the day when Christ returns I do not understand why the Thessalonians would have been upset. It would seem to me they would rather have rejoiced to think that they were in the day of the Lord. Paul has taught them from the beginning to look up, that your salvation is near, be on the alert, be watchful. It is what we are looking for. It is called our blessed hope. It is that which excites us and it spurs us on to Christian godly living because we have been bought with such a price that when our redeemer comes it is all over and we are together with him. I think the “day of the Lord” is a technical term; I believe it starts with the seventh trumpet. I think given enough time I could prove it to you with Scripture. But it is really hard to sit here and try to sum up things like the rapture in five minutes. I can't do that. It is the totality of Scripture. It is looking everywhere that word is used and how it is used. It seems to begin when he steps into the temple and declares himself to be God.

Answer: You are talking about the man of lawlessness?

Followup: Yes. It seems to end, as Peter says, at the end of, not just the tribulation, but the millennial kingdom because there will still be judgment meted out. I believe it's the *Word Biblical Commentary* and certainly Spiros Zodhiates in his dictionary of the New Testament, he is Greek . . . I love his Greek dictionary. He really goes into great detail about the day of the Lord and what it means. We have to look at the context.

Answer: That is critical. We can at least agree on this point: with the interpretation of Scripture, it's critical to look at context. So when we talk about the “day of the Lord” in Paul's correspondence we need to look at what Paul meant by it and how he used it because we know that Paul read the Old Testament through the lenses of Christ. Look at the way he interprets the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection now in terms of Christ – the first fruits and then the rest of the harvest coming at the end. It is the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection of the dead but it is seen in a Christological perspective. He refers to the day of the Lord Jesus. He interprets this Christologically, I think. But we can at least agree on this point. I think that is a takeaway here. When we read Scripture, look first at the immediate context, and then the wider context, and then how different authors used it, and so forth. If this lesson has been a stimulus for you to do that, I think that is a very positive result. I am not asking you to agree with me.

Question: Two points. I'll stick with my interpretation that the day of the Lord here refers to the seven year tribulation period. The vast majority of biblical prophecies come from the Old Testament, not the New Testament. And Daniel is by far the most important book

of prophecy in the Bible. Daniel 9:27 talks about that seven years. I would say this also: if you are correct and the day of the Lord can also mean Christ's cataclysmic judgment on mankind – you can make a good point for that and that is one of the meanings of day of the Lord – if that is the meaning here in Thessalonians, how in the world could they have missed that? If it is like the lightning going from the left to the right, and the buzzards over the kill, and all of that, how could they have missed it? I think that argues against the idea that that meaning of the day of the Lord is used there. That is my first point.

Answer: I'll let you go on but I did respond to that question by means of this heresy that was being taught by Hymenaeus and Philetus.

Followup: But how could they have missed it? Regardless of who taught what, if Christ's return is anything like what he said in the Olivet Discourse, everybody on Earth is going to know it. It is going to be everywhere. So they would have seen it.

Answer: Unless they had spiritualized it in this sort of Gnostic way.

Followup: I am talking about if they believed what was in the Olivet Discourse. An event like that could not go unnoticed by everybody on Earth so how in the world could they have missed it? That's my first point. My second point is this. If I can't get you to admit the existence of the rapture, perhaps I can get you to admit that there are two entirely different operations by Christ here. Let's take the first classic one where he comes to mete out eternal punishment on unbelievers, on unregenerate mankind. This is shown in Revelation 19 when he is the fifth horseman of the apocalypse who comes with blood on his robe and sentences him to eternal damnation. That's (a). Also, he touches down. Zechariah 14 says his foot touches the Mount of Olives when he comes for that task or operation. Now, the rapture – air – he does not touch down. There is no evidence given that he touches down. That is one huge difference. Now, the rapture could not be more different in its purpose. Hebrews 9:28 says that we look for Christ's return. He will come to give us his salvation – he will bring salvation to those who are looking for him. John 14:2-3 – in my Father's house are many mansions. I go there to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you there with me. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, we shall not all sleep – sleep being a metaphor for the death of a believer – but we will all be changed in a twinkling of an eye. You see the body of description of this rapture is vastly different from what he is doing . . . There are many good Bible scholars who agree that the two events occur simultaneously – I disagree with that. I think that the rapture occurs seven years before. But you must admit those are two vastly different operations, and if you are going to have him do it you must believe that he does that simultaneously on his Second Coming.

Answer: I would see them as two sides of the same coin. Look at 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10. He says,

. . . God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed . . .

It seems to me that there will be wrath and destruction for the unsaved, but there will be salvation for those who are saved. These are two sides of the same coin.

Followup: Right. My point is that since they are so far, as you say, on different sides of the coin, opposite extremes, it would not be implausible to think that they could occur temporally at different times. It would not be implausible because they are so different.

Answer: All right. That will depend, I guess, on how you would read these passages, and I've already spoken on that.

Question: The first thing on the air that they had talking about Christ's resurrection already occurring, they should have known that the only event that kept the rapture from occurring would be the crucifixion of the apostle Peter.²⁸ It was prophesied he would die the same way before Christ returned. That would be one thing. The second thing is – I agree with the other person and his eschatology – you have to tie the seventieth week with the feast of trumpets. We are waiting for trumpets in the timetable. "Trumpets" is the rapture. This is in the Jewish feast calendar. The last thing is if you reject a rapture and day of the Lord you have to allegorize a lot of the Old Testament as well as Revelation. But you also have to explain why there is a physical Israel. There is no need in an amillennial format to have a physical Israel. So the fact that there is is evidence that this is fulfilling a timetable God has with the Jews.

Answer: Let me just make quickly one comment. Again it will be a hermeneutical comment similar to what I said earlier. I have noticed that some folks want to use the controlling factor in this to be prophecy. It seems to me that that is a mistake. You should take the didactic portions of Scripture as primary; that is to say, the doctrinal portions of Scripture where Paul, for example, is teaching doctrine. Then you interpret the prophecies in light of the doctrine. You don't take the prophecies as your primary foundation and then try to make the teaching fit it. The reason for that is obvious. The prophecies are ambiguous. They are so difficult to interpret many times. Look at how the New Testament authors often interpret the Scriptures in the Old Testament and in very unexpected ways. So you've got to begin first with the teaching, I think, of Jesus and of Paul and then you can look at the prophecies in light of that and how they may have been fulfilled. But don't impose the prophecies on the didactic parts of Scripture.

Next time we will look at preterism, which is the very interesting view that these prophecies, far from being in the future, have already been fulfilled.²⁹

²⁸ 35:00

²⁹ Total Running Time: 37:35 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 4

Preterism

Preterist View

Today we come to a second interpretation that also holds to multiple returns of Christ, and this is the Preterist view. Preterism says that the return of Christ predicted by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse has already occurred. You may have heard from your English teacher when she taught you English grammar something about the past-preterite tense. The idea there is something that is in the past. This is what the preterist thinks with regard to the return of Christ.

According to the preterist, the coming of the Son of Man that Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse has, in fact, already occurred. It occurred in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. With that event the Son of Man was enthroned in heaven. This view was defended by the notable New Testament scholar G. B. Caird, and also by the late R. T. France, a fine New Testament scholar, and most notably perhaps today by N. T. Wright, a very well-known and highly respected New Testament scholar.

According to this interpretation the events of the Olivet Discourse that Jesus predicted are not end-time events at all; rather, these predictions were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Roman legions. The descriptions of the Great Tribulation that Jesus refers to was, in fact, the horror of the Roman siege of Jerusalem which, as we know from the descriptions of Josephus, really was indeed terrifying – a horrible siege as people began even to eat their own children, to cannibalize one another, in order to stay alive under that terrible Roman siege.

In Mark 13:24-27 we have a description in apocalyptic imagery of the coming of the Son of Man. Jewish apocalyptic literature was literature about the advent of God, or the judgment of God, that would often be characterized in highly symbolic imagery. So the description that we have in Mark 13:24-27 is taken to be such an apocalyptic, symbolic account. There we read,

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The preterist says this is not a literal description of astronomical events; this is a description of the events in AD 70 and the presentation of the Son of Man before God in this apocalyptic symbolism. Compare, for example, Isaiah 13:10. In these verses, as you see from verse 1, this is a prophecy concerning Babylon and the destruction of Babylon. In verse 10 Isaiah says, “For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light.” This is very similar sort of imagery that you have in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse. Or turn over to

Ezekiel 32:7. This is, as you can see from the first and second verse, a prophecy concerning Pharaoh, the King of Egypt.³⁰ In verse 7 Ezekiel says,

When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness upon your land, says the Lord God.

Here in Ezekiel as well as have this astronomical language used in symbolism for the judgment of God coming upon Egypt.

Lest anyone think this should be taken literally, turn over to Acts 2:19-20. This is part of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. You will remember what people experienced there was hearing the disciples speaking in other languages and there were tongues of fire resting upon their shoulders. In Acts 2:19, Peter explains that this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel (verse 16). Then he quotes Joel's prophecy from the Old Testament: "And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day." Clearly those things weren't literally happening on the day of Pentecost yet Peter says this is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. It is apocalyptic imagery describing this sort of earth-shaking significance of the events that God was bringing to pass.

So this description of the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man that is cast in this astronomical image shouldn't be taken in a literal sense, says the preterist.

Moreover, if you turn back to Daniel 7 where the coming of the Son of Man is predicted, they will point out that this is not a description of the coming of the Son of Man to Earth. Rather, it is a description of the presentation of the Son of Man before God in the throne room of heaven. In Daniel 7:13 and following, Daniel says,

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;

So what we have in Daniel is the coming of the Son of Man into the throne room of heaven and his presentation before Yahweh – before God – who then delivers to the Son of Man all Kingdom authority and dominion. So the coming of the Son of Man that Jesus predicts in Mark 13 is not meant to be a sort of visible return of Christ to the earth but rather his enthronement in heaven.

What about the gathering of the elect from the four winds, however, where he sends out his angels to gather the elect? The preterist would say that this is, again, in symbolic

³⁰ 5:06

terms the prediction of the worldwide preaching of the Gospel and the gathering of this great harvest for the Kingdom of God from every nation in the world. They will all be brought into the Kingdom of Christ through the preaching of the Gospel.

This is certainly an interesting interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, but I think what really drives this view hasn't been mentioned so far. What really drives this view, I'm persuaded, is Mark 13:30 where Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." The preterist wants to solve the problem of the delay of the *parousia* by saying all of these events predicted by Jesus did take place in the lifetime of his hearers. They did occur just as Jesus predicted they would in verse 30 within the lifetime of those who heard Jesus.³¹ So these events literally occurred and Jesus' prophecy literally was fulfilled.

What might we say by way of assessment of this interpretation? I think we have to say that initially this is an attractive view because it solves the very knotty problem of verse 30 where Jesus says "all these things will take place before this generation passes away." We don't have to do any fancy explaining away of that verse because they literally all did happen. So this makes the interpretation, I think initially, attractive. But I have to confess that after thinking about it and, with all the best will in the world, being quite open to it, I just can't buy it at the end of the day. I am just not persuaded that this is the correct interpretation of Jesus' teachings. Like the Rapture view, in the end the Preterist view also winds up positing an invisible coming of the Son of Man prior to his second final coming to Earth to establish his Kingdom. So Preterism, like the Rapture view, winds up postulating multiple returns of Christ.

How might this be seen? Let me make a few points about this.

1. It seems to me that, according to Jesus and according to the New Testament (Paul as well), *the coming of the Son of Man predicted by Jesus is a visible coming to Earth*. Notice that the verb "to come" is a perspectival word. What do I mean by that? I mean when somebody "comes," that represents the situation of the speaker – somebody comes to you. If you want to describe how you go to them, you use the verb "go" instead – you don't say "I come to them." You say, "I go to them and they come to me." "Come" and "go" are perspectival words; sort of like "here" and "there." "Here" is where somebody comes; "there" is where somebody goes. To see how this is used in the New Testament, look at Acts 1:11. This is a very good illustration, I think, of the perspectival nature of coming and going. Here the angels say to the disciples who are standing about having just witnessed Jesus' ascension, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

So when Jesus in Mark 13 talks about the "coming" of the Son of Man, this is a description of his coming to Earth. It is where we will see him and experience him. The language of the coming of the Son of Man indicates that he is coming to the place where the observer is. What that means then is that Jesus coming to Earth that is described is going to be visible and public. It is going to be observed; it is not going to be some secret, invisible event. Look at Mark 13:26: "And then they will see the Son of man coming in

³¹ 10:02

clouds with great power and glory.” The people who are on Earth will see the Son of Man coming with great power and glory. Also, if you look at Mark 14 – the trial of Jesus – you have on Jesus’ own lips similar words. Mark 14:61-62:

But he was silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”

Here he says to the Sanhedrist, “You will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” – just as he said in the Olivet Discourse.³² Notice that this is in sharp contrast to the false Messiahs that are predicted in Mark 13 in the Olivet Discourse where someone will say “Here is the Christ, or there is the Christ.” As Robert Gundry points out in his commentary, the distinction between the true coming of Christ and these false Messiahs will be in the public, visible, demonstrative nature of Christ’s real coming. These false Messiahs come in deceptive private ways which are seen but by a few. But the coming of the Son of Man described by Jesus is a public overpowering event that will be overwhelmingly evident to everyone. Compare in this connection, Matthew’s description of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:24-27. There Jesus says,

For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Lo, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out; if they say, ‘Lo, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man.

It is going to be a visible overwhelming event that everyone will see; not something that takes place privately in the inner rooms or out in the desert, as these false Christs claim.

Also look at Revelation 1:7 to see that this was the view that the early church held as well: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.” So this is a public event that will be witnessed by all people.

If that is right, what that means is that the coming of the Son of Man that is predicted by Jesus is not some invisible secret thing that took place in AD 70 that nobody saw. It will be a public, visible, overwhelming advent of the Son of Man to Earth that will be experienced by everyone.

2. The Son of Man doesn’t have to wait around until AD 70 in order to be enthroned.

Remember on this view with the coming of the Son of Man and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 Christ is enthroned on his Kingdom as the Son of Man. But what happened in between AD 30 (or 33) and AD 70? For some forty years did the Son of Man have to wait around in order to be enthroned? That seems preposterous. Jesus rose triumphant and glorified from the grave and ascended into heaven to the right hand of the Father. He doesn’t have to wait to assume his Kingdom. He assumes his Kingdom with his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Look at what Paul has to say about this in 1 Corinthians 15:23-28 in his discourse on the resurrection of Jesus. Keep in mind that 1 Corinthians was written by Paul around AD 55. That is in advance of the coming of the

³² 15:03

Son of Man which supposedly took place in AD 70. So this is looking forward to that event. It hasn't occurred yet in AD 55 when Paul wrote this letter.³³ He says,

But each in his own order: *[referring to the resurrection]* Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

[In AD 55, Christ is already on his throne. He is reigning as the Son of Man, but will deliver the Kingdom over to the Father when he comes again.]

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. "For God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection under him," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him.

[That is to say, the Scripture says God has already put all things under Christ's dominion. But obviously that excludes God himself, Paul is saying. God put all these things under his feet but that doesn't mean God is under his feet. God is the one who put all things under Christ's feet.]

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.

Christ will deliver the Kingdom to God the Father and himself be subject to God the Father when Christ's return is finally accomplished.

So on this view, it seems to me, Christ doesn't have to wait around until AD 70 to be enthroned in his Kingdom. He is the risen and ascended King already when Paul writes in AD 55. Compare this to Hebrews 2:7-9, a very similar reflection. The writer says, quoting from the Old Testament,

"Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels,
thou hast crowned him with glory and honor,
putting everything in subjection under his feet."

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.

So I am not persuaded that what Jesus describes in the Olivet Discourse is the presentation of the Son of Man in the throne room of heaven where he then is crowned and receives his Kingdom. It seems to me much more evident that what is described is the coming of the Son of Man as King and Conqueror – the glorious return of Christ to the Earth as the risen and conquering Lord.

3. It seems to me that *the real Achilles Heel of the Preterist view is once again the resurrection of the dead*. Paul, in his letters, looks forward to the *parousia*. Remember all

³³ 19:51

of these letters were written prior to AD 70. Paul was martyred somewhere in the mid-AD 60s. His Thessalonian correspondence, where he describes at length the appearing and coming of the Son of Man, was some of the earliest material in the New Testament (it was written around AD 51 from Corinth to the church in Thessalonica). Paul looks forward to the *parousia* of Christ and the resurrection of the dead at his return. Now obviously the resurrection of the dead didn't occur in AD 70. So what the preterists are forced to say is that what Paul is looking forward to in describing as the coming of the Son of Man is not the event that took place in AD 70 but rather an event that will occur at the end of history when Christ comes back once again and then the dead will be raised.³⁴ I remember at a conference at which N. T. Wright was speaking, someone asked him, "If you believe that the coming of the Son of Man occurred in AD 70, what about the resurrection of the dead? Do you think that that is already passed?" And Wright responded, "Of course not. I think Christ will come again at the end of the age, and then the dead will be raised." So you see, you wind up doing exactly what the Rapture folks had to do. You have to postulate that Paul isn't talking about the same event that Jesus is talking about in the Olivet Discourse, despite the commonality of vocabulary and the connections between the two. What Paul is really talking about in Thessalonians and his other correspondence is this end-time event, not the event that Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse which occurred in AD 70. That seems to me to be just extremely *ad hoc* and artificial. It seems to me that the natural interpretation of Paul's teaching is that he is talking about the same event when Christ will return as the Son of Man, the dead will be raised, the angels will gather the elect from the four corners of the Earth, and they will welcome Christ back to Earth to establish his Kingdom visibly.

So, again, with all the best will in the world, at the end of the day I just don't buy Preterism. It would be nice if it were true because it would solve the problem of the delay of the *parousia* so adroitly. But it seems to me that this interpretation is implausible.

DISCUSSION

Question: I'd say that as somebody with sympathies toward the Preterist view myself, I think you actually covered the material very well. I would agree that the central thing here is saying that what is described in the Olivet Discourse is not Christ's Second Coming but, as you alluded to, this scene in Daniel 7 where Christ is coming into the throne room of God. I think that the things you mention actually are pretty good objections to it and things that are worth further study, but what I think I would say in response to that is that we need to evaluate what Jesus is saying chiefly in the context of his ministry to the people of Israel. Jesus talks throughout the Gospels about the judgment that is coming to Israel. He says, "Who will I compare to this wicked and perverse generation?" The thing about the generation comes up over and over and over again. Jesus' central claim here is that the temple is going to fall. You will see it collapse. You will see me vindicated. So what I would argue Jesus is talking about with the coming of the clouds and everyone will see is everyone will see Jesus' very public claims of the destruction of the temple and the fulfillment of all these prophecies he is giving as being

³⁴ 25:16

vindicated because Jesus has been going around very loudly proclaiming this to everyone in Israel. Everyone has heard the news about this by now. So when this happens people aren't going to go, "Well, this is just some inexplicable event." They are going to go, "Oh, no, Jesus was right! He was telling the truth about this. His claims have been vindicated." So in that sense I would say it is a very public affirmation of what Jesus claimed in this passage.

In response to what you said about Paul looking forward to the Second Coming rather than Christ's coming as described in Daniel is that Paul's ministry is, of course, outside of Israel. What Jesus is talking about chiefly affects the people of Israel who are affected by all of these prophecies concerning the temple. But if you look at, for example, the Corinthian church or the Ephesian church, that is not really an issue for them the same way it is for the people in Israel. I feel like if we saw Paul writing letters to a church in Israel he might talk about totally different stuff. So Paul is, in his letters, focusing on the Second Coming because that is the most pertinent issue involved for the people in the cities to which he is writing.

Answer: Let me say a couple of things before you go on. I find it very hard to think that Paul made that kind of differentiation consciously; that he was using the same sort of vocabulary and wording about the coming of Christ to refer to a different event.³⁵ After all, there were lots of Jews in these Christian churches as well. They were in a very large part Jewish as well as Gentile.

With respect to the first point, I do think what you are saying has some merit. Certainly the early Christians did think that these predictions were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. I wonder here if we might have not a case of a sort of double-fulfillment where there is a kind of preliminary fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies of the final destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the age that takes place in AD 70. You have other examples of this in Scripture where you have a kind of dual fulfillment. That would allow us to say that, yeah, these prophecies (though not completely fulfilled) were, in a kind of preliminary way, fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Followup: I think that is a very good point. I guess the other thing that I would add to that is that it can be very challenging for us to read the Gospels from the perspective of first century Jewish people because our natural inclination as 21st century Westerners is to look at it and say "What does this say about me?" and kind of miss a large chunk of what Jesus talks about to the people of Israel. Even if you just directly read the text it can be difficult to get back to that. That is one of the reasons why I found this view to be pretty compelling because it makes sense of all of that.

Answer: Let me just respond to that by saying this is one of the strengths of N. T. Wright's work. He wants us to get back in touch with the mentality and worldview of these first century Palestinian Jews. I hear that emphasis. I appreciate that. But I don't think any of my objections that I've raised here depend upon taking this sort of outsider's perspective on the problem. I've tried to consider the interpretation within the Jewish context that you mention and asked "Is this a plausible understanding of the text?" But your emphasis is certainly quite right. That is why, for example, you will notice I didn't

³⁵ 30:06

criticize the claim that this could be apocalyptic imagery. I think that that is very likely that this could be apocalyptic imagery rather than actual astronomical events. You see that in Acts 2. That would be an example of where we've got to be careful to read this literature in a Jewish sort of way.

Followup: The last thing I'll say: another relevant piece of Scripture is Isaiah 19:1 where it is describing an oracle concerning judgment on Egypt and God says he comes riding a swift cloud. I think Jesus is deliberately invoking this passage because when you read this obviously God is not physically coming down riding on top of a cloud to go fight some idols in Egypt. He is using it as a metaphor. In this passage too, coming is describing a judgmental act. I think that what Jesus intended for his audience to hear was for them to put themselves in those same shoes, like, "Oh shoot, God is coming to judge us." That was one more thing.

Answer: Good point. That kind of connects with what I said about Ezekiel 32:7 which was also a lament over Egypt that used this apocalyptic imagery.

Question: If you compare Matthew 24 to Luke 21, which is a parallel passage, if we look at Christ's answer to the disciples beginning in verse 4 of Matthew 24 he says that there is going to be deception, there is going to be wars, rumors of wars, nation against nation, these are just the beginning of birth-pangs. Then we will have tribulation, you will be hated by all nations because of my name, many will fall away, betray each other, false prophets are going to arise, etc. We are very familiar with this. He also mentions, when it comes to verse 15, after he has given a pretty much overview of the end days, "therefore when you see the abomination of desolation," we can correlate this to the book of Revelation and know what happens around the time of the seventh trumpet which is the midpoint. We know that.³⁶ Now go to Luke 21 beginning in verse 7. They question him, "When will these things happen?" The same event, the same time, they are coming to him. He says to them, "Don't be misled." We have that deception again – very similar. "Many will come in my name, don't go after them. When you hear of wars and disturbances, don't be terrified. But these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." Then he said, "Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, and there will be great earthquakes and various plagues and famines. There will be terrors and great signs from heaven." So we see these as parallel. But the next five words, in my opinion, have been so overlooked. It says, "But before all these things." That would be these events that are marking the last days of Earth. Some time before, we are not told how long before but certainly before, what is going to happen? They will lay their hands on you, persecute you, and deliver you, bringing you before kings and governors. We read that in the New Testament with Paul, with Felix, etc. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. You will be put to death. Hated. Then go down to verse 20, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies" – now remember in verse 24 he said "when you see the abomination of desolation standing in the place you shouldn't," here it says "when you see Jerusalem surround by armies recognize that her desolation is near. Then they must flee." Very similar to Matthew, but I believe this is a totally different time frame. This is 70 AD. When you see that Jerusalem is surrounded, get out of town. Then he says, "Woe to those who are pregnant." But notice what he says in verse

³⁶ 35:02

24, “They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive into all the nations.” We would say, yes, well that is what happened in 70 AD. The temple was destroyed; the people were taken into all the nations, “Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” That has continued to this day. Jerusalem is still being trampled.

Answer: Everything you’ve said so far would be exactly what the Preterist would say.

Followup: Yeah, but what I am saying is the verses from 7 through 11 have not happened because the fall of Jerusalem has to happen before then. He says, “Before all these things” – before! – “you will see these apocalyptic signs.”

Answer: I think I understand you. You are saying before these end time events have to take place, we are going to see Jerusalem fall, etc, etc. So we shouldn’t identify the fall of Jerusalem with these other things. This is going to occur first. And the preterist errs in putting them together and making them the same.

Followup: So here we see that the Jews are sent into all the nations where in 24 they are going to have great tribulation and then Christ is going to come. So this cannot be the same time.

Answer: OK, that is a very good point and a fine emphasis on the text.³⁷

³⁷ Total Running Time: 38:50 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 5

Nature of the Second Coming

The last several lessons we've been asking the question: will there be one return of Christ or will there be multiple returns of Christ? We've looked at two views that both imply that there will actually be multiple returns of Christ: the Rapture view and the Preterist view. I've offered criticisms of both of those views.

DISCUSSION

Question: I was wondering whether we have taken that in too much of a literal sense, almost like when Jesus told Nicodemus about how you must be born again and he couldn't comprehend it because, in a literal sense, being born again and going back into your mother's womb is hard to comprehend. The first coming of Jesus is sowing of the seed of Emmanuel – God with us. That is a reality that he is going to bring to each one of us. The Second Coming of Christ, I suspect, is the maturity or the harvest of this thought, God with us. What do you think?

Answer: I will say more about the nature of the Second Coming today. I think this forms a nice segue. But I think what your question raises is the issue: is this going to be a literal event, a literal coming of Christ bodily and physically back to Earth, or could this be itself a sort of symbol of something else? I remember when I was doing my doctoral studies in Munich under Pannenberg, one day in the class lecture he affirmed something about the Second Coming of Christ and said, quoting Matthew, "It will be as the lightning shines from the east to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."³⁸ I was stunned by this because I couldn't imagine that a German theologian would actually affirm a literal Second Coming of Christ. It just astonished me. So I asked him about it after class and sure enough he said, "Well, who knows what that means. Maybe it just means the triumph of the Christian church in history. The Second Coming will be that the Gospel will go worldwide and the Kingdom of God will be established on Earth or something like that." It was clear that he wasn't necessarily taking it literally. I am going to say some things in a few moments that suggest that this is, in fact, a literal event; that it does involve a return of Christ to the Earth to bring about the end of human history.

I think in particular with regard to the resurrection, Paul's doctrine in 2 Corinthians 5 about the intermediate state of the soul after death prior to the resurrection at the end of history shows that the resurrection is not just a sort of spiritual reality that occurs to each person when he dies but that there is this period of time – this interim period – during which the dead in Christ exist as disembodied souls. Paul says "to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord."³⁹ Although this is regarded by Paul as less than a full human existence, nevertheless he says we have to pass through that state of nakedness, as

³⁸ cf. Matthew 24:27

³⁹ cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8

he puts it. As the body is stripped away, the soul lives without the body with Christ until the day of the resurrection. Then you will remember what happens at the resurrection – the dead in Christ rise first. Christ will return bringing with him the souls of the deceased (the righteous dead) and then their bodies will be raised and reunited with their souls, and then those who are alive who have not gone through that state of nakedness who are still embodied at the time of Christ's return will be similarly transformed into the kind of resurrection body that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 15.

So I think that the reality of this intermediate state in particular prevents us from spiritualizing the resurrection and seeing it as less than an event that will take place at the end of human history.⁴⁰ It will involve a physical restoration and transformation of the body to become an immortal, incorruptible, powerful, and glorious resurrection body such as Christ had. That will then make us suitable for eternal life in the new heavens and the new Earth.

Question: Do you think there is a difference between Hyper-Preterism and Historic Preterism. Hyper-Preterism says that the resurrection has already occurred; there is no remaining prophecy to be fulfilled. Historic Preterism says that the Second Coming is still to come, just like the other orthodox view.

Answer: Clearly, there is a difference in the way he has defined those. It is obvious he has defined them differently. The one would see that the resurrection of the dead is still an event in the future that lies at the end of history. That would be N. T. Wright's view. When asked, "Do you think all of this has actually happened?" he would say, "Of course not. Of course the resurrection still remains." That is why I said Preterism actually implies a multiple return of Christ. There is the return in AD 70 but then there will be the eschatological return of the resurrection of the dead. The *ad hoc*-ness of that – the artificiality of that – is, I think, one of the weaknesses of Preterism.

If I might tell a personal anecdote. One of my debate colleagues in college at Wheaton was one of the most ardent Christians I've ever known. She loved to pray. She was a wonderful, zealous Christian. There is no doubt at all about her fellowship and walk with Christ. She became troubled with this problem of the delay of the *parousia* where Jesus says, "There are people standing here who will see the Son of Man. . . . All these things will take place within this generation."⁴¹ In order to interpret that verse as literally true, she began to embrace Preterism. But then what she realized was that implies that the resurrection must have occurred already. Therefore, she had to re-interpret 1 Corinthians 15 to be not a physical resurrection from the dead but just some sort of spiritual resurrection of the dead – that is what Paul meant by the spiritual body. And you can see the slippery slope that she began to slide down on until today she is an atheist and has completely abandoned Christian faith. I asked her sister – did it start with Preterism? And she said yes; that was the sort of crack in the dike that put her down this slippery slope.

So while there is this difference, I think the very artificiality and *ad hoc*-ness of Preterism differentiating between the return in AD 70 and then the final return of Christ shows that this isn't a stable position.

⁴⁰ 5:09

⁴¹ cf. Matthew 16:28, 24:34

Question: The answer I would give to her is – first of all, the word I believe is (in the Greek) *genea*, generation, which can mean race. So some people might say God’s people – the Israelites – will not pass away until this happens. That is one thing that would get her over the hump. But here is the second one: what generation was he talking about? Was he talking about the generation of people, the Hebrew men, that were listening to him or, as I believe, was he talking about the generation of people in the future who would see these things happen? This has spawned a whole lot of numerology like: because Israel was established in 1948 so add a generation to that. Of course they didn’t obtain control of Jerusalem until 1967 so add a generation to that. For that matter, what is a generation? So I fail to see how that would destroy her faith.

Answer: Obviously she didn’t find those solutions to be plausible. We are going to take this up later. This is the elephant in the room that has to be confronted. So we will get to that question, and we will talk about those proposed solutions to the problem later on.⁴²

Question: Like he said, “There are some standing here who will not taste of death until they see the Kingdom of heaven come with power.” My position is that there are some people who have overcome and rule with Christ and they have been since he rose in that generation. That didn’t mean everybody and doesn’t preclude the physical resurrection later. It just means it is possible.

Answer: OK, I don’t want to launch off on this now ahead of time. We will get to this topic. So hang on to those comments and questions. We will come back to it. We certainly won’t overlook it.

Nature of the Second Coming

Let’s move ahead now to our next point which is the nature of the Second Coming. Here I want to make four points.

1. *The Second Coming of Christ will be a personal coming.* The discussion that we’ve had of the Rapture view and Preterism leaves us, I think, with the classical Christian view that the return of Christ will be a visible, decisive, singular event that will bring about the end of human history, the resurrection of the dead, and the judgment of mankind. That, I think, is the classical traditional view that best represents biblical teaching. So, with respect to the nature of the Second Coming, it will be personal. That is entailed by the classical view.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-15. Many of these verses we’ve read already.

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.

This alludes to what I mentioned a few moments ago in response to the first question.

⁴² 10:03

Those who have died in Christ are now in this intermediate state of disembodied existence away from the body but at home with the Lord. When Christ comes again he will bring with him the souls of the departed righteous dead, and then their bodies will be raised from the dead in a transformed, powerful, immortal resurrection body. Then those who are alive at the time of Christ will similarly be transformed. So I think that this implies that this is a personal literal coming of Christ again with the deceased saints who are currently with Christ.

Also, look at Acts 1:11b. There the angels say to the disciples, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Christ ascended personally into heaven; he will come again personally from heaven. It is analogous.

2. *The return of Christ will be glorious.* In contrast to the humble state at which the first coming occurred, the Second Coming will be in his glory. Matthew 24:30 says,

then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Here we have this visible public event of power and glory which is the return of Christ. Compare Mark 14:61-62. This is the trial scene where Jesus is interrogated by the high priest.

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”
And Jesus said, “I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”

This leads immediately to Jesus’ condemnation for blasphemy.⁴³ Here Jesus is going to be seen on the clouds of heaven, seated at the right hand of God himself, coming in power.

Finally, Revelation 1:7, a passage which recalls the passage we read in Matthew, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”

So this will be a glorious, powerful return of Christ.

3. *It will be a decisive event.* By that I mean that this is the termination of human history. The return of Christ closes human history. 1 Corinthians 15:22-24,

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.

So the coming of Christ is not something that occurs so to speak midway through human history. This is the end of the world in the sense that it is the time at which the dead are raised, Christ destroys every enemy, and he hands the Kingdom over to God the Father.

So it is a decisive event.

4. Finally, *it will be a sudden and unexpected event.* Matthew 24:37-44:

⁴³ 15:17

As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Here this indicates the abruptness and the unexpectedness of the return of Christ. The nature of the return of Christ therefore requires readiness on the part of his believers precisely because they do not know the time of his return.

Also look at 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6, Paul's advice concerning this very subject. He says,

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

We may not know when Christ will return, but this is a call to vigilance, to readiness, so that when he does return we won't be caught off guard like the person whose house is burgled because he didn't know that the thief was coming.⁴⁴

So the nature of the Second Coming of Christ is going to be a personal, glorious, decisive, sudden, and unexpected event terminating human history.

DISCUSSION

Question: In Matthew – I think you actually quoted Mark but Matthew does the same thing – “He will send forth his angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together his elect from the four winds from one end of the sky to the other.” Do you see that as the same event? Here the angels are blowing the trumpet and they are going to get the elect from the four winds. Do you see that as the same thing mentioned in Thessalonians and Corinthians? The change in the twinkling of an eye?

Answer: Yes. I do. And in 1 Corinthians 15, particularly the trumpet call is so characteristic of all of these. You'll notice – she is reading from Matthew 24:29ff – in verse 29 he says, “Immediately after the tribulation” this is going to happen. And then will be this visible return of the Son of Man and he sends out his angels to gather the elect. I take it that that is what Paul is talking about.

⁴⁴ 20:22

Followup: What is the mystery then in 1 Corinthians 15 that he is telling?

Answer: Let's look at that again, before I speak off the top of my head. 1 Corinthians 15:51. It seems to me that it would be what follows that expression. "Lo! I tell you a mystery." He is saying, *I am telling you what the mystery is. i.e. "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."*

Followup: Didn't Martha even understand that? When she talked about the regeneration? Was that a mystery that they would inhabit a Kingdom with Messiah? Do you think they didn't know that there would be a resurrection?

Answer: Certainly Jews did believe in a resurrection. There is precedent in intertestamental literature about this involving a transformation of the body. In the intertestamental book of 2 Baruch – if you look at that – it talks about how they will be made like the stars of heaven and glorious and so forth.

Followup: Yes, from Daniel 12:1.

Answer: Yes, or Daniel; that is right. But I take it that from what Paul says he regards this as a mystery not in the sense that this is incomprehensible.

Followup: Well, that's not what a mystery is.

Answer: Right.

Followup: A mystery is something revealed that has not been revealed before.

Answer: Yeah. So it seems to me that he gives the content of the mystery that we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed. Whether living or dead, we will all be transformed to be suited for inhabiting an eternal Kingdom. The people to whom this was written – these Corinthians – found that to be just inconceivable. Look at verse 35. These Greek thinkers despised the material and the physical as the prison house of the body that dragged down the soul. So in verse 35 his opponents in Corinth say, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" They are mocking this idea of the resurrection of the body. Then I take it what Paul is saying in verse 51 is it is not going to be the resurrection of the old body that we presently have. This is going to be this marvelous transformation into this powerful, glorious, spiritual, immortal resurrection body. So they should not stumble at it. So I take it that that is what he is revealing to the Corinthians as the content of the mystery. That is why they should not be offended.

Followup: I would just say that those of us who believe in a rapture – which, by the way, you kept saying it was invisible. I don't ever remember studying that or hearing that the rapture is invisible.

Answer: Invisible to the world – right? – even if Christians see it.

Followup: I don't know. I never read that, so I don't know. I don't think God minds showing us all what he is doing.⁴⁵ But anyway, I would just say that for those of us who believe in a rapture, whether it is pre-, mid-, or whatever, that the mystery here is the rapture. That is what he is talking about. When you look at Matthew 24, which I believe is written to the Jews during Daniel's 70th week (if you just circle all the 'you's and look

⁴⁵ 25:01

at who he is talking to, he is talking to the Jews) that is then when he comes and all the tribes will mourn. I believe the tribes that it refers to is the Jews. I believe they will be saying the words of Isaiah 53. They are the only people on Earth who would say the words of Isaiah 53. That is what I wanted to ask you. Corinthians seems to be instantaneous in the twinkling of an eye where Mark and Matthew say he will send the angels and he will gather his elect. I believe that does happen but I believe it is going to take place over a period of time (the Matthew and the Mark events).

Answer: I did not take it that way. You are right. This is sudden. It is in the twinkling of an eye.

Followup: Instantaneous. There is like no time passes.

Answer: Or like “Boom!” It is like that. This would describe, I think, not only the resurrection of the dead but the gathering of those who are still alive at the time of Christ.

Followup: It would be all the believers at that point. They are going to be taken up.

Answer: Right. The dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Question: It seems to me that talking about the mystery we keep focusing on that second part – the “we will all be changed” part. But it seems to me the mystery is really the first part – “we will not all sleep.” The Jews believed in a resurrection of the dead, and I am sure the Corinthians had heard about that. But the point, it seems to me, he is making is we are not all going to be dead when that resurrection occurs. This is not completely the end of the world where everything is over. The resurrection occurs while some of us are still alive and we will all be caught up and changed.

Answer: Yeah, I thought you were going to say something different, but another view would be that verse 51 is not the beginning of the new paragraph, but it is the conclusion of the paragraph before it. “I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” That is the content of the mystery. But it would seem to me that the most natural way to think about this is “I tell you a mystery:” then what follows is what he is revealing to them. That would fit in with the problem that the Corinthians had about being offended about the resurrection of the body and why this mystery solves the problem. It involves a transformation.

What we will do then next time is begin to look at the purpose of the Second Coming. Why do we have this doctrine at all? Why does Christ come again? What is the purpose of this event? That will be next time.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Total Running Time: 28:30 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 6

Purpose, Time, and Delay of the Second Coming

Purpose of the Second Coming

We have been talking about the Second Coming of Christ. Last time we talked about the nature of the Second Coming. Now we want to turn to the subject of the purpose of the Second Coming. Why is there such a thing as the Second Coming of Christ? Let me suggest four purposes that are fulfilled by Christ's coming again.

1. *It completes the work of redemption.* It completes the work which was begun on the cross and with the resurrection of Christ and now finally his return again. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 15:22-28, 50-57. Here Paul writes,

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. "For God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection under him," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.

. . .

I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O death, where is thy victory?"

O death, where is thy sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this passage I think it is very clear that the triumphant Second Coming of Christ completes the work of redemption. It will be the final destruction of sin and of death – the last enemy to be destroyed. Then all things will be given over to God the Father as the Son delivers the Kingdom to God. So while the Kingdom of God is already present here on Earth amongst those who know Christ, it will come in triumph and destroy every

enemy – especially death – at the return of Christ. So first of all, it completes the work of redemption.

2. As I have already indicated from Paul, *it is the time of the resurrection of the dead*. Those who die go into an intermediate state between the death of the body and the final resurrection. We will talk about that later in this class. But the resurrection of the dead will not occur until the return of Christ. That is when the dead will be raised. John 5:25-29 is Jesus' prediction of this event.⁴⁷ Jesus says,

Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.

Here Jesus speaks of the dead – both righteous and unrighteous – which will be called forth from the grave at the time of the return of the Son of Man for judgment.

That segues to the third point.

3. *This Second Coming of Christ will be for the purpose of judging all people*. As Jesus said, they will be raised from the dead, and he refers to this as a resurrection of judgment. Look at Matthew 16:27 for a reference to this function of the Second Coming: "For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done." This indicates the coming judgment of the Son of Man.

Also see 1 Corinthians 4:3-5. Paul says,

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

Here Paul talks about not judging too quickly. He says, *I do not even judge myself. I am not aware that I am outside of God's will or in sin in any way, but ultimately it will be the Lord who will bring out every hidden thing and disclose the heart purposes of every person. Then judgment will occur*. When does this happen? He says it happens when the Lord comes.

Finally, see Jude 14-15 – the little epistle of Jude just before the book of Revelation. Speaking of the unrighteous, he says,

It was of these also that Enoch in the seventh generation from Adam prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with his holy myriads, to execute judgment on all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness which they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which

⁴⁷ 4:56

ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

Here he speaks of the Lord coming to bring judgment upon the unrighteous.

So there will be a judgment that is coming that will occur at the time of the return of Christ.

4. *The purpose of the Second Coming is to gather the church.* This is referred to, for example, in Matthew 24:29-31. Jesus said,

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

So there will be this great in-gathering of the elect, of the Christians who are alive at the time of the return of Christ.⁴⁸ The dead will be raised and the elect Christians will be gathered and together ushered into the Kingdom of God.

So the work of the Second Coming is multifaceted. It is to complete the work of redemption, to resurrect the dead, to judge all people, and to gather the church.

DISCUSSION

Question: You’ve explained that when a Christian dies the soul goes to be in the presence of Christ and the body remains here waiting for the resurrection. What about those who are not believers? I realize this isn’t a pleasant topic, but are they simply just not in the presence of Christ or are they truly in the presence of Satan in what we might call hell? Or is that later?

Answer: We will talk about that later when we talk about the state of the soul after death. But, by way of preview, the Bible uses the word Hades for this intermediate state of the unrighteous dead. Hades is not Hell. The word for Hell in the New Testament is *Gehenna*, and this is the final state of the damned. But there is this intermediate state between death and this resurrection for judgment in which the unrighteous dead are separated from God and are in a conscious torment separated from Christ called Hades. We will look at this in more detail later on.

Question: Based on what you just said then there is an awareness on the part of both parties – those that are with the Lord that they are in fact with the Lord, and those that are separated from the Lord are aware.

Answer: Yes, I think that is pretty clear. We will talk about this more later. But I think it is clear that it is not an unconscious state. It is not as though when you die you go unconscious like you are in a coma. This is a state of either conscious bliss or conscious torment. I’ll have more to say about that when we get to that section.

⁴⁸ 10:25

Time of the Second Coming

Now we come then to one of the most interesting and controversial issues – the question of the time of the Second Coming. When is Christ going to return again to raise the dead, judge all people, and gather the church?

On the one hand, as you read Jesus' Olivet Discourse about the signs of his coming, it would seem that this is a long way off. This is not something that is imminent. Look at Mark 13 again – the Olivet Discourse that we have been talking about over the last few lessons. Notice the elements of Jesus' predictions in answer to the disciples, "When will this be and what will be the sign when these are to be accomplished?" He predicts there will be a period of religious apostasy. In Mark 13:5-6,

And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.

So there will arise false Christs who will lead people away from the truth. He also predicts persecution and a worldwide witness of the church in Mark 13:9-11, 13-19.⁴⁹ Jesus says,

But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

...

and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

...

For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be.

Here Jesus predicts the spread of the Gospel. He says it is going to be preached to all nations. There will be persecution; there will be tribulation and distress. It looks like there is a lot that is going to happen before Jesus comes again. He predicts that there will be wars and conflicts. Mark 13:7-8:

And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.

Here Jesus predicts one war after another, unrest, and turbulence. Notice he also predicts these natural disturbances – famines and earthquakes. Then in Mark 13:24-25 he says,

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon

⁴⁹ 14:50

will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

So this doesn't look like anything imminent to me. It looks like Jesus is saying, "This is a long way off. A lot has to go down first before I come again."

When you look at the writings of the apostle Paul this same impression, I think, is underlined. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10, Paul is dealing with the concern of certain persons at Thessalonica who for some reason or another seem to think the day of the Lord has already come. Paul calms them by saying, *No, no. A lot has to happen first before the Coming of the Lord.* He says in verse 1,

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

So Paul is again saying that there has got to happen a lot of things first before the day of the Lord comes, and particularly the appearance of this anti-Christ figure who will seat himself in the temple and proclaim himself to be God.

Moreover, we know that Paul anticipated that, after a period of spiritual harvest among the Gentiles during which the mass of the Gentiles would come into the Kingdom of God, then ethnic Israel would also experience a turning to God and be saved.⁵⁰ He mentions this in Romans 11:25-26. He says,

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

"The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"

So, in Paul's thinking, during this interim period there is a kind of spiritual dullness or hardness or recalcitrance that has come upon ethnic Israel – upon ethnic Jews – whereby they refuse the Gospel and reject Christ. But Paul says this will not persist. After the full number of the Gentiles come into the Kingdom then, he says, Israel also will be saved

⁵⁰ 20:11

and there will be a turning to Christ among ethnic Jews. You will remember again Jesus saying that the Gospel of this Kingdom must be preached to all the nations of the world. That would be this harvest among the Gentiles as the Gospel goes out to the whole world to bring them in before finally Israel will turn to Christ.

So, as I say, when you put all of this together it seems to me that the impression is that this is a long way off. There is going to be wars, rumors of wars, worldwide preaching of the Gospel, this tremendous harvest among the Gentiles, persecution and apostasy, and then finally Christ will come again.

Therefore, it is so surprising after this to find Jesus saying in Mark 13 and in certain other passages sayings that suggest that in fact he thought this was going to happen in the lifetime of his hearers. In Mark 13:30 Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” So this verse quite out of left field seems to suggest that Jesus thought this was going to happen within the lifetime of his hearers. This is not the only verse like this. Look also at Mark 8:38-9:1. Jesus said,

“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

Here again it seems in this verse that Jesus is saying that there are people listening to him who will experience the coming of the Son of Man in glory and power. Compare this Markan passage with the way Matthew renders this same verse. This is the parallel passage in Matthew – Matthew 16:28. In Matthew’s version the verse is sharpened. It becomes even more obvious. Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” Notice the difference in wording between Mark and Matthew. In Mark, Jesus said, “There are some standing who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Matthew says, “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”

Delay of the *Parousia*

The Problem

How do you deal with these verses?⁵¹ On the one hand we have abundant evidence from Jesus as well as Paul that the Second Coming of Christ was not something that was going to happen soon. It looked like a lot had to happen first. It was a long way off, and yet here you have these very puzzling sayings of Jesus that seem to suggest that he was predicting his return within the lifetime of his hearers. How can we deal with this?

Proposed Solutions

As you can imagine, there are quite a number of different suggestions that have been made.

⁵¹ 25:08

Preterist Solution

For example, the Preterist view has no problem with these verses because the preterist says these were all fulfilled in AD 70 in the destruction of Jerusalem. When Jerusalem was destroyed all that Jesus had predicted, in fact, actually happened including the Son of Man coming into God's throne room and receiving the Kingdom.

That is certainly a strength of the Preterist view. It just completely solves this problem by saying that these predictions were in fact fulfilled within the lifetime of the hearers. But I've already expressed my reservations about the Preterist view and why I just don't find it plausible. It seems to me that it is not a plausible interpretation of the data. So, for me at least, that is not an option. I don't think that that solves the problem.

Prophecy Revised

Another alternative would be to say that the prophecy was changed or that Jesus' prophecy was simply provisional but that it was susceptible to change. We have in the Old Testament certain examples of prophecies like this. Think of Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh in the book of Jonah. What did God tell Jonah to proclaim to the Ninevites? "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!"⁵² They had forty days and then God's judgment was coming down on Nineveh. But it never happened. Why not? Because the Ninevites repented!⁵³ They turned to God and so God stayed his judgment so that Jonah's prophecies never came true, much to Jonah's displeasure as you remember.⁵⁴ He wanted to see these pagan Ninevites judged by God. So the prophecy was provisional. If things change, God would not do what he had said he was going to do.

Another example would be in 2 Kings 20, the story of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah. No less than the greatest prophet of the Old Testament – Isaiah – came to King Hezekiah and said, "Set your house in order. The Lord says that you are going to die." It was an unconditional prophecy that Hezekiah received. But Hezekiah then turned to God in prayer, pled with the Lord, and the Lord said, "Because you have prayed and asked me, I will not end your life as I said I would. I will, in fact, prolong your years another fifteen years." So the prophecy was not fulfilled. Once again there was a prophecy given as to something was going to happen within a certain amount of time but then it didn't happen because the prophecy was changed. It was provisional.

So we do have examples of prophecies that involve time limits that are malleable or changeable as it were. So the suggestion here is maybe that is the way it was with Jesus' predictions of his return. Maybe Jesus was prophesying that he would return within the lifetime of his hearers but then for some reason or another that we don't know the return was delayed and delayed and delayed. And we still live in this period of the delay of the *parousia* as it is called. That is what the problem is known as – the delay of the *parousia*. Maybe this just fits in with prophecies of this nature.

Well, that is possible I suppose. But the problem I think with this explanation is nothing seemed to change in this case.⁵⁵ In the case of Nineveh, the people repented so that God's

⁵² Jonah 3:4

⁵³ Jonah 3:5-10

⁵⁴ Jonah 4:1

⁵⁵ 30:04

judgment of them would be inappropriate now. In the case of Hezekiah, he turned to the Lord and prayed and so God stayed his judgment on King Hezekiah. But in the case of Christ's coming again, he gave all of these signs. It is not as though anything changed; everything seemed to be happening just as he predicted. So it seems implausible to think that what Christ was giving here were merely provisional sorts of prophecies.

DISCUSSION

Question: One interpretation of Matthew 16:28 ("Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.") to which I personally subscribe is that he was referring to the transfiguration which took place six days later.

Answer: In chapter 17, which follows right on the heels of this prediction.

Followup: Right. Also, as I mentioned I think last time in response to the idea of "this generation," there are two possibilities. One, he could have been referring to race or group. And second, which I think is more plausible, he is referring to the generation that is alive when these things begin to happen rather than you folks right now.

Answer: Those, again, are certainly possible. I think a lot of people would say that in the transfiguration they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom, but I don't know. To me, yeah, maybe, though it sure doesn't sound like what he is talking about. Also, I think one of the problems with that is you have to offer two different interpretations for those different passages. The one about "this generation won't pass away" you offer one way to avoid that, but then for the passage in Mark 8 or Matthew 16 you offer a different one, which makes it look a little more *ad hoc*. It would be nice if there were sort of one explanation that would deal in a single way with all of these passages rather than trying to sort of find ways to avoid them individually. These are certainly options. Wait and see whether or not the option I suggest isn't more convincing. We'll see.

Question: This is going to seem a little off the wall, left field type stuff. But it occurred to me a long time ago – and the reason I think it is off the wall is because nobody else in church history has ever commented on it in this way – I think that there were some there who did see the Second Coming. For instance, John in Revelation. Peter seems to know an awful lot about the details, as if a revelation came to him. Of course, Paul was taken up to heaven in some sort of way and saw all these things and was able to give us lots and lots of details about the Second Coming and what happened there. I don't know. That was something that occurred to me a while back. I've always thought about it.

Answer: I have heard others refer to John and the vision that he has of the apocalypse in the book of Revelation in which he describes all that he sees. I think it would be more convincing if the text itself somehow connected it with John's vision. For example, if this were found in the Gospel of John rather than Matthew and Mark, which doesn't seem to have any connection with the book of Revelation and what John saw there. It would just be more convincing, I think, if the text had some reason to give us to think that it is John that Jesus has in view. But this is still another option that is on the table.

Question: I'll be the fly in the ointment. I am a preterist or a partial-preterist. It is just

exciting to compare all of this stuff and comparing Scripture with Scripture and so on. I just appreciate the opportunity.⁵⁶

Answer: Thank you! I appreciate that comment. Someone was saying to me just before class that in this class we are not afraid to disagree with each other and to recognize that among brethren we can be united on the essentials and then have charity on the secondary details. Certainly, questions like this are part of the secondary details however interesting and stimulating they might be.

Next time, I will lay out what I think in my mind is the most plausible account of these passages and this seeming inconsistency.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ 35:00

⁵⁷ Total Running Time: 35:51 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 7

Contextual Ambiguity Regarding the Delay of the *Parousia*

Contextual Ambiguity

We've been talking about the problem of the delay of the *parousia*; that is to say, how is it that we have in the Scriptures these predictions of the end times and the return of the Son of Man by Jesus and by Paul that seem to suggest that this is something that is a long way off and yet there are a pair of sayings by Jesus that are very curious that suggest that this was an event that he thought would take place within the lifetime of his hearers? How is this best to be explained?

I am going to suggest a view that doesn't have a name so I've just given it my own name – this apparent conflict is due to what I'll call *contextual ambiguity*. The idea behind this proposal is the well-known fact that context crucially affects interpretation. How a sentence or saying is to be interpreted is going to depend upon the context in which it appears. I think all of us know that this is true. Take the saying, "That's exactly what I think." That is completely ambiguous unless you know the context in which it occurs.

In the Gospels, it is a well-known fact by New Testament scholars that the evangelists (that is, the Gospel writers) exercise considerable editorial freedom in giving back the teachings and sayings of Jesus. They will move them around, and sometimes these sayings will appear in different contexts. When they are in these different contexts they can seem to take on a different meaning. I want to suggest that these passages about the Second Coming of Christ that appear to suggest that Jesus thought this was going to take place within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses is a false impression that could be attributed to this contextual ambiguity.

Let me give you what I consider to be a knockdown argument for this sort of contextual ambiguity that is in the Gospels. What I am referring to here is the mission of the Twelve on which Jesus sends the disciples to preach and to heal. This is a sending or a commission that is during the lifetime of Jesus. It is early in his ministry. It is prior to the death of John the Baptist. We read about this in Mark 6:7-13. If you have your New Testament, I really encourage you to open it with me because these passages will be illuminated much more if you have them in front of you.

And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, "Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them." So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.

Now, there is nothing unusual about this mission of the Twelve. It is a preaching and healing mission that Jesus sent the twelve disciples on, and they went out and did what he said and came back, and the rest of the Gospel story continues. But now I want you to turn over to Matthew 10 and look at the way Matthew relates the story of the sending of the Twelve.⁵⁸ Matthew 10:5-23. Remember Matthew is using Mark's Gospel. Mark was the more primitive, earliest Gospel, and Matthew uses Mark as part of his source. I want you to look at the editorial freedom that Matthew exercises in using material from Mark's Gospel.

These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay. Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart. As you enter the house, salute it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."

So far he is basically following Mark's narrative. But now look what he inserts in verses 16 and following:

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; *[now look at this verse]* for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.

Now, here it sounds as though Jesus is saying before the mission of the Twelve is completed – before they go through the towns of Israel – the return of the Son of Man will occur. Where does this extra material that Matthew inserts into the narrative come from? Well, it comes from the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13! Look at Mark 13:9-13. This is Jesus' prophecy about the end times:

But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my

⁵⁸ 5:00

sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

So what Matthew has done is he has taken words from Jesus' Olivet Discourse about the end times and he has inserted it into Jesus' charge to the disciples on the mission of the Twelve when they go out preaching in the towns of Israel. As a result, it creates this bizarre illusion that Jesus is predicting that before they finish their mission the Son of Man will return – the coming of the Son of Man will take place.⁵⁹ We know that Matthew didn't believe that. Right? Matthew relates the rest of the Gospel about how the disciples come back and continue with Jesus. There is the remainder of his ministry and then his death and resurrection and so forth. So Matthew knows that the coming of the Son of Man didn't occur prior to the close of the mission of the Twelve. But because of the context into which he inserts this material from the Olivet Discourse, it gives the false impression that before they have gone through all the towns of Israel on their preaching mission the Son of Man will return.

I think this is a perfect and remarkable illustration of the kind of contextual ambiguity that I am talking about. A saying about the return of the Son of Man can look like it means different things when it is put in different contexts. Given the editorial freedom that the evangelists exercise, I am suggesting that we can't know for sure that this is what Mark 13:30 meant – that before everyone listening to him at that time died off that the Son of Man would return. I think that the way you solve this problem is not by trying to soften the problem ironically; you try to sharpen the problem. You point to what Matthew has done in the charge to the mission of the Twelve and you can see exactly this kind of textual ambiguity that I am speaking of.

Let's look again at this pair of verses that are the problem that we are dealing with. I want to suggest that these, too, could have a different sort of meaning depending upon the original context in which they were uttered. We may well not know the original context in which they were uttered, just as a reader of Matthew's Gospel wouldn't know the original context of this material that is inserted into the charge to the twelve disciples.

Look first at Matthew 16:28 where the problem appears. Here is Matthew's version of one of these sayings: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." That looks pretty clear, doesn't it? But now I want you to turn over to Mark 8:38-9:1 which is the passage that Matthew has adapted and gives back in somewhat different words. Jesus said,

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the

⁵⁹ 10:02

kingdom of God has come with power.”

Now that is a very different rendering of these words. Mark’s passage uses the future tense – “There are some standing here who will see” (future tense) – “that the kingdom of God has come” (perfect tense). That looks back to the past. So what will these people who are standing here see? They will see that the Kingdom of God has come with power. That is very different than what Matthew says. Matthew says “they will see the Son of Man coming in power.” He is paraphrasing or giving back Mark’s words in a way that gives them a very different sort of meaning.⁶⁰ What Mark says is that they will see that the Kingdom of God has come with power. Notice the break between 8:38 and 9:1. There is the end of the saying “he will come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” and then there is sort of a break “And he said to them” and then here comes this saying of Jesus. What was the original context of that saying? Has Mark appended that here as the break sort of suggests? We don’t know. But look at the wider context. What is he talking about in Mark 8:31? “And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” He is predicting his death and resurrection from the dead. And Mark says, “And he said this plainly” to make it clear. “And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.” Here Peter is rebuking Jesus. Now, suppose Jesus then says, “There are some standing here who will not die before they see that the Kingdom of God has come with power.” This could be a reference to his resurrection from the dead. That is the context more broadly. So this may not be a reference to the Second Coming of the Son of Man, but what he is saying is that some of the people who are hearing him will see that in fact, yeah, the Kingdom of God has come with power. After the resurrection, Peter and the others will look back and say, yeah, the Kingdom of God really has come with power. But Matthew gives back the words of Jesus in a somewhat different way that would give a different impression. So I am suggesting that it may well have been that chapter 9 and verse 1 isn’t really about the Second Coming. It could be about the resurrection.

Similarly, let’s look at Mark 13:30, the Olivet Discourse. Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” What was he referring to in the original context when he said “all these things?” This saying comes after the prophecy of the return of the Son of Man in verses 24-27. So in this context you think he is talking about the return of the Son of Man when he says “all these things will take place before this generation passes away.” But look at the broader context of Mark 13. The phrase “all these things” occurs in Mark 13 in verses 4, 23, and 29 before Jesus says this in verse 30. Look at Mark 13:4, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” What is the sign going to be when all these things are going to take place? Then in verse 23, after describing the destruction of Jerusalem and the false Christs that will come, he says, “But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand.” Then in verse 29, “So also, when you see these things taking place, you will know that he is near, at the very gates.” Here again, “these things” – what are these things? The things that he has been talking about with the destruction of Jerusalem. This concerns these things before the return of the Son of Man. He says “you

⁶⁰ 15:01

will know then he is near, at the very gates.” But the things that he is talking about are the events prior to the Second Coming of Christ. Then he says “I say to you this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” So this could well have been in the original context talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the tribulation that will happen at that time. But, because Mark has in verses 24-27 this passage about the return of the Son of Man, reading verse 30 one gets the misimpression that he is saying the Son of Man is going to return before this generation dies off.⁶¹ It may well have been that in the original context what is being discussed is the destruction of Jerusalem and the trials and the signs that will lead up to that. In fact, Jesus then goes on in verse 32 to say, “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” How could Jesus have been predicting that his return would occur before this generation is dead when he himself says that even the Son of God doesn’t know when the return of the Son of Man will take place?

I think that it may well have been the case that in the original context what you have here are prophecies about things that will take place before that generation dies off, but not predicting that the return of the Son of Man will occur any more than Matthew thought that the return of the Son of Man would occur before the Twelve had completed their mission to Israel despite what it says in Matthew 10:23 that before they’ve gone through all the towns of Israel they will see the Son of Man come.

Parables of Delay of the *Parousia*

If this weren’t enough, what I have not shared with you is that while you have this pair of troubling verses about this generation not passing away and some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom has come with power, what we also have in the Gospels is a parade of parables by Jesus precisely about the delay of the *parousia* – that it is going to be a long time. It is going to appear to be delayed. Look at these starting in Matthew 24. Matthew 24:45-51 is the first parable:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, “My master is delayed,” [*Look at that! There it is!*] and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

You can compare the same parable in Luke 12:35-48.

As if that weren’t enough, Jesus gives a second parable in Matthew 25:1-13 which teaches this same thing:

Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the

⁶¹ 20:18

wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Here again you have the delay of the return, the delay of the bridegroom. The lesson is: always be watchful.⁶²

Again, if the disciples still hadn't gotten the point, another parable – Matthew 25:14-30:

For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, "Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, "Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

There is much to be learned from this parable, but the point we want to focus on is, again, a long time during which this money could be invested and grow and even gather interest if it was simply put into the bank. So you have here this prediction again of a long time before the return of the master.

⁶² 24:56

Now, you'd think the disciples haven't gotten the point yet? Maybe not! Matthew 25:31-46 is another parable teaching this same thing.

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Again, in this parable you see that even though Christ is absent – they've never seen Christ – the church ministers to the sick, the poor, and those who are in prison.⁶³ It is describing the ministry of the church to others that will transpire before the master finally comes again and does the reckoning. As they did it to the least of these his brethren so they've done it to Christ.

So I think that when you consider on balance the teachings of Jesus about his return, it is clear that Jesus says he doesn't know the time of his return, nobody knows when he is going to come again. But he prepared the disciples over and over again for a long time – a long delay – during which the church will minister in his name to the unfortunate, the Gospel will be preached to all the nations, and finally at some indeterminate time in the future the end will come. This odd pair of sayings that seem to imply otherwise, I suggest, is due to some sort of contextual ambiguity. It may well be the case that in the original historical context in which Jesus uttered those words he wasn't talking about the Second Coming or the return of the Son of Man at all.⁶⁴

⁶³ 30:04

⁶⁴ Total Running Time: 31:38 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 8

Caution about Date of the Second Coming

Last time we dealt with the question of the delay of the *parousia*. I presented a solution to this question that I called textual ambiguity; that is to say, the sayings of Jesus concerning his coming apparently within the generation of the eyewitnesses may reflect a quite different context than the context in which we find it in the Gospels. So it was not in fact originally the claim that Christ would return as the triumphant Son of Man within the lifetime of his hearers. We had a good example of that in Matthew 10:23 where you will remember Matthew, by putting certain passages within the context of the mission charge to the Twelve, made it sound as though Christ was going to come again before the Twelve had returned on their mission trip to the towns and cities of Israel.

DISCUSSION

Question: As you were talking about these different phrases and sayings of Jesus and as they appeared in different contexts and different books of the Bible and so forth, it sounded like there was just some good old cutting and pasting going on, like just moving things around. I know that is not the way to look at it, but is that kind of what happened? How does that play into biblical inerrancy, when things would show up in different places and different stories?

Answer: I think that it does raise significant questions for that, but we can tell that the Gospel authors did have what I call the editorial freedom to sort of cut and paste. I think that is not a bad analogy, frankly. In other words, the words can be accurate in terms of the gist of what was said but they can take a very different meaning depending upon the context that they are put in. So they are an accurate rendition of what Jesus said but depending on the context they may take on different nuances. I think that is something we just have to live with. You will need to compare different passages with different passages in order to try to sort out the meaning of certain sayings or teachings of Jesus. I think in this case it is justified in doing this because we have a good example in Matthew of where this is done – Matthew 10:23 – and also because of the teachings of Jesus that I've cited that show that he thought a great deal had to happen before the Son of Man would return, he didn't know the time of his own return he says, and there is this list of parables about how the Son of Man's return might indeed be delayed. So it is those other teachings that give, I think, one justification for raising this as a possibility.

Question: I agree with what you are saying, and also the question that this is bringing out about if they were to put it in an inappropriate place it would be an error. But it is not. It is like they know it is related to a Second Coming. It is like him coming personally. So my belief is that he was saying that Christ will come to people – they will overcome and rule with Christ in that generation with power. So that is a type of coming. That is a full redemption of Adam who is fallen for individuals. So there are some there that will rule with Christ in power. Acts 3:21, I think, says it is necessary for heaven to receive Christ

until everything has been accomplished. All enemies bow beneath his feet. So he remains in the clouds. Those that overcome and rule with him must remain in the clouds, too. It is not an error to put it in that context since it deals with Christ's coming. So there are those that have always ruled with Christ here on Earth.

Answer: I think you are suggesting a somewhat different interpretation, but I don't mean to suggest this is the only view. This is just the view that I find, at least for now, to be the most plausible of the alternatives that I've encountered, and so I wanted to share it with you for your consideration.⁶⁵

Question: I think some of these verses have a near and far-term application in that there is a telescoping time – near-term fulfillment and portraying far-term fulfillment. You also have to overlay or introduce the rapture as well as the tribulation. There is no saying that one will start the other. You could have a period of time in between, even a long period of time.

Answer: I am not sure if you were here when we discussed the rapture question, but the position that I took is that there really isn't any such event; that that is a matter of reading things into the text that really isn't there. That is very different than talking about textual ambiguity. Here one is importing things into the text that just aren't anywhere to be found, I don't think. But your point about telescoping is certainly true. I think that we earlier mentioned that it could well be that there is a kind of preliminary fulfillment of these end-time prophecies in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 – a kind of preview. Then there will be a double fulfillment. There are other examples in the coming of Christ himself where you have a kind of double fulfillment of prophecies that were made by the Old Testament prophets. So that I would certainly want to affirm.

Followup: So you probably disagree on the second point, but the third point would be the verse that talked about going to all the cities. This is, again, a term like saying "to all the world." The general, near term fulfillment – he didn't give them a list of cities to check off. We don't know the exhaustive list of all the towns of Israel that were at the time in Judea, and they probably didn't go to all of them.

Answer: I think you are missing the point there that I am trying to make. What I am saying is that when you look at the charge to the Twelve that you have in Mark, it doesn't include these eschatological or end-time elements. But in Matthew's charge to the Twelve, he imports this stuff from the Olivet Discourse. As someone earlier put it, he cuts and pastes it into the charge to the Twelve so that it looks like Jesus is saying, *Before you go through all the towns of Israel (however many that might have been), before you are done with your mission trip, the Son of Man will return.* Obviously Matthew didn't believe that. He knew that wasn't right because he goes on and relates the rest of the life of Jesus. So this would be, I think, a real clear example of what I am calling textual ambiguity where a saying appears to take on a meaning that it originally did not have because of a context in which it is given.

Question: The Kingdom of heaven, when Jesus comes, or even jump back to comes and says it is at hand, and the Kingdom of heaven is a progress, it is a process. So when Jesus said that some of you will see the Kingdom of heaven come which is true because that

⁶⁵ 5:10

eleven is alive and doing its work. It is just not the whole though, but it is all in sync with this whole process of king, where Jesus is the king of the Kingdom of heaven, he is bringing to everyone the God-with-us consciousness.

Answer: All right. Let's emphasize, I think, what you are correctly pointing out, and that is that the advent of the Kingdom of God which was the centerpiece of Jesus' proclamation – that the Kingdom of God is at hand – has what New Testament scholars call an already-but-not-yet element to it. That is to say, the Kingdom of God is already present among mankind in virtue of Jesus' own presence among them. It breaks into human history in his person, and then among those who are his followers who are members of the Kingdom. But the Kingdom of God clearly isn't fully inaugurated yet. That won't happen until the Son of Man comes at his Second Coming when he will destroy every enemy including death and Satan and judgment will take place. Then the Kingdom of God will be fully inaugurated.⁶⁶ So you are quite right in saying that this advent of the Kingdom of God is a process. It is already but not yet completely fulfilled. In Mark 8:38-9:1 it says, "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God has come with power." Again, as I say, they *will* see that something *has* happened. The Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus, but this phrase "with power" makes me suspect that he is referring to something dramatic. That is why I suggested it could be the resurrection. Because that is the context in verse 31 – he begins to tell them about his death and resurrection. They took offense to this idea but then he says, "Some of you will see that the Kingdom of God has really come with power." So you are right. It is already inaugurated in the person of Jesus though some of those will come to a realization of that. So in that case this isn't really an end-time prophecy at all.

Caution about Date of the Second Coming

Let me go on to the next issue which is the time of the Second Coming and how one should respond to that.

1. As we've already alluded to, *the Second Coming of Christ is going to be unexpected*. It is not going to be something that is obvious and clear in terms that it is about to happen. It is going to be unexpected. Matthew 24:44, "Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect." This is going to catch people by surprise. It is going to come when they don't expect it.

Also Acts 1:7, "He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.'" We saw that Jesus also said the Son doesn't know as well. So the Father has fixed the time of Christ's return, and it is not for us to know. Therefore, the Second Coming is going to be something that will be unexpected and surprising.

At the same time, Jesus emphasizes that the fact that the Second Coming is something that is unexpected and could be delayed means that we always need to be ready for it because it is coming at a time when you are not expecting it to come. Therefore, we should not use any unfulfilled signs of the Second Coming. We don't yet see these

⁶⁶ 10:01

prophecies fulfilled – it doesn't look near – but we shouldn't use that as an excuse for bad living or not living as disciples of Christ. Matthew 24:45-51, Jesus goes on to say,

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, “My master is delayed,” and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

So even if there are unfulfilled signs that the coming of Christ doesn't appear to be near, we must not use that as an excuse for laxity in the Christian life. Rather, we should always be ready for Christ to return unexpectedly, even within our own lifetimes.⁶⁷

2. Keep in mind that *God's timescale is obviously different than ours*. Our timescales are human conventions, but God, who is eternal, isn't bound by these same sort of conventions. So in 2 Peter 3:8-10 Peter says,

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

Here Peter says this is going to happen. The Lord is going to come unexpectedly. This universe and this Earth will be destroyed and consumed. But, he says, just because this seem a long time to you, to God it is like the day before yesterday. It has been two thousand years since Christ died and rose and ascended into heaven, but a thousand years is like a day with the Lord. So it is like the day before yesterday for him when Christ died and rose and ascended to heaven. So God's timescale is different, and he is not in any hurry to bring to pass these things. But he is forbearing, wanting as many people to be saved as possible.

3. *Christians have always believed that theirs was the last generation*. So we should not get overly worked up about thinking Christ is going to return in our lifetimes. We should be ready because he is going to surprise us. It is going to be unexpected. But every generation has thought that they are the last, including this one. One of the most famous of these prophecies was by Edgar Whisenant who wrote a book called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988*. Well, Whisenant was wrong; the Lord didn't return in 1988. He said, *I made a miscalculation*, recalculated it, but that then didn't come to pass either. I think we need to be very, very cautious about reading the signs of the times and thinking that the Lord is going to return in our generation. Christians have always believed that, and they've always been wrong. So while we should be prepared, we should be ready, it is going to catch us by surprise, I don't think we should get overly worked up in thinking

⁶⁷ 14:57

that the end is near and that we are living in the end times.

4. Finally, I want to make one last point. I think that if we are honest it is rather difficult to believe in the literal Second Coming of Christ because it is just so other-worldly. It is so strange to think that, say, maybe next Tuesday Christ is going to come again and the universe and the Earth and everything is going to be destroyed and we will be ushered into the presence of Christ. It just is so other than what we normally experience.

Everything seems to be going along very well – doesn't it? – operating according to natural law. It is hard to believe that next Tuesday this all might be over. But if you think that then you are not really saying anything different than what early New Testament Christians confronted. Look at 2 Peter 3:3-4, in talking about the Second Coming of Christ, says,

First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation."

You can well imagine early Christians being confronted with scoffers like this saying, *Look, everything is going along just fine since the origin of the universe; where is the promise of his coming again?*⁶⁸

What these scoffers did not and could not have realized is that even on a purely physical, scientific approach to eschatology, there is the imminent possibility of an apocalyptic scenario that would involve worldwide destruction. Amazing as it may be, eschatology is no longer simply a field of theology. Eschatology is today a field of physics, particularly of astrophysics. It is a subdivision of the field of cosmology. Cosmology is the study of the large-scale structure of the universe as a whole. Cosmology involves two sub-disciplines: cosmogony (which is the study of the beginning of the universe, the past of the universe. Here is where you have the familiar Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe and questions about whether the universe is past eternal or whether it began to exist. Less familiar to us laymen is the other field of cosmology which is called (ready for this?) eschatology! Yes, that is the name that physicists give to the study of the future and the end of the universe – the study of the last things.

In physical eschatology there is the possibility of such an imminent, unexpected worldwide destruction of the universe. If the universe is not in its lowest energy state of the vacuum but is in what is called a false vacuum (let this ball represent the universe) and it is hung up in this false vacuum which is not the lowest energy state that it could possibly have, given enough time it will inevitably make a quantum physical transition to this lower energy state. When it does so, it will bring about a complete metamorphosis of nature. Because this is an indeterminate quantum process, it is unpredictable. It could happen at any time. It could happen next Tuesday. It could even happen this afternoon for all we know. In such a transition, what will happen is that throughout the universe there will be bubbles of this lower-energy true vacuum that will begin to form and then they will begin to expand at incredibly rapid speeds to bring about a transition of the entire universe to this lower-energy state.

⁶⁸ 20:00

In their book *The Five Ages of the Universe*, two cosmologists (Fred Adams and Gregory Laughlin) describe this physical apocalypse that may be coming. This is their words,

Silently, and without warning of any kind, it came. . . .

The shock wave began at a particular but rather undistinguished point of space-time and then traveled outward at blinding speed, rapidly approaching the speed of light. The expanding bubble then enveloped an ever larger portion of the universe. Because of its phenomenal velocity, the shock wave impinged upon regions of space with no advance warning. No light signals, radio waves, or causal communication of any kind could outrun the advancing front and forewarn of the impending doom. Preparation was as impossible as it was futile.

Inside the bubble, the laws of physics and hence the very character of the universe were completely changed. The values of the physical constants, the strengths of the fundamental forces, and the masses of the elementary particles were all different. New physical laws ruled in this Alice-in-Wonderland setting. The old universe, with its old version of the laws of physics, simply ceased to exist.

One could view this death and destruction of the old universe as a cause for concern. Alternatively . . . as a reason for celebration. Inside the bubble, with its new physical laws and the accompanying new possibilities for complexity and structure, the universe has achieved a new beginning.⁶⁹

The parallels between this scenario and the apocalypse that is described in 2 Peter 3:8-10 where the heavens will pass away, the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the works of the Earth and everything that is upon it will be burned up are amazing.⁷⁰ The parallels between these are unmistakable. They bring about a complete metamorphosis of nature, sudden, without warning like a thief in the night, unavoidable, and it issues in a new heavens and a new Earth. A renovated universe!

Don't misunderstand what I am saying. I am not saying that what 2 Peter 3:8-10 is describing is a poetic rendition of a quantum phase transition in the history of the universe. I am not saying that. I am making a much more modest point. I am simply saying that if physical eschatology involves apocalyptic doomsday predictions that could be realized tomorrow, for all we know then we should not balk at similar forecasts on the part of theological eschatology about the impending destruction of the universe. It seems to me that they are quite on a par. The difference between the two is, of course, for Christians we look forward to this event as the Second Coming of Christ and the deliverance from this world and its shortcomings and being ushered into the new heavens and new Earth that God has prepared for us.

DISCUSSION

Question: I believe in the rapture, and I think it could happen next Tuesday. Then the Second Coming of Christ, which I think is being described in the Olivet Discourse, is

⁶⁹ Fred C. Adams and Greg Laughlin, *The Five Ages of the Universe: Inside the Physics of Eternity* (New York: Free Press, 2000) p. 154.

⁷⁰ 25:42

seven years after that. When we say it is unexpected we must say this is a relative term. Notice that he says, “Only the Father knows the day and the hour.” That doesn’t mean we might not know the year or the month or possibly even closer to that. I would direct your attention to Matthew 24:33. It says, “Even so, when you see all these things” which he is including earthquakes – by the way, we now have confirmation from the government that the major earthquakes frequency has doubled – pestilences – “you know that it is near right at the door.” Well, “near right at the door” is not totally unexpected. We don’t know the day or the hour but we might know the week, or the month, or the year. Why would Jesus have spent this much time telling his disciples about the signs?

Answer: I think you have to be careful not to be too overly literal about “the day and the hour.” That is probably a kind of idiom for saying you don’t know the time. We don’t know the seasons either. As for “near,” again, I think that is kind of a relative term. What God counts as near may be very distant as far as human reckoning is concerned.

Followup: “Day and the hour” is imprecise, but “right at the door,” I think, is saying that is pretty close. That is not 100 years, 50 years. I think that would imply a very close time.

Answer: OK.

Question: I might have just not heard you say anything about this but this whole concept about cosmology – is it based on any kind of fact or is it all theoretical?

Answer: Don’t make that dichotomy between theory and fact. That is a false dichotomy. It is based upon theory. So we don’t know if the universe is in one of these false vacuum states. That is why I said it is possible. This is based upon quantum phase transitions in the quantum vacuum. There can be a system that is kind of hung up temporarily in a false vacuum state, and then it will tunnel and roll down to a true vacuum state. It is possible, as I say, that the universe could be hung up in a situation like that which would result in the kind of catastrophe that Laughlin and Adams describe.⁷¹ But no, we don’t know at all if that is the case.

Question: I just looked it up. That quote came out in 1999 and of course there has been a lot of things we’ve learned since then. The guys who wrote it are working on a revised edition as we speak. So you might want to wait just a little bit if you are going to check it out and read it.

Answer: OK. That’s great.

Question: Coming from a little more philosophical view, what does this do to the uniformity of nature and that as a part of induction? If everything can change in a second, the principle of uniformity of nature comes into question from that point of view.

Answer: Well, it would mean that the physical constants and the values of the forces of nature and other quantities like that would be contingent, not necessary. So if such a change would take place, a very different universe would result. We wouldn’t be there to see it. We would be wiped out in the destruction of the universe that we live in.

Followup: I was referring more to when we talk about science today and people especially in the atheist community who say “Science works” and “Things are going to

⁷¹ 30:09

be exactly tomorrow as they are today.”

Answer: This would show that that is not necessarily true. We don’t know what tomorrow holds in that sense. This is a physically possible situation. So those who are working in physical eschatology have to reckon with this possibility. So that is right. The person who says that, as I say, is kind of like those scoffers that are mentioned in 2 Peter 3. They don’t realize that our own best science predicts that, in fact, things may not be uniform in the future. It could be radically different.

Question: What would be the force that would cause the quantum phase transition that you are talking about?

Answer: It doesn’t have a cause. It is simply indeterminacy. If you have a situation that is indeterminate, it quantum tunnels through the barrier. This is the same sort of physical process where a particle located at one place has some probability of being in another place. It is not as though there is some cause that makes it move. It is just that given enough time it will tunnel through the barrier and appear on the other side. So it is a prediction of the indeterminacy of quantum physics.

I thought that was a very interesting analogy that can help us, I think, with respect to believing in the reality of the Second Coming of Christ and the ushering in of a new heavens and a new Earth when he returns that we look forward to.

Next time we will wrap up this section by talking a little bit about our response to the teaching that we’ve seen so far.⁷²

⁷² Total Running Time: 34:02 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 9

Practical Application of the Second Coming of Christ / The Millennium

Application

We come now to the end of our discussion of the return of Christ, and now I want to say what application this has to our lives. What should be our response to what we've learned about the Second Coming of Christ? I think that this doctrine has considerable practical application in our lives.

1. *It is a call to moral living; a call to holiness.* This contrasts with what we saw last time about the imminent potential apocalypse predicted by physical eschatology. There you will remember Adams and Laughlin said that preparation is as impossible as it was futile. There is nothing you can do to prepare for this imminent apocalypse and it wouldn't do any good if you could. By contrast, the coming of Christ is an incentive to moral and holy living so that we will be ready to meet the Savior whenever he should return. 2 Peter 3:11-14 – this is right after that passage that we read last time about the coming of the Day of the Lord and the destruction of the present heavens and Earth. Peter says,

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

So the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ ought to be an incentive for us to live lives that are holy and blameless without spot and to be at peace with ourselves, with others.

Paul emphasized the same thing in Romans 13:11-14. We've seen much of what Paul had to teach about the Second Coming of Christ, and he draws a similar application in Romans 13:11-14. Paul says,

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

So Paul also emphasizes that as the coming of Christ approaches this is all the more incentive to put off these sinful works of darkness and to live lives that are honoring to Christ.

Finally, the apostle John says the same thing. 1 John 3:2-3. John says,

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

This is very much in contrast to the apocalypse that may be predicted in physical eschatology.⁷³ The end of the world and the return of Christ that we await is one for which considerable preparation is possible and far from futile. We want to be found living lives that are honoring to Christ when he returns.

2. *The return of Christ is an incentive to be engaged in fulfilling the Great Commission.* Jesus gave to his disciples the command to go throughout the world and evangelize and disciple the nations. This is called his Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus says,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

Here Jesus talks about his Second Coming. He will be with us until the close of the age – the end of the world – when he returns again. Meantime, we are to be preoccupied with fulfilling this Great Commission of making disciples of all the nations. This is the work that is given to us to do until Christ returns – not just to live life enjoying ourselves or fulfilling other obligations, but first and foremost to be engaged in the work of the Great Commission.

Jesus himself said something like this in John 9:4. Jesus says, “We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work.” When either our own death comes or when Christ returns and brings about the end of the world, it will be too late then to be doing the work that the Father has given us to do. We still have time to be engaged in fruitful ministry, fruitful labor, for Christ until he returns. So we ought to be involved in fulfilling this Great Commission that he has given to the church.

3. Finally, *the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is the basis for our hope.* It is the church's hope toward which we press. Titus 2:13 refers to “awaiting our blessed hope,” – and what is that? – “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” So this is the church's hope, our blessed hope – the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. So we ought not to think about the end of the world or the return of Christ with fear or anxiety or trepidation. On the contrary, this is what we hope for; this is what we long for – the return of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Look also at Romans 8:22-25. Paul says,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

⁷³ 5:12

Here Paul talks about how the whole creation and we ourselves groan and yearn.⁷⁴ What for? For the redemption of our bodies; that is, the resurrection of our bodies. We have the first fruits of the Spirit – we are born again spiritually; our spirits are born anew – but as Paul says elsewhere, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. That born again spirit resides in an earthly mortal body that is still affected by sin and corruption and death. We groan as we await the redemption of our bodies – the ultimate resurrection which, as we saw, Paul believed would come on that day when Christ would return and the dead would be raised.

Look at 1 Corinthians 16:22 as well. This is a wonderful verse. In the second part of verse 22 we see here the early church at prayer. Paul says, “Our Lord, come!” In the Greek this is the word *maranatha*. It is a transliteration of Aramaic – *marana tha* – which means “Our Lord, come.” It is the original language of the mother church in Jerusalem. This isn’t the language that they spoke in Corinth in Greece. Paul is passing on here the language of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem. What were they praying for? Praying for the return of Christ – our Lord, come!

This same prayer is to be found in Revelation 22:20. “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’” John’s response is, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” So just as in 1 Corinthians 16:22 we have that early prayer, “Our Lord, come!” Here John prays, “Come, Lord Jesus!” So this is our hope. This is our hope toward which the church presses, the hope that we long for and should give our lives an optimism and buoyancy because of the hope that we do have.

So I think that the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ has tremendous practical implication. It is an incentive to moral living, a call to be involved in the work of fulfilling the Great Commission (making disciples of all the nations), and it gives us hope beyond the shortcomings and finitude of human existence.

DISCUSSION

Question: In Revelation, right before the one you quoted, it looks like there is a play on words for “come.” It is saying in verse 17 that he is saying “come” and then he is talking to other people to come and accept Christ. So he asks for God to come into them as they accept him.

Answer: Let me read the verses that you are referring to. It is beautiful.

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price (Revelation 22:17).

That is this wonderful invitation to come to Christ. Then the final prayer of the book and of the New Testament is “Come, Lord Jesus.” That is very nice. Yes.

Question: I want to commend you for defending the doctrine of the Second Coming. The delay obviously produces in some people skepticism, apostasy, or at least complacency and apathy. I think you probably talked about 2 Peter 3 that you mentioned today and

⁷⁴ 10:05

how there will be people who say, “Where is the promise?” One thing Peter says is that people who say that forget that there were previous delays in the fulfillment of God’s promises.⁷⁵ The passage that I wanted to mention which seems to me that speaks to this also is Hebrews 11 which is the faith Hall of Fame chapter. Twice in that chapter it says that these famous believers in the past “died without receiving the promise.”

Answer: Hebrews 11:13 says, “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

Followup: The other is verse 39.

Answer: Hebrews 11:39-40, “And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

Followup: What is striking to me is that all of these people did receive benefits from God. If you read the chapter it says in some cases there were resurrections, healings, and other benefits. Yet the ultimate promise they did not receive. I think we are in the same situation where we are called also to be faithful.

Answer: Amen. Very good. Thank you.

Question: The millennial Kingdom – could you just talk about that for a minute?

Answer: [laughter] That is a wonderful segue to what I was going to say.

You will notice I haven’t said anything about the millennium. That is because this is not something that I’ve studied, and therefore have little to say about it because I simply haven’t worked on this. However, I thought as a kind of bonus I would share a few thoughts about the subject of the millennium during the remainder of the class. That wasn’t a plant, that segue! [laughter]

Question: You had mentioned the Great Commission. Can you address what the Second Coming of Christ means for the urgency of sharing the Gospel?

Answer: I guess I would say that it would involve urgency only for those who are living in the generation in which Christ actually does return. But it wouldn’t supply urgency for those who will die before Christ returns. In that case it would be their own impending death that makes it urgent that one be involved in sharing the Gospel. But because we don’t know when Christ returns, we don’t know if we are living in the last generation or not. Therefore, we should conduct ourselves as though Christ could return at any time. But I would see the urgency of evangelism as arising more from a person’s own mortality that is so frail and a person could walk out of here and be dead by this afternoon. Just this week, Jan was telling me about a story she heard on the news here locally. A policeman said he was called to the scene of an accident that was the most grisly he’d ever seen. Two teenage kids in a truck lost control of the truck and struck a man mowing his lawn and killed him. We thought, “How uncertain life is!” You can imagine this fellow saying to his wife, “I’m going to go out and mow the law.” And he never came back. He was going to die. I think that frailty and mortality is something that gives more urgency than

⁷⁵ 15:02

the idea that Christ might come again. Nevertheless, given the Great Commission, we are to be engaged in the work of discipleship until Christ comes back.

Question: Just a quick comment. I always read this hope as something in the way that we do – “Gee, I hope it happens. I am not sure it will happen. I just hope it happens.” But that is not the proper understanding of this word “hope.”

Answer: No, no, that is right. I totally agree with what you are saying. This doesn’t mean “hope” in the sense of, “Gosh, wouldn’t it be nice. Probably not, but, it would really be great.” No, no. This is an idea of something that is assured, isn’t it?⁷⁶ We are assured that Christ will come again and destroy this universe and establish a new heavens and new Earth. But it is the hope in the sense that it is the hope of deliverance, redemption, resurrection, freedom from sin, and of Christ’s Kingdom. This is not at all an expression of uncertainty, but rather that for which you long and look toward. That is a good point to make.

Question: I was wondering whether the Second Coming of Christ is in a physical time and physical space or is it just this reality of God with us being played out on a large scale?

Answer: I think I’ve already addressed that before. I don’t want to go back over it again. Look at the notes on what I said previously about the nature of the return of Christ. I don’t think that it does justice to this doctrine to simply interpret it as a sort of maximization of God’s indwelling in his people or in his church until everything is fully submitted and related to him. The passage we just read from Romans makes it so clear, I think. Paul is looking for a physical redemption of this sin-infected cosmos and the resurrection and redemption of our bodies. It is a very physical thing, and it will involve the personal return of Christ in a physical way, I think, to this Earth. I just don’t think you can do justice to this by reducing it to what you called the Emmanuel factor. That certainly is there in that we are related to God, we are indwelt by him (though that is very different from Jesus – he was God incarnate, not simply indwelt by God). We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. But as Paul says, we have the first fruits of the Spirit, we have this treasure in earthen vessels, but what we wait for and long for is the redemption of our bodies which will be the completion of Christ’s work. That will come at the personal return of Christ.

The Millennium

That also relates to the subject of the millennium because what you were describing could sound a little bit like one version of the millennium – maybe an amillennial view or something of that sort. So let’s turn to that subject. As I say, this is not something that I’ve studied in any depth, but what I am going to do here is lay out for you some alternative positions and arguments pro and con which are reviewed very nicely in Wayne Grudem’s one volume *Systematic Theology*, in part seven on the doctrine of the future.

The subject of the millennium is mentioned in Scripture in Revelation 20:1-10. Let’s read that passage.

⁷⁶ 20:01

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while.

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city; but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Here is described this thousand year period of the reign of Christ and of his saints on Earth after which then Satan will be released and there will be a final cataclysmic conflict.⁷⁷ Then people will go into the eternal state.

In church history there have been at least three broad views on this passage about the millennium.

The first view we could call *amillennialism*. This would be the view that Revelation 20:1-10 isn't to be interpreted literally as describing some sort of future thousand year reign of Christ with the saints on Earth. Rather, many amillennialists would take it to simply describe the present church age. On this view, at the end of the church age when Christ returns then there will be a judgment of the wicked and the just. But the return of Christ will not be something that precedes the establishment of this literal earthly thousand year reign of Christ.

The second view is *premillennialism* which holds that there will be a return of Christ prior to a literal thousand year reign of Jesus on the Earth. This is often referred to as *chiliasm* from the Greek word for one thousand. Chiliasmists are those who believe in a literal thousand year reign of Christ on the Earth – an earthly Kingdom. Traditionally in church history, those church fathers and others who have been chiliasmists and believed in a literal millennium have taken the view that there will be a return of Christ such as we have described already prior to the establishment of the millennium and then the reign of

⁷⁷ 25:50

Christ on Earth will follow. After that will be the final judgment of Satan and then the judgment of the world.

Those who hold to a rapture theology add an additional wrinkle to classical premillennialism by positing another return of Christ prior to the Second Coming in order to evacuate the church out of the tribulation. Christ will come and will snatch believers out of the world before the tribulation begins. Then at the end of the tribulation he will come again and establish his earthly Kingdom for a thousand years. It is important to recognize therefore that premillennialism is not bound up with rapture theology. Until the early 1800s premillennialists didn't hold to rapture theology. So the issue of the millennium is independent of your rapture theology. Whether you believe in a rapture or not, you still might be a premillennialist, thinking that after Christ comes again he will establish an earthly Kingdom.

Finally, the third broad perspective would be *postmillennialism*. Postmillennialism holds that Christ will return after the millennium. The millennium is actually describing the triumph of the church as the Gospel spreads to all nations and this great harvest comes into the Kingdom, and God's Kingdom is established on Earth through the preaching and the dissemination of the Gospel to all nations; in effect the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Then Christ will return after that.⁷⁸

So we have three different perspectives on the subject of the millennium. One of them takes it literally, the other two do not. What we will do next time is look at some of the arguments pro and con that have been offered for each of these three views.

DISCUSSION

Question: For postmillennialism, would it mean that the Second Coming of Christ would be in 1000 AD?

Answer: No, because on this view it isn't a literal thousand year period. It is the church age, if you will. This will continue as the Great Commission is eventually fulfilled, the church will ultimately triumph and the knowledge of God will be spread throughout the world. So it is not a literal thousand year period. It is in that sense symbolic.

For both the amillennialist and the postmillennialist, this thousand year figure should not be pressed for literal truth. It is symbolic.

As I say, what we will do next time is look at the arguments for and against these various perspectives on the millennium.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ 30:11

⁷⁹ Total Running Time: 31:56 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 10

Views on the Millennium

We have begun to talk about different views of the millennium following the return of Christ. As I said last time, this is not an area which I have studied. So we are just doing a brief survey without assessment of competing views on the millennium. Last time I said that there were three fundamental perspectives on the millennium:

1. Amillennialism holds that there is in no literal sense a millennium – there is no thousand year reign of Christ. This is purely symbolic.
2. Postmillennialism holds that the millennium is a description of the triumph of the church in human history as the Gospel goes out to all the world and the Kingdom of God is established here on Earth.
3. Premillennialism holds that there will be a literal thousand year earthly reign of Jesus Christ following his return.

You can see that the first two do not take the millennium typically to be a literal thousand year period of time. Only premillennialism takes it to be literal. What differentiates the amillennialists and the postmillennialists, I think, is the sort of triumphalism that characterizes postmillennialism. The amillennialist treats this purely symbolically. But there is the additional element in the postmillennial view that the millennium is this sort of idyllic period of human history that will arrive here on Earth as a result of the propagation and worldwide triumph of the Gospel and the subduing of the forces of unbelief and sin.

One of the members of this class shared with me a link that contains a discussion of these three views that looks to be very interesting though I haven't had a chance to see it myself. But I did want to share it with you. It is at desiringgod.org/resources/library/4262/video.⁸⁰ This is a panel discussion among proponents of these different millennial views moderated by John Piper. Defending the amillennial view is Sam Storms. Defending the postmillennial view is Doug Wilson. Defending historic premillennialism is Jim Hamilton. All are responsible representatives of these views. By historical premillennialism they mean that this is a millennial view that doesn't involve rapture theology – just classic millennial theology. So if you are interested in following this up, you may want to look at that further.

What we want to do now is to look at some of the arguments for and against these specific views.

Let's begin with the amillennial perspective. The amillennialist presents a number of arguments in favor of his view that might seem surprisingly strong for those of us who have been raised in churches where we've always been taught premillennialism.

1. The amillennialist points out that *the millennium is taught in only one passage in*

⁸⁰ A working link as of September 7, 2014 is <http://www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/an-evening-of-eschatology>

Scripture. It is only found in Revelation 20:1-10. It is not to be found anywhere else in Scripture. So this whole doctrine of the millennium is based on this single passage. This comes from a book of the Bible that is filled with apocalyptic symbolism and imagery – dragons, monsters, beasts, bowls of wrath being poured out upon people, a many-eyed lamb on the throne in heaven.⁸¹ The whole book of Revelation is permeated by symbolic, apocalyptic elements that aren't to be taken literally. That really gives one pause, I think – why should we take the millennium literally if it is only found in Scripture in the book of Revelation, a book that is noted for its symbolic and apocalyptic imagery. It would be much more convincing if the doctrine of the millennium were found in the teachings of Jesus and in the teachings of Paul as the Second Coming is, and then also in the book of Revelation. But to base a doctrine totally upon one passage in the book of Revelation, I think, ought to give us pause.

2. The amillennialist will point out that *Scripture teaches only one (and not two) resurrections of the dead*. There will be a single resurrection of the dead when Christ returns. This is a point that we've already seen in our study of the return of Christ. But let's just look at a few passages by way of review. Daniel 12:2, for example, in the Old Testament, says, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Here there is a resurrection predicted of both the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Turning over to the New Testament you find Jesus teaching something similar in John 5:28-29: "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment." Here Jesus again speaks of a resurrection of the evil and the righteous alike when the Son of Man returns. Finally, Acts 24:15 says, "there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." Here Paul teaches that there will be a resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous alike. So there is just one resurrection, not multiple resurrections such as you have in Revelation 20:1-10.

3. *The idea of sinners living alongside glorified, resurrected, righteous saints is an intolerable thought*. Think of what the millennium contemplates. This is after the return of Christ. The dead in Christ are risen. They have now no longer earthly bodies; they have resurrection bodies like Christ's with all of its supernatural powers. They have a body that Paul described as immortal, incorruptible, powerful, and glorious. They are now free of sin. Sin has been done away with. These are glorified saints. Yet we are to imagine them living in a society with mortal, sinful, corruptible people and that this is the kind of interrelationship that they would have? It just seems inconceivable that you would have that sort of mixture.

4. *If Christ is present and reigning as described in the millennium then how can people persist in sin?* The whole idea of the Kingdom of God being established is to do away with sin and with the enemies of God. So how is it that Christ is now reigning in his millennial kingdom on Earth and yet sin still continues and people still persist in sin? What does it mean that Christ is the reigning King? That is the situation we have now! Christ is King but the Kingdom isn't yet established, right? It is still waiting to be fully

⁸¹ 5:04

established on Earth when sin and death will be done away with.⁸²

5. The amillennialist would say *the millennium serves no purpose*. Why do such a thing as to have this strange earthly kingdom? Why not simply, upon people being raised from the dead and judged, go into the eternal state of heaven or hell? The millennium doesn't seem to serve any purpose.

How might premillennialists respond to these sorts of arguments?

1. In response to (1) that there is only one passage in Scripture that teaches it, they will point out that the teaching that God's Kingdom will be established on Earth is all throughout the Old Testament. This *is* the Jewish hope that God will establish his Kingdom here on Earth, not in some afterlife. And they will point out that the prophecies of the first coming of Christ are not clearly distinguished from the prophecies of the Second Coming. Everyone who believes that Christ is the Messiah has to think that many of the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah (about how the government will be upon his shoulders and his reign will be forever and ever) haven't yet been fulfilled in a kind of literal, temporal sense. So there is a distinction between those prophecies fulfilled in the first coming and those that will be fulfilled in the Second Coming, and they would insist that these prophecies about an earthly Kingdom go to support the idea of the millennium – that there will be an earthly Kingdom of Christ established here on this planet.

They will also point out that in Revelation 20:1-10 it says that Satan is going to be temporarily bound, incapacitated, put into a pit, so that he will be temporarily out of commission. But they would point out that during the present age, that isn't true. Satan is very much on the prowl. Look at 1 Peter 5:8 which says, "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour." So against the postmillennialist, at least, it doesn't seem that Satan has been bound. He is still very much on the loose. Also 1 John 5:19, a very sobering verse, says, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one." So the whole world is under the power of Satan in the present age. Therefore, this can't be reasonably described as the millennial kingdom – the church age.

2. In response to the second argument that Scripture teaches only one (not two) resurrections, the premillennialist might say look at John 5 again. In John 5, Jesus teaches that there will be a resurrection of the just and of the unjust. So this is really two resurrections; it is not one resurrection. I am not convinced that is such a good response because it does seem to me that Jesus there is talking about one resurrection of two sets of people. What he differentiates is not the resurrections but the subject of the resurrection. But nevertheless one could say that here two resurrections are described and these might be temporally separated.

3. What about the argument that the idea of sinners living alongside of and having relationships with glorified, resurrected saints is just unbelievable? They would point out that Christ was on Earth in his glorified resurrection body for forty days before ascending. So this isn't an idea that is completely absurd. Christ was in his resurrected glorified body here on Earth for forty days among his disciples. That is a fair enough point, although it really doesn't go to speak to the issue. It seems to me of imagining a

⁸² 9:57

whole society, a whole planet, which is populated by both ordinary, mortal sinners and then living in their midst and even maybe married with some of them are these glorified, resurrected, immortal, righteous persons. That really, I think, is quite unlike saying Jesus was temporarily with the disciples for forty days after his resurrection and prior to his ascension.⁸³

4. What about number (4) – if Christ is present and reigning, how can people persist in sin? What they would point out is that people resisted Christ during his earthly life when he was present among them, and people continued to resist Christ today even though the Holy Spirit is present among us. Again, I think that response kind of fails to convince because Christ during his earthly reign was here in his so-called state of humiliation, not his state of exaltation. Remember when we looked at the Doctrine of Christ we saw that there is this period of humiliation where Christ takes on the form of a servant. He lowers himself, as it says in Philippians 2, and is obedient until death. But it is not the same as the glorified, risen, reigning Christ. Similarly, even today the Holy Spirit doesn't make the glorified, risen Christ evident and apparent to everybody. So I think that appealing to the way in which people resisted Jesus during his earthly life and resist the Holy Spirit today isn't really comparable to what we would be talking about in the millennium.

5. In response to the argument that the millennium serves no purpose, premillennialists will say that the millennium shows God's plan for social structures, for redeeming human society, and therefore this is a worthwhile thing to do rather than just usher in the eternal state.

Those are some of the arguments pro and con about amillennialism. You can consider them for yourself and look into it further if you wish to.

Let's talk now about some arguments pro and con concerning postmillennialism. The postmillennialist will say that Christ has given a Great Commission to his church to fulfill, and that the church will fulfill that Commission. That Great Commission is found in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

The postmillennialist will say that there are indications in Scripture that the church will, in the power of the Holy Spirit, carry out this Commission and be successful in its mission. For example, Matthew 13:31-32. Jesus tells a lot of parables of this sort:

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Here Jesus says from its ignominious beginnings, the Kingdom of God is going to spread throughout human society and become this great cultural influence and indeed transform

⁸³ 15:10

the world. There are many passages that suggest there will be this tremendous harvest of souls that will come into the Kingdom of God as the church fulfills the Great Commission. So they would argue that this gives grounds for thinking that we don't need to think of the millennium literally; they would employ the same sorts of arguments against the literal interpretation that the amillennialist has already given. But they would add this additional note – there is this triumph that will occur through the church's obedience.

Against postmillennialism many people will say that this view was an overly optimistic and rather naive view of human history that came to a shattering end with the 20th century – World War I and World War II and the horrors that have followed, and the withdrawal of the colonial powers from the third world and the aftermath of colonialism.⁸⁴ But I am not persuaded that that kind of argument has any sort of merit in terms of the Scriptural warrant for or against a view. What we see in the 20th century could just be a blip in the whole scheme of human history. If Christ returns, say, in AD 5000 or AD 12,000 then what happens in this century could be nothing. The fact is that it is very true that the Christian church has from these most ignominious beginnings in first century Palestine grown throughout the world so that now there are at least three and a half billion people on Earth claiming at least to be Christians. About a third of the population of the Earth at least claims to be Christian. The Christian church and the Christian movement is the largest, most successful movement in the history of mankind. It is really astonishing when you look at the history of how this movement spread geographically over the twenty centuries of its existence. So we must not take the short-term perspective on the church and say just because the 20th century has involved a lot of evil and suffering that therefore the church is not going to be successful in its mission.

In fact, quite the contrary, it has been in the midst of this suffering and war that the growth of evangelical Christianity throughout the world has been beyond parallel in church history. The last twenty-five years of the 20th century were a period of church growth around the world that are simply unprecedented, as in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The church is growing by leaps and bounds. So we must not be misled by the disastrous things that are happening in the world to think that the church is failing in its Great Commission.

On the other hand, I think there are good arguments that could be raised against the postmillennial view.

1. For example, these passages about the Kingdom of God growing from a mustard seed to a large tree, or about the leaven that a woman puts in the lump until the whole dough is leavened doesn't really say exactly how large the Kingdom of God will grow to be among humanity. It could be true that there will be, and has been, this great harvest of souls for the Kingdom of God – millions and millions of people coming to Christ. But that doesn't necessarily mean there is going to be this sort of millennial kingdom established on Earth.

2. There are a good number of passages in Scripture that predict quite the opposite. In the end times, there will actually be a falling away from the truth. There will be an apostasy

⁸⁴ 20:14

and departure from belief. For example, 2 Timothy 3:1-5, Paul says,

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it.

Paul here predicts that there is going to be this falling away in the last times. Jesus in fact himself asks when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on Earth? That is an open question.

3. The postmillennialist doesn't really deal very well with the terrible tribulation that is going to precede Christ's return. You will remember that Jesus taught there would be this terrible, terrible time of tribulation before Christ would return. Certainly the book of Revelation teaches this as well. Postmillennialists will see these predictions fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. So that means they take a kind of preterist view of those predictions.⁸⁵ You will remember we talked about that view – in the destruction of Jerusalem the great tribulation has already come in God's judgment upon Israel and Jerusalem, and that the coming of the Son of Man to the Father was not his visible coming to Earth but it was his coming into the sort to speak heavenly throne room to receive the divine authority and vindication.

Insofar as the postmillennialist has to appeal to preterism to preserve his view from this criticism, I think it becomes implausible for the reasons that I laid out when I criticized preterism. Although preterism has some nice features to it, in the end I think it can't make sense of the biblical data, particularly concerning the resurrection of Christ.

Those are some of the arguments for and against postmillennialism. Let's say something about premillennialism.

The premillennialist, again, will appeal to Old Testament prophecies of an earthly kingdom which will still involve mortality, sin, the presence of enemies. In these Old Testament prophecies of God's Kingdom that would be established, it wasn't envisioned as a Kingdom that would do away with things like sin, death, and the enemies of God. So the premillennialist would say that the idea of a millennium such as John describes is right in line with these Old Testament prophecies about God's Kingdom.

Secondly, they would point out that believers are supposed to reign with Christ. Christ has said that we will reign with him. But that is nowhere spoken of in the Scripture as a present reality. So against the postmillennialist, we are not reigning with Christ now in human history, nor will we be. But this will require the return of Christ and the establishment of the millennial kingdom if these prophecies concerning the co-regency of believers with Christ are to be fulfilled.

What might one say in response to those arguments? Certainly it is true with regard to the first argument that there are these Old Testament prophecies about the Kingdom of God being established. But if you take those literally then it leads to some very discomfoting

⁸⁵ 25:01

conclusions. For example, these prophecies in the Old Testament envision an era in which the temple sacrifices will be renewed. There will be the temple in Jerusalem, and now sacrifices are going to be offered to God. Wait a minute! The book of Hebrews talks about how Christ is the final sacrifice for sin. He has done away with these animal sacrifices of the old covenant. So are we to think that the Kingdom of God that Christ has come to establish will involve a renewal of animal sacrifices in the Jewish temple? That seems crazy. But if you say that this is non-literal then, of course, you have taken a step toward the other views of the millennium – the amillennial or postmillennial approach. You have to ask yourself, isn't the predictions of the Kingdom the predictions of Christ's Kingdom – his spiritual Kingdom – that is reigning right now and then will come to completion when Christ returns? I think it can lead to uncomfortable conclusions if you press those Old Testament prophecies too hard.

Secondly, what about the believers reigning with Christ? I think this is an interesting argument. I would think that the verses where Jesus says to his disciples that, "You will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" certainly envisions that kind of Kingdom being established. Then Christ will be the King over all of them. But one needs to ask why think this is something that happens here on Earth? Why couldn't this be the establishment of Christ's Kingdom in eternity and we will reign with Christ in eternity rather than just for this thousand-year period.

So, as I say, I don't have any sort of verdict on this debate. This is not one that I've studied. But these are at least some of the issues that are raised pro and con with regard to these three perspectives.⁸⁶

DISCUSSION

Question: The criticism of premillennialism on having glorified people co-existing with unglorified, you have the example of Christ. It is true for most of that time he wasn't in the glorified state, but he did miracles. When he raised Lazarus, you would think everybody would be believers, but some went to plot how they were going to kill him. I think that is a strong argument to say that this could co-exist. On the Old Testament side of things, you had situations where if this was all fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem what would you do with prophecies like in Zechariah that says all nations are going to come and observe the chosen people in Jerusalem and Christ will come down on the Mount of Olives and rule from that. Then I think the third thing is I think the amillennialist would have to explain why there is a literal Israel. Amillennialism doesn't require a literal Israel. So I think they would have to explain that.

Answer: It is true that amillennial views do tend to be more popular among Reformed theologians or churches which would see the church as heir to all of these promises of Israel, rather than ethnic Jews. But it is not clear to me at least why a person couldn't be amillennial and still think that God has a plan to bring as many Jews as possible into the Kingdom and that after the full number of Gentiles come to Christ that there will be a turning to Christ among ethnic Jews.

⁸⁶ 30:05

Followup: It could, but in amillennialism they take the Jews out of being . . .

Answer: It doesn't have to. OK.

Question: In the passages about postmillennialism – the mustard seed parables, the leaven parable – mustard seeds only grow so big. They grow huge beyond what they start at, but there is an ending point. The same thing with leaven – a loaf of bread only gets so big before it collapses. So to say that those passages indicate the whole world will be saved – you can't draw that conclusion based on those metaphors.

Answer: I think that you are right. I think that is true.

Question: I think it comes down to a matter of hermeneutics or how you interpret. As you alluded to, there are many Old Testament prophecies that talk about a literal kingdom on Earth. The amillennialist in rejecting the concept of that has to ignore or allegorize a huge number of these things. Another one is the fantastically detailed description of the millennial temple in Ezekiel 40 and 43. For me that just does far too much violence to the Scriptures without contextual or other justification. So I feel more comfortable with the premillennial view.

Answer: Could I ask you a question? How would you deal with the criticism that I mentioned that taking these passages literally involves a reestablishment of the temple sacrifices?

Followup: That is the most powerful argument against my position. The classic rebuttal to it is, "This is memorial."

Answer: Let's explain what you mean there. These are no longer being offered for sin or in the way they were in the Old Testament. These are memorial sacrifices to remember Christ's sacrifice and so forth.

Followup: Sort of like communion is for the church.

Answer: On a Baptist view, right.

Followup: That won't quite fly because I think it is in Ezekiel where it mentions actual propitiation that this is done. That implies that these sacrifices are actually doing something. If you examine the prophecies in Ezekiel, you will find some huge differences between the millennial temple and the classic temple. For instance, there is no high priest. If there were a high priest I would have to say hold the phone. We know Christ is the high priest. There is no high priest and there is no Day of Atonement. The best argument I have – it is not perfect, but I am OK with it – is that these sacrifices were because people coming to worship God (and he is in some physical form in the millennial temple) were ceremonially unclean.⁸⁷ They may have had a traffic jam going over there – "Why you!" They've got their sin natures. Satan is bound during that period by the way, it is not going to be rampant, but there is sin during the millennial kingdom, I believe. They come, they hurry and go in there, and here is God in a physical form. No where in our current situation are we asked to go before God in a physical form, one that goes right to our senses. It is only spiritual. So I think the idea is that you might become ceremonial unclean. It occurred to me – remember the burning bush when Moses came up? – here we

⁸⁷ 35:05

have a physical form of the manifestation of God. Moses was saved; he wasn't perfect, but he was saved. But the warning was (if I remember correctly) loose the latches on your sandals because the ground that you stand upon was holy. He was saved but he had to do a little something. Did that take away his sin? Of course not. Taking off your sandals is not going to take away your sin. But it is a recognition that you are in the presence of a physical manifestation of the living God. Similarly, in the millennial temple, is that going to remove their sin by killing these animals? No, but it is more like a recognition. As I say, that is the best rebuttal that I can make.

Answer: Thank you. That is a very interesting distinction.

Next time we will begin to look at the state of the soul after death. Do you go to heaven when you die if you are believer? Do you go to hell? What does the Scripture have to say about the destiny of people after they die? That will be the question we take up next.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Total Running Time: 37:06 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 11

State of the Soul after Death and the Biblical Position

State of the Soul after Death

We have been talking about the Second Coming of Christ, but of course up until this time in history no Christian has lived until the time of the *parousia*, or Christ's Second Coming. Rather, every Christian up to this point has been ushered into the afterlife, not by Christ's return, but by death. So we want to ask ourselves now, "What happened to them?" What happens to people when they die – people who do not live until the return of Christ?

Man Longs for Immortality

Immortality is an innate human desire. We sense the despair that is wrought by the finitude of human life and long for immortality beyond the grave. Edward John Carnell, in his *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, writes as follows:

The incongruity between man's desire for life and the reality of physical death is the most maddening problem of all. Although he sees the handwriting on the wall, man yet refuses to think that death is his final destiny, that he will perish as the fish and the fowl, and that his place will be remembered no more. Man wills to live forever; the urge is written deep in his nature.⁸⁹

People around the world and down through history have longed for immortality. J. G. S. S. Thomason, a famous theologian, in the book *Basic Christian Doctrines*, writes as follows:

Belief in survival after death is not only universal but very ancient. The Egyptians held it; in Greece it was adopted by the Orphics, from whom Plato received it; the Hebrews accepted it; Jews in Christ's day held it; Christianity has always believed it; and for primitive man, too, immortality was a certainty, not a conjecture. Survival after death was how man interpreted the ineradicable intuition rooted in the imperishable core of his being.⁹⁰

So the desire to live beyond the boundaries of this finite existence is rooted deep within human nature.

Pointers to Immortality

What pointers are there to immortality – to survival after the physical death of the body? In the existence of one's soul or self I think one finds pointers to the immortality of the

⁸⁹ Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics: A Philosophic Defense of the Trinitarian-Theistic Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), pp. 23-24.

⁹⁰ J. G. S. S. Thomason, "Death and the State of the Soul After Death" in *Contemporary Evangelical Thought Vol. 3: Basic Christian Doctrines* [ed. Carl F. H. Henry] (Dallas, TX: Digital Publications, The Electronic Bible Society, 2002), p. 270.

soul or the ability of the self to survive the physical death of the body. You will remember when we did our section on the Doctrine of Man, we defended a view of human being called substance-dualism – that we are not simply material objects. We are not just bags of chemicals on bones. Rather, there is a soul, a spiritual substance or self, that is conjoined with this body, and eventually we will lose this body and the soul will persist.

There are pointers, I think, to this in human experience.

Man's Personality

Philosophers have noticed that there is a kind of self that cannot be fully objectified. Sometimes this is referred to as the transcendental ego. One of my colleagues in the philosophy department said that on his examination for his beginning students, one of the beginning students wrote down in discussing this, “the transcontinental eagle.”

[laughter] But that is not what is meant by the transcendental ego. Rather, this is the self that cannot be fully objectified.

As a thought experiment, think about the wall. Set your mind on the wall. Now think about him who thought about the wall. Now think about him who thought about him who thought about the wall.⁹¹ You see, there is always this transcendental self that cannot be fully objectified. When you think about him who thought about the wall, there is this further self – a higher self – that is thinking about itself. You cannot get rid of this transcendental self. There is always this unobjectifiable self that still persists even when we think about ourselves.

This self seems to transcend mere physical organs. We don't think of ourselves as being identical with our body. This transcendental self seems to transcend even the body and not be identical with it even if conjoined with it.

Man's Rationality

We think rationally. We are not (and we certainly don't regard ourselves as) simply determined by physical processes to draw the conclusions that we do. If everything that we thought were simply determined by the mindless interaction of physical forces, it is hard to see how we could regard that as rational thinking. It would simply be no different than having a toothache or a tree growing a limb. But in rationality there seems to be something beyond the physical – a sort of mind that is able to reason logically and not simply be determined in what it thinks; therefore, its conclusions and inferences are rational.

There are three ways in which this soul and body might relate. The influence might be solely one way – from the body to the mind. The body, through its stimuli and makeup, determines what the mind thinks. Or it might be that the mind influences the body but is not influenced in turn. The mind controls the body and determines how it shall act when we will to do certain things. Or the body and the mind might mutually influence each other. The body can influence the mind through the stimuli that it receives, and in turn the mind can affect the body by willing to do this or that.

Of those three possibilities, only the first (that there is an asymmetrical causation from

⁹¹ 5:01

the body to the mind) would be inconsistent with immortality. The other two at least allow the possibility that this self might survive the death of its body.

Man's Morality

Morality cannot be meaningful in the absence of immortality. Death would make morality meaningless. Even if there were objective moral values and duties, there would be no moral accountability – no reward for goodness; no punishment for evil. Therefore, one's duties and values would become really ultimately irrelevant. Everyone winds up the same if there is no immortality. Thus, immortality is a condition of a meaningful, moral life. The Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky put it in this memorable phrase: if there is no immortality, then all things are permitted.

So if we do believe that the moral life is meaningful and significant, that would give grounds for thinking that there is immortality.

I don't offer any of these as proofs of immortality, but rather as pointers to the idea that the soul could be distinct from the body and survive the death of its body.

Biblical Position

In one sense, however, all of this is somewhat irrelevant since the Christian belief in immortality is not the immortality of the soul alone. Rather, it is the resurrection of the body. We will be raised from the dead physically and so inhabit our eternal state. So even if the lights went out when we die, so to speak, nevertheless, God could still raise the dead at the end of human history upon Christ's return.⁹²

So whether or not there is immortality of the soul beyond the death of the body, the Christian hope for immortality isn't really affected because it is rooted, not in the Greek idea of the survival of the soul through the death of the body, but rather in the resurrection of the dead – this old Jewish hope.

Let's talk about the biblical view of what happens when a person dies.

Progressive Revelation

Here it is important to understand the notion of *progressive revelation*. Progressive revelation means that God has not given to humankind all of his truth that he wants us to know at once, but has revealed it gradually over time in increasing detail and fullness.

Examples of progressive revelation in Scripture would be, first, the doctrine of the Trinity. When you read the Old Testament, you would never guess that God is three-in-one. There seems to be a single person who is God in the Old Testament. There is monotheism, and there doesn't seem to be a plurality of persons in the godhead. But with the revelation in Jesus and the development of the New Testament, God's nature is more fully disclosed and we've come to learn that God is, in fact, three-in-one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A second example would be the plan of salvation. In the Old Testament, salvation seems to belong to the Jews. Yet, in the New Testament, Paul speaks of the mystery hidden for

⁹² 10:03

ages in God, and that mystery is to reconcile both Jews and Gentiles together in Christ. He said this mystery hidden for ages is now fully disclosed through the teaching of the apostles to the church.⁹³

So these would be examples of how progressive revelation works. God gradually unfolds his truth over the course of history. The Christian doctrine of immortality takes this form. It is something that is progressively revealed over time.

Immortality in the Old Testament

Let's begin by talking about the concept of immortality as it appears in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament you do not have an optimistic, hopeful perspective on what happens to people when they die. Rather, the destiny of the departed (whether righteous or unrighteous) is this place referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures as *Sheol*. What is Sheol? Sheol is the underworld abode of the departed spirits of the dead. There isn't any discrimination between good and evil in the concept of Sheol. Sheol is just the nether realm of the departed spirits. We are not told whether it is divided into a blessed paradisiacal place or a horrible tortuous place. Let's look at some scriptures that refer to this idea of Sheol.

Isaiah 38:9-10, 18:

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness:

I said, In the noontide of my days
I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.
...
For Sheol cannot thank thee,
death cannot praise thee;
those who go down to the pit cannot hope
for thy faithfulness.

This is a rather gloomy picture of the afterlife, isn't it? You go down to the pit, down to Sheol, where there is no praise or thanks being offered to God.⁹⁴

We also find this referred to in the book of Job, in Job 7:9-10: "As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more." Certainly, we don't see any doctrine of the resurrection from the dead – do we? – in a passage like this. Rather, it seems that Sheol is this hopeless place where one goes and from which one does not return.

Also, Isaiah 14:9-11:

Sheol beneath is stirred up
to meet you when you come,
it rouses the shades to greet you,

⁹³ cf. Colossians 1:25-28

⁹⁴ 14:56

all who were leaders of the earth;
 it raises from their thrones
 all who were kings of the nations.
 All of them will speak
 and say to you:
 “You too have become as weak as we!
 You have become like us!”
 Your pomp is brought down to Sheol,
 the sound of your harps;
 maggots are the bed beneath you,
 and worms are your covering.

Again, this is a very gloomy picture of the afterlife. Notice that here it speaks of these shades – a sort of ghostly spirit that is just a pale vestige of the robust person that once lived. For that reason I don’t think we can agree with those who say that Sheol simply means the grave or simply means death. Rather, as I say, it is this nether realm of departed spirits – wraiths – who are the vestiges of the people who once lived. They here are described as greeting the King of Babylon when he will go down to Sheol at his death.

Nevertheless, there are some passages in the Old Testament that provide glimmers of hope. For example, look at Psalm 73:23-28:

Nevertheless I am continually with thee;
 thou dost hold my right hand.
 Thou dost guide me with thy counsel,
 and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.
 Whom have I in heaven but thee?
 And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.
 My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.
 For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish;
 thou dost put an end to those who are false to thee.
 But for me it is good to be near God;
 I have made the Lord God my refuge,
 that I may tell of all thy works.

Here the psalmist seems to be quite hopeful. He says God will guide him in life, but then afterward God will receive him to glory. He said, “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” So there are at least some glimmers of hope here for something beyond mere Sheol.

In a couple of places in the Old Testament, late in the development of the Old Testament – in Isaiah and in Daniel, you do have the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead explicitly affirmed.

Look at Isaiah 26:19:

Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise.
 O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!

For thy dew is a dew of light,
and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall.

This seems to be an explicit teaching of the resurrection of the body which is therefore called for singing and rejoicing. I think it is especially interesting that he says God's dew of light will fall on the land of the shades – those departed spirits in Sheol. There is hope of resurrection from the dead.

Then in Daniel 12:2 we have another explicit affirmation of the hope of resurrection.⁹⁵ Daniel 12:2 says, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Here is taught a resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous dead alike.

The [Old] Testament picture is mixed.⁹⁶ The older view seems to have been one that just speaks of this departed realm of the dead. But then in time there begins to enter in a more hopeful sort of prospect, and finally actual affirmations of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

During the intertestamental period, this belief in the resurrection of the dead flourished in Judaism and became a very widespread belief. In Jesus' day it was held to by the party of the Pharisees, but it was denied by the sect known as the Sadducees. The Sadducees in Jesus' day represented the sort of old line conservative Jews. They didn't accept the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead. Nor did they believe there were any rewards and punishments after life. They held to the older, more primitive, view that you have in those passages we read about Sheol. So the Sadducees rejected the notion of immortality and resurrection of the dead in the sense that we've been describing it. By contrast, the sect of the Pharisees affirmed both the immortality of the soul beyond the death of the body as well as the eventual resurrection of the body and retribution in the future life. There would be rewards and punishments.

Jesus' Argument with the Sadducees

So, although the belief in resurrection was widespread in Judaism during Jesus' time, it wasn't universally held. Jews were divided about this. We see this division so explicit in Acts 23:6-10 where we have this marvelous story about how Paul uses this division between the Pharisees and the Sadducees to his own advantage. Paul has been arrested and is brought in front of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, to be tried. Let's read in Acts 23:6-10 what happened:

But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial."

What a clever move! He is being tried for what he preached about Jesus – the resurrection of Jesus. But he says *I am on trial because I believe in the resurrection of the dead*.

And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no

⁹⁵ 20:03

⁹⁶ Dr. Craig misspeaks and says "New" Testament here; he clearly meant to say "Old" Testament.

resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. Then a great clamor arose; and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" And when the dissension became violent, the tribune [*that is, the Roman tribune*], afraid that Paul would be torn in pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them and bring him into the barracks.

Here Paul adroitly exploits just the difference that we are talking about in order to escape judgment by the Sanhedrin, and the Romans have to rescue him so violent is the dissension that ensues.

It is very interesting to notice that Jesus sided with the Pharisees on this issue. Jesus himself sided with the Pharisees against the Sadducees when he was questioned about this.⁹⁷ Look at Matthew 22:23-33. Matthew says,

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies, having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her."

And you can just imagine these guys chuckling at how clever they were. They are sort of like the Internet Infidels of their day trying to stump Jesus with this silly thought experiment.

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. [*He really puts them in their place; he couldn't be more blunt.*] For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

Here Jesus teaches that the resurrection will occur but there will be a different quality of life in the resurrection. There will not be marriage such as we have here on Earth. Therefore, the riddle was simply beside the point. He appeals to the Pentateuch which was accepted by the [Sadducees]⁹⁸ as authoritative Scripture from God to say that God is the God of the living including the dead patriarchs, which suggests that they are in some sense still alive.

So in Jesus' argument with the Sadducees, we see him affirming the belief in the resurrection. The Christian movement that followed Jesus, of course, believed not only in Jesus' resurrection, but they considered that Jesus' resurrection was the foretaste and

⁹⁷ 25:00

⁹⁸ Dr. Craig misspeaks and says "Pharisees" when he clearly meant to say "Sadducees." It is the Sadducees whom Jesus is debating, and it is they who accept the authority of the Pentateuch (which is why Jesus is appealing to it).

harbinger of our own resurrection eventually from the dead. As Paul said, “Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”⁹⁹ That is, a representative sample of the harvest that will come.

So the early Christian view was essentially the same as the Jewish view of resurrection from the dead, with this difference in that one of these resurrections has already occurred. It has occurred in advance as the guarantor and harbinger of our own resurrection; that is, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. His resurrection is the basis upon which our hope in immortality and resurrection rests.

DISCUSSION

Question: This is kind of in my ministry. Sheol is one of the focuses and things I like to study. Just like what you said, there is so much Scripture that talks about how all men go to Sheol, but then there is a lot of negative connotations with Sheol, and then also Job asks God to comfort him in Sheol. Others say you will not abandon my heart to Sheol. It says God’s hand can go to Sheol. So it does seem like there is this combination of it being a good place of comfort and also a negative place where the evil enemies of Israel would actually go. All men go there.

Answer: Let me just say one thing. I think you quoted Psalm 16:10 about “you will not abandon my soul to Sheol.” If you look at that, what I think David is saying is not *you won’t leave me there*. I think he is saying *you are not going to let me die*. He is saying *you will preserve my life*. He is not predicting that he will somehow be raised, but that he is saying *you won’t allow me to die. You won’t allow me to go there.*¹⁰⁰

Followup: OK. All right. My understanding was that all the godly men of the Old Testament, as well as the evil, unrighteous men, all went to Sheol. However, Luke 16 is kind of like the divide between the two places.

Answer: Right! Right!

Followup: Their ultimate destiny is determined before they die, but those who hoped in the future resurrection of Christ and look forward to the promise of Christ would one day be raised to heaven. However, since their sins had not been paid for as of yet (they couldn’t go to heaven yet because their sins had not been paid for), therefore they were kept in Abraham’s bosom which was basically the good side of Sheol.

Answer: OK! You are getting way ahead of me! What we’ve been talking about just to this point is what the Old Testament says and then this division between Jesus and the Sadducees. But you are talking here about the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke where the rich man wakes up in Hades in torment and he sees Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom in paradise. We will talk about that next time. I think the question that you are raising is: were these Old Testament saints in Sheol – this awful, hopeless sort of place – and then maybe they got transferred later to Abraham’s bosom after Christ came, or something of that sort?

⁹⁹ cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20

¹⁰⁰ 30:07

Followup: I believe that is the same place.

Answer: I suspect that, and I think maybe that is what you think, too. It is not that there was any kind of transfer made. The difference is just the description. The description in the Old Testament was rather negative, gloomy, and pessimistic. But, in fact, I think the righteous dead were, as you say, with the Lord in Abraham's bosom or whatever you want to call that. But that wasn't revealed yet. That was still part of the mystery that was hidden. All we had was the revelation of this nether realm of the departed dead. I think you are right; I don't think there is any sort of change that took place in reality. What it was was a richer, fuller description came – progressive revelation – of what was really the case all along.

Question: I agree with progressive revelation, but I think the Old Testament did teach about the multiple personalities of God. Genesis *elohim*, the *Shema* where the word used is for a complex unity not a singular unity for "The Lord your God is one God." Then you had Psalm 110, "The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit on my right hand.'" At least, if not the Trinity, there are allusions to a multiplicity of persons.

Answer: I don't care to dispute about that right now. As you say, some people would see at least hints of some sort of composition in the godhead in the Old Testament. Maybe that is the case, but I think we'd all agree that certainly it wasn't fully explicit as what we have in the New Testament. If Jesus had never come, never lived, I don't think anyone would have developed the doctrine of the Trinity simply based on the Old Testament.

Question: My understanding of progressive revelation is that it became progressively more clear although . . .

Answer: Well, now wait. I would say more information, not just more clarity. There is actually more information, too.

Followup: My question then is: there is two places in Job that I think are a little bit more clear as to the resurrection. I'll only mention one of them. Job 19:25-26. You could even go to verse 27.

Answer: Ah, yes. Right.

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,

This seems to be the idea of physical immortality.

Followup: I can't really think of a different way to interpret it than after my body is destroyed yet my body will exist somehow.

Answer: Yes.

Followup: The other one, if I may, is Psalm 71:20. This is not necessarily speaking of the bodily resurrection but it does mention this "depths of the earth" idea.¹⁰¹ I would like your opinion on that one.

¹⁰¹ 35:11

Answer: That one says,

Thou who hast made me see many sore troubles
wilt revive me again;
from the depths of the earth
thou wilt bring me up again.
Thou wilt increase my honor,
and comfort me again.

Right. I think there it is a little more difficult to press that for literality rather than saying he is just saying that God is going to restore his fortunes, but perhaps in this life.

Followup: The last thing I just want to hear a few words on is Ezekiel 37.

Answer: Oh, yes. I didn't mention Ezekiel 37, but maybe we can go ahead and turn there. This is the famous vision of dry bones that Ezekiel has. This is clearly a use of the idea of the resurrection as a metaphor for the restoration of Israel. In Ezekiel 37 he talks about how he sees this vision of dry bones and then they are clothed with muscle and sinew and skin and are restored again. It is a description of physical resurrection, but here it is used as a metaphor for the restoration of the nation of Israel. This is how Israel will be restored. But nevertheless you are quite right in saying this shows that the belief in the resurrection of the dead and of the physical body was a Jewish belief that was held in Israel. So we could add Ezekiel 37 to Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 as one of the explicit references to resurrection of the body in the Old Testament. But I didn't mention Ezekiel 37 because it is used in a metaphorical sense there to talk about the restoration of Israel. Nevertheless, you are quite right in saying that this does show belief in the idea of resurrection from the dead.

What we will do next time is talk about immortality in the New Testament. We will look at the problem of what happens to a person when he dies. Does he go immediately to heaven or to hell? If so, then how do you make sense out of the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns if people are already in heaven or in hell. That is the problem we will sort out next time.¹⁰²

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 12

State of the Soul after Death in the New Testament

The last several lessons we've been talking about what we might call cosmic eschatology – how the end of human history and the world will come about. But as I said last time, most of us (or at least all Christians up until this point) haven't or won't experience that cosmic end of the world when Christ returns, but rather Christians have experienced what we might call personal eschatology. They have been ushered into the presence of Christ through their own personal death.

¹⁰² Total Running Time: 37:57 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

This raises the question: what happens to a person when he dies? If he doesn't live until the return of Christ, what happens to that person when his body gives out? Does that person go straight to heaven, or to hell, or does his soul somehow sleep until the resurrection day when he rises from the dead and Christ returns? Many people on our contemporary scene have claimed that they have had near-death experiences in which they have gone to heaven and had a glimpse of heaven – what it is like when we die. For example, a best-selling book and now a film is *Heaven Is For Real* in which a young boy – Colton Burpo – describes his experience of what he calls “going to heaven.” He says that there he saw people whom he recognized. He saw his deceased grandfather. He even saw his little sister whom he did not know he had because she died before he was born. He even claims to have seen Jesus in this state.

What are we to make of these kinds of claims? If a person does go straight to heaven when he dies then how do we understand the final resurrection of the dead and of the Judgment Day? How can there be people who are already in an embodied and recognizable condition if they haven't yet been raised from the dead, because that won't happen until Christ returns.

If you say, well, people don't have to wait until the resurrection from the dead then where are these souls of the departed? Where are the souls of the saved or of the unsaved during that interim period before Christ returns?

Those are the sorts of questions that we want to address in this lesson.

Immortality in the New Testament

To do that we want to look at what the New Testament has to teach about the state of the soul after death. The New Testament teaches, I think, that the souls of the saved do not perish when the death of the body occurs, but the soul outlives the body and goes to be with the Lord in a conscious blissful state. The soul is not extinguished upon the death of the body, nor does the soul go into a state of unconsciousness. Rather, the soul is in a conscious, blissful communion with Christ during this intermediate state between the death and the resurrection of the body.

In Philippians 1:23, the apostle Paul reflects upon the possibility of his martyrdom. On trial and in prison for Christ, he faced an impending execution. Look what he says in Philippians 1:21-24. Talking about whether to die or to continue on in the flesh, he says,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

What Paul indicates here is that death is actually a better state, a better condition, because it brings a closer conscious fellowship with Christ.¹⁰³ He recognizes that he needs to continue in this earthly life because of the ministry that God has given him to discharge. But his heart's desire is to depart and to be with Christ.

Paul discusses this intermediate state of the soul somewhat more fully in 2 Corinthians

¹⁰³ 5:28

5:1-10. Here Paul says,

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Here he uses the image of an earthly tent to describe the present body in which we live. The contrast between the earthly tent and the resurrection body which is described as a building from God eternal in the heavens – this immortal structure – is that the earthly tent is flimsy and easily struck down. But the building is stalwart. It stands and will remain forever. So the contrast here that he draws is between this fragile, perishable, mortal body that we presently inhabit, and then the resurrection body eternal that we shall have some day. He says,

Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked.

The state of the soul disembodied – the soul apart from the body – is often characterized in ancient Greek literature as a state of nakedness. Here Paul says that we would rather put on our resurrection body without the need of going through this state of nakedness, the state of disembodied existence. We long to put on that heavenly dwelling so that by putting it on we may not be found naked – a soul without a body. He says,

For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

The verb here for being further clothed is an interesting one. It has the idea of pulling on top clothing over the clothing that you already have on, like pulling on a sweater over a shirt that you are already wearing. Paul is saying we don't want to go through this state of nakedness – this intermediate condition – we would rather put on our immortal body by being further clothed. In other words, he is describing the best scenario is to live until Christ's return. When Christ returns, remember we saw that those who are alive at that time will be transformed and receive their immortal resurrection bodies without the need of going through the state of disembodied existence first. This would be the best scenario – that we would not be unclothed, stripped of the mortal body, but that we would be further clothed so that what is mortal would be swallowed up by life, by the resurrection body.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

We have the Spirit living within us. We are spiritually born again. But, as Paul says, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. We have this immortal, regenerated spirit within a mortal, fallen body that is destined to destruction.¹⁰⁴ So he says,

So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

¹⁰⁴ 9:58

This is the same thing that he expresses in Philippians 1:24 – that if you had to choose between this earthly life and the disembodied state, it is better to be in the disembodied, interim state because you are closer with the Lord. While we are in this body we are away from the Lord. But when you are in that disembodied intermediate state, you are with the Lord awaiting the final resurrection. That is not the best state. The best state will be the resurrection state. The luckiest people are those who don't have to go through that intermediary period of disembodied existence who live until the *parousia* and receive immediately their resurrection body. But that puts Paul into a catch-22 situation, doesn't it? Because in order to get the best state you've got to keep on living in the worst state! So you are in a kind of catch-22. You have conflicting desires. On the one hand you'd rather die and go and be with the Lord because that is better than the worst state, but nevertheless it is not as good as the best state. So there are sort of three states that could be ranked here: embodied mortal existence, disembodied existence, and embodied immortal existence. The catch-22 is that to get the best state you've got to keep living in the worst state. Otherwise, you are going to go through that intermediate state.

He says nevertheless we'd rather be at home with the Lord than here in this earthly body, and

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.

We will someday stand before Christ and give account of our mortal existence, but Paul says while we are in this mortal existence we seek to live for Christ and honor him, to please him, as long as we are alive on this Earth.

I take it that what Paul is teaching here is that when a Christian dies his soul, stripped of the body, continues to exist in a disembodied state, but in a state of closer, conscious, blissful communion with Christ. He will be with Christ in that condition until Christ comes again, and you will remember what Paul says in 1 and 2 Thessalonians: bringing with him those who have fallen asleep in Christ. They will rise first and be reunited with their resurrection bodies, and then those who are alive at the time of Christ's return will similarly be transformed without needing to go through the intermediate state.

Jesus himself gave a very interesting parable where he envisioned something very much like this. Let's look at Luke 16:19ff, the famous parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus. I want to immediately recognize that we must not press parables for doctrinal precision. Parables are simply stories to illustrate usually one or maybe two central truths. It would be a mistake to try to press these stories, these illustrations, for doctrinal exactitude, as though they were systematic theology. Nevertheless, what Jesus says here is very interesting.¹⁰⁵ He says,

There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in

¹⁰⁵ 14:20

Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame." But Abraham said, "Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us." And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead."

Apart from the other interesting features of this parable, what we do see here is that Jesus envisions that in the afterlife prior to the resurrection of the dead, these persons exist either in Abraham's bosom (some sort of paradisiacal existence) or else in Hades, a place of torment. So the person during this intermediate state is alive and in a state of paradise or blissful fellowship with God.

Finally, Luke 23:43. This is the story of the repentant thief on the cross – one of the two criminals crucified with Jesus. This man says to him in verse 42, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Whether you call it Abraham's bosom, as in the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, or you call it paradise, this is a state of conscious blissful existence during which people will wait until the resurrection when Christ returns.

We might ask ourselves: what about these people who have died and seen these relatives in "heaven," like Colton Burpo seeing his grandfather or little sister? Given that the resurrection hasn't occurred yet, it is impossible that they could actually have their resurrection bodies. Moreover, why would one be seen as a little girl rather than as an adult woman in the resurrection? He is obviously not seeing them as they actually are because Christ hasn't returned and the resurrection hasn't occurred. So what is going on here?

Well, we could either say that these are just illusions of a dying brain, perhaps drug-induced hallucinations, or something of that sort. Or we might offer a more sympathetic interpretation of such experiences. It is possible that in this intermediate state, in order for the disembodied souls of the dead to have fellowship with one another and with Christ, they have mental projections of other persons so that they look to them as though they are in an embodied condition and can have relationships and fellowship with them. That would also explain why to one person the other individual might look like a little girl but maybe to another person would look like an adult woman. Why? Because this is a mental projection of the soul in this intermediate state that makes it look like you are having intercourse with other embodied persons when in fact it is a disembodied state.

Interestingly enough, when you look at the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, you do

have descriptions of embodiment that are seen here.¹⁰⁶ The rich man is in flames, in torment, he wants his tongue to be cooled, and he *sees* Lazarus in Abraham's bosom and converses with Abraham.

So if you do have a situation in the intermediate state where the disembodied souls project mental pictures of other disembodied souls in the intermediate state then that would explain why you could have this appearance of physicality even though the actual resurrection body won't be received until Christ comes again. That is just a speculation, but it would make sense of these kinds of experiences.

DISCUSSION

Question: I agree with what you are saying about a projection. I guess they call it a different realm. There is another doctor who is a Christian but did not believe in near death experiences called Dr. Alexander. You can look him up on the web. He saw a lot of butterflies, which to me is symbolic of somebody he wouldn't know who is redeemed, because a chrysalis, butterfly, new life.

Answer: Yes, that would kind of go along with this as well, I think.

Question: I have always been skeptical of claims that people have seen ghosts. Is there any place in Christian belief for believing that you've seen a departed person?

Answer: The only possibility that I could think of that would be supportive of that sort of idea would be the story of the Witch of Endor in the Old Testament, where Saul goes to a conjurer and she conjures up Samuel.¹⁰⁷ Could it be that in this case Samuel somehow came out of this intermediate state and appeared to her? She seemed rather rattled about it herself; she didn't expect to have such success in this way. I think there would be no grounds in the Bible for thinking that the souls of the dead are not separated in this realm and are able to haunt buildings and be around people, or even that the bereaved actually see, for example, visions of their recently departed loved ones. Apart from that Witch of Endor story which involves necromancy – magical bringing up of dead spirits – I just don't see any grounds for placing any credibility in these ghost stories.

When you look at what Paul and Jesus say it would seem that these people are confined to these states, and therefore these souls are not free to have intercourse with human beings that are embodied.

Question: This is a tough one here. 1 Peter 3:19-20 talks about – some people say Christ went to hell or not, but anyway – it talks about him proclaiming the Gospel to the spirits who are now in prison. Can you comment on that? I don't really know what to make of that passage.

Answer: Let's turn to it. 1 Peter 3:18-20,

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey,

¹⁰⁶ 20:02

¹⁰⁷ cf. 1 Samuel 28:3-25

when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, . .

What this seems to indicate is that, during the interim period between Jesus' own death and resurrection, he made this visit to what we will call Hades where the unrighteous dead are imprisoned and proclaimed, I don't think a Gospel of salvation to them, but rather his victory over sin and death and hell. There are parallels to this verse in Jewish literature from the time that suggests that by "the spirits in prison" what are meant here are these demonic spirits that are imprisoned in Tartarus, the sort of underworld of the dead where God has put the worst of these demonic spirits, rather than allowing them to roam freely about on the Earth.¹⁰⁸ If that is right, what he really is doing is proclaiming his victory over the demonic spirits, particularly these who are imprisoned in Tartarus, in this place where these spirits are confined until their destruction.

Question: Can you explain if man *is* a soul or *has* a soul?

Answer: OK, that is a real good question. I hold to substance-dualism – that human beings are composed of body and soul. I would say that you *are* a soul which *has* a body. The soul is you. That is your self – your "I" – and you have a body. It is very easy to imagine that you might have had a different body. If your soul had been conjoined with Kevin's body, say, instead of your body, you would look very different, but it would still be you. So it seems to me that you are a soul that has a body.

That has some interesting implications. J. P. Moreland, who holds to this view, was once talking to his daughter, Ashley, when she was young, and she said, "How can God exist when you can't see him?" J. P. said to her, "Well, Ashley, you've actually never seen me, either." She said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "You've just seen my body, but you've never seen me." That is what he was trying to express. J. P. is a soul who has this body, and what the daughter has seen and known is the current body that he is conjoined with. But that is not actually him.

Question: What do you make of Matthew 27:52-53 where, at Jesus' death, some of the Old Testament saints came back to life?

Answer: Alright. Let's turn to Matthew 27:51-53. This is at the death of Christ.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

What is troubling about this passage to every interpreter (regardless of how you regard it) is that it seems to suggest that there were people that were raised from the dead prior to Christ. That is theologically very problematic because Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, and that it is on his model and pattern that people are raised from the dead. So it would seem really odd here that there would be people raised from the dead prior to Christ's own resurrection. Even Matthew seems to feel a little bit of discomfort about this because he says the tombs were opened and the bodies of the saints were raised, but then he says, "coming out of the tombs *after*

¹⁰⁸ 25:04

his resurrection.” Well, what were they doing in between? Were they sort of sitting around in these tombs waiting for Christ to be raised, and then they came out? That doesn’t seem right. So even Matthew feels, I think, a little uncomfortable about having these resurrected saints prior to the resurrection of Christ. Yet, he does seem to want to connect the resurrection of these Old Testament saints with the crucifixion of Christ.

Notice this is not appended to a resurrection narrative. This story about the raised saints is appended to the crucifixion of Christ as a way of showing the cosmic significance of the death of Christ. This has led some interpreters to suggest that maybe this shouldn’t be taken literally. Maybe this is just part of Matthew’s apocalyptic imagery of saying how earth-shattering the death of Christ was. It underlines its cosmic significance, but it isn’t meant to be literally interpreted. I don’t know what the right answer is, frankly. This is one of those passages that makes you just scratch your head. It is not found in any other Gospel. Matthew doesn’t say anything more about it. So I don’t really know exactly what to make of it.¹⁰⁹

Question: On that passage, it doesn’t say that they have resurrected bodies though. They could be resuscitated bodies like Lazarus. This would really be a sight; this would be like Thriller!

Answer: I think your point is a very good one. It could well be that what Matthew is thinking of here is not a resurrection in the proper sense of the word; that is to say, to immortality and glory. But what it could be would be something more like Lazarus being raised from the dead or Jairus’s daughter. I find that a very attractive solution – to say that these people came back to mortal life but it isn’t a resurrection to glory and immortality. I like that solution very much. I think that is certainly possible with the vocabulary that is used here.

What we’ve said is all about the souls of the righteous dead. What about the souls of the unrighteous dead – the souls of those who do not know Christ? As we’ve already seen in the parable from Luke 16, the unsaved are imprisoned in a condition that the New Testament calls *Hades*; that is to say, they are in a place of conscious torment until the resurrection at the end of the world. Hades is the Greek word that is used to translate the Hebrew *Sheol* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint – often abbreviated LXX. In the LXX, the Greek Old Testament, Hades is the Greek word for Sheol. In this sense, Sheol in the Old Testament describes more accurately the state of the unrighteous dead.

Look, again, at Psalms 6:5 read in this light. There the psalmist says, “For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise?” That is certainly true of Hades, isn’t it? In this condition, people are not praising and worshiping God. Similarly Isaiah 38:18, “For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness.” That, again, certainly would be an accurate description of those in Hades.

In Jesus’ parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we have Hades referred to along with

¹⁰⁹ 30:02

Abraham's bosom. Look again at Luke 16:22b-23. It says, "The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom." This is not hell. That is the final state after the resurrection of the dead. Hades is this intermediate state of the disembodied, unrighteous souls as they await the resurrection from the dead.

So the unsaved are also in an intermediate state, but far from being in a state of blissful communion with Christ, they are in a state of torment and separation from Christ as they await their final resurrection.

Finally, what will happen is that when Christ returns the dead – both saved and unsaved – will be raised from the dead. John 5:25-29, a verse that we've read before. Jesus says,

Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.

So when Christ comes again to execute judgment, the dead (whether in Hades or in paradise) will be raised from the dead, their souls will be reunited with a body, and they will then be judged before the judgment seat of Christ, and then ushered into the eternal state.¹¹⁰

For God's judgment, see 2 Corinthians 5:10, a verse we read just a moment ago: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body." This is not just the judgment of Christians for rewards because he says that we will receive either good or evil (punishment or reward) based upon what we've done in the body.

1 Corinthians 4:5 Paul says,

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

So it is at the time of Christ's return that judgment will take place. Not when you die! It will be at the time of Christ's return when we are raised from the dead.

Also 1 Corinthians 3:12ff Paul says,

Now if any one builds on the foundation [*He is talking here about Christians who are building on the foundation of Christ*] with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation [*on Christ*] survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹¹⁰ 35:48

Here Paul contemplates Christians who have built upon the foundation of Christ with solid lasting materials as those who receive a blessing from the Lord and a reward, but other Christians who have squandered their lives and built on the foundation with just refuse, their work is going to be burned up. They will be saved; they will get in, but only with the smell of smoke on their garments, so to speak.

Finally, in 2 Timothy 4:8 Paul says, “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” Here Paul is speaking of the reward or the commendation that Christ will give to his followers on the day of his return.

By contrast, the unsaved will be judged and sentenced to eternal punishment and death. Matthew 25:31-32, 46:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats . . . And they [*that is, the goats*] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous [*the sheep*] into eternal life.”

Here, just as the saved when they are raised from the dead will have eternal life, so the unrighteous dead will have eternal punishment.¹¹¹

The last verse that I wanted to read is Romans 2:6-11. Paul says,

For [God] will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

So both the saved and the unsaved will stand before Christ for judgment, be judged upon the basis of what they’ve done with their lives, and those who have built upon the foundation of Christ and built well will receive a commendation from God, but the unsaved will be condemned and sent into everlasting punishment and separation from God.

In a sense, they go from the frying pan into the fire. They go from Hades into Gehenna, or the final state which is called hell.¹¹²

¹¹¹ 40:01

¹¹² Total Running Time: 41:57 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 13

The Character of a Disciple of Christ

Today we reach something of a milestone. We come to the final class session of our Defenders course. It has taken us about three and a half years to get to this point. Now we finish out this class. So it is with a sense of nostalgia as well as satisfaction that we finally reach the end of our course. I wanted to say a few words about the class by way of reflection as we close.

The first purpose of the Defenders class, if you look at our purpose statement, is the following: *To train Christians to understand, articulate, and defend basic Christian truths*. All three of those words are important.

First, to understand Christian truth. We want to have a grasp as profound as we can of Christian doctrine – what the Christian world and life view teaches. So in this class we've tried to explain and elucidate various concepts that underlie the Christian faith. We've surveyed the different views that the Christian church has upon these various doctrines. If anything, I hope that this class has opened your mind to the diversity of perspectives that are represented in contemporary and historic Christianity on these different doctrines.

But it is also important that we not merely understand these doctrines but that we are also able to articulate them. We want to be able to explain them clearly. In this class I've tried to show you how to express these doctrines in an accurate way that will communicate them to the people that you want to talk with. I hope that some of you will take the opportunity to become teachers yourselves and to lead a Bible study group or a Sunday school class where you will be teaching this material to others.

Then also to defend these doctrines. Along the way, as we've surveyed Christian doctrine (from the Doctrine to Revelation to the Doctrine of the Last Things), we've also looked at how one might defend these doctrines. What arguments and evidence might be given in support of these various Christian truth claims? You will remember that one of the qualifications that Paul lays down for an elder in the church (in order to serve as an elder in the church), he says that you need to be able to teach Christian doctrine and to confute those who contradict it.¹¹³ I think we all want to aspire to that kind of maturity even if we never actually serve as elders in the church. So being able to teach Christian doctrine and confute or refute objections to it, I think, will be something that is greatly to be desired.

That is the very first purpose of this class that we've tried to fulfill.

The second purpose of the class, you may remember, is *to reach out with the Gospel to those who have not yet come to Christ*, always being ready to give a defense to anyone who should ask for a reason for our hope. I hope that many of you will avail yourselves of the opportunity to bring a non-believing friend to class. As I said earlier, this is a place where we welcome a diversity of perspectives, not only among Christians – we have Catholics, we have Baptists, we have Pentecostals, we have all sorts of Christians

¹¹³ cf. Titus 1:9

represented in class – but also non-believers as well.

Finally, third, *to be an incendiary fellowship of mutual encouragement and care*. In a large megachurch like Johnson Ferry Baptist, you are going to really get lost if you don't have a church within the church that you can identify as a small body of people that you can get to know, that you can care for, pray for, and who will care for and pray for you. That, I think, is something that we are building in the Defenders class.

And yet, having said that, in a sense we have only scratched the surface of Christian discipleship.¹¹⁴ Someone shared some time ago with me what Jesus actually said in the Great Commission that he left his disciples with in Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus said,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

Notice what Jesus said we are to teach as we make disciples of the nations. We are to teach them to obey all that Jesus has commanded us. As I reflected on that, it hit me forcefully that I am not doing that at all in this Defenders class. I am not teaching you what Jesus commanded. We haven't really looked at the teachings of Jesus about the ethical and spiritual life, about the kind of person that you are to be as a Christian follower of Christ, much less have I taught you to obey those commands. To do that you would need some sort of a discipleship group like the twelve disciples where Jesus took apart these twelve men and poured his life into them and taught them to obey his commands. He did not just teach them the commands, but he taught them what it means to live an obedient life of a disciple, of one of his followers. I haven't even begun to do such a thing as that in this Defenders class. In that sense, I have a real sense of inadequacy, frankly. I won't say failure, given our limited objectives, but I am just so impressed with how little we've really done in one sense about building disciples. We haven't but scratched the surface of what it means to be a Christian disciple.

It seems to me that the paramount thing that Jesus has commanded us to do and that we need to remember is found in Matthew 6:33 in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." Jesus said don't focus on your needs or these other material concerns. Focus on the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. This, I think, ought to be the heart cry of every Christian disciple – the Kingdom of God, his reign in your life, and its righteousness that attends it. What kind of character you are building. What kind of person are you becoming to bear the name of Christ as a Christian – to be his disciple?

What does a disciple of Christ look like? Turn to 2 Peter 1:3-11 where we have a very interesting list of the sort of character qualities that ought to describe a Christian disciple. There Peter says,

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.

¹¹⁴ 5:02

So the goal here is to escape the corruptions that are in the world because of sin, and to partake of the divine nature – to become like God himself. So here is his advice – look at this advice:

For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue,

So, you have your faith in Christ, and now you are going to add to this certain character qualities that ought to characterize a disciple of Christ.¹¹⁵ The first one is what he calls “virtue,” that is to say, moral excellence. You should have a virtuous character; be a good person. You are to have moral excellence.

and virtue with knowledge,

So in addition to virtue, we will supplement our faith with knowledge. This is obviously not intended to be just any sort of knowledge – not knowledge of Russian literature or agriculture or quantum mechanics. He is talking here about Christian doctrine, about the knowledge of God’s truth. Look at Ephesians 4:14. Paul says, “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.” Part of Christian maturity is to have doctrinal discernment so that you won’t be carried about by every wave of doctrine or teaching that comes along. You will have a clear grasp, a clear knowledge, of Christian doctrine. Then Peter goes on to say,

and knowledge with self-control,

That is to say, self-mastery. You should have mastery over your self. What this will mean will be, for example, self-mastery over your bodily passions and appetites over the lusts and the appetites that are inherit in our fleshly body. These are so powerful, obviously, that it takes tremendous self-mastery for people to keep these bodily passions in check and to live a holy and righteous life, and also your appetites and to keep those under your mastery. Have you arrived at this point in your Christian life that you can say, “I am the master of my own body, of my own flesh; I control its appetites and its desires?” I find that these appetites and passions are so powerful that if you allow them free reign they are really impossible to control. So the better thing to do is to do what Paul says – to mortify these earthly passions and appetites that are in you by avoiding things that would arouse them and stimulate them. For men I think that would mean not going to movies that have sexually explicit material in it. If you are having a problem with obesity, it would mean not having certain foods in the house that could be a temptation to you. If you avoid these things and shun the temptation then these sorts of temptations will be easier to manage and self-control will be more feasible.

Another aspect of self-control would be control over your own temper. It is easy, especially for some people, to become very angry at others and they lose their temper. This is a loss of self-control; a loss of mastery over yourself. Also one’s tongue – how do you use your speech? Do you glorify Christ in the way you talk, or do you say things that you later regret and wish you hadn’t said? Why? Because in a moment of a loss of self-control your tongue got away from you and you began to speak in ways that you shouldn’t. Or the desires that you might have. Our desires are not to be for earthly material goods like riches, wealth, big houses, and fancy clothes. Our desires are to be

¹¹⁵ 10:15

spiritually oriented and to be focused upon those eternal values that will last forever, and not to be sucked in by American consumerism and materialism and greed.¹¹⁶

Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:25 says that we should “exercise self-control in all things” in the way that an athlete exercises self-control. Undoubtedly what Paul is thinking of in the context here is the Greek Olympians. The Greek Olympic athletes exercise self-control so that they might win their event. In the same way that an athlete in training for the Olympics is master of himself and exercises self-control, so we as Christians need to exercise self-control over our lusts, appetites, temper, tongue, and our desires.

Next Peter goes on to say:

and self-control with steadfastness,

Or as I call it perseverance. That is to say, endurance. We are in this for the long run. The promise of the Scripture is that he who endures to the end will be saved. Remember Jesus’ parable of the sower where some of the plants received the Word of God, they spring up, but then they wither away because they had no root. Others become overtaken by the thorns of materialism and the desire for worldly things and are choked out. But we are to be disciples that are in it for the long run – to persevere. So Peter says add to your character, perseverance. Next he says,

and steadfastness with godliness,

That is to say, we are to have a spiritual orientation. In 1 Timothy 6:6-11, Paul says,

There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.

This is a real warning for us, especially in an American culture that is so consumeristic and materialistic and says that the dream is to have a chicken in every pot and everyone is a home owner on his own. Those are not Christian values. Christian values are godliness, to have a spiritual focus, to let your life be focused on spiritual things rather than material things and material advancement.

Then Peter says,

and godliness with brotherly affection,

Brotherly affection or kindness toward others is to be exemplified first and foremost within the body of Christ to our fellow Christians. In Romans 12:9-10 Paul says this: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” We ought to be cheerleaders for one another and to be seeking the good of one another. We are not fighting against one another or jealous of one another, but seeking one another’s good.

¹¹⁶ 15:06

In 1 John 3:16-20, John says this:

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

So John says we are to be liberal in giving the goods that we have to help brothers in need and caring for them in action.¹¹⁷

The last quality that Peter says that we should have:

and brotherly affection with love.

This is the *agape* love that characterizes God himself. Paul describes this sort of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Paul says,

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

As a Christian, we ought to be able to put our name in the place of the word “love” there. “I” am patient and kind, “I” am not jealous or boastful, “I” am not arrogant or rude, “I” am not insisting on my own way, etc. When you do that it is really convicting, isn't it? Because we know how fall short we fall of this standard. But this is a description of what a Christian disciple ought to be like.

There is one quality that ought to be characteristic of all of these. Peter says make every effort to do this, and this will be the Biblical quality of diligence. That is to say we are to be zealous, steady, and relentless in pursuing these things. We need to be diligent in adding to our Christian faith these sorts of character qualities that befit a disciple of Christ.

I had intended to say something more about this, but we are out of time. I will have to reserve this to next time. I have some more thoughts to share about what it means to be a disciple of Christ and how we might go about inculcating this kind of character into us.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ 20:22

¹¹⁸ Total Running Time: 25:14 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)

§ X. DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

Lecture 14

The Character Qualities of Christians

As we draw our Defenders Series II to a close, I have been sharing with you some thoughts about Christian discipleship because I feel so keenly the inadequacy of what I've taught you over the last three and a half years with respect to being a disciple of Jesus. Doctrinal maturity or correctness is only one facet of being a disciple of Christ.

We saw last time in looking at 2 Peter 1:3-11 that in addition to our Christian faith there is what we might call "faith plus" – all of these other character qualities of the Christian disciple that we need to be diligent about inculcating into ourselves. Peter mentions virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. These ought to be the character qualities of a follower of Jesus.

Let's not miss the promise that goes with this in 2 Peter 1:8ff:

For if these things are yours and abound, *[notice it is not just to have them, but to have them abundantly]* they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What a fantastic promise. If you want to have a life that is bearing fruit for Jesus Christ, a life that is effective in carrying out the ministry that God has given you, then these character qualities are sufficient for that. Having these character qualities in abundance will prevent you from being ineffective or unfruitful. They will guarantee a fruitful, effective Christian life and ministry.

He goes on to say,

For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election,

By developing these character qualities and having these in abundance will confirm your call and election as a Christian.

for if you do this you will never fall;

What a promise! Do you worry about whether you will persevere to the end? Will I fall away and apostatize? Here Peter says this is the guarantee – that you will persevere and you will not fall away. If these qualities are yours and abound then you will never fall.

so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I think you can see how essential and important it is to try in our Christian lives to develop the character of Christ and to abound in these Christ-like qualities.

At the same time, although we are to be diligent about this (Peter says make every effort to do this – he says if you are zealous about these things – so obviously he is emphasizing that we are to make efforts in this regard), still this can really be discouraging or put you under the pile because nobody by human effort can bring his life into conformity with the

character of Christ. The more you try, the more you realize how far short you fall of the standard to which we aspire. So if we are not to lead Christian lives of defeat and constant discouragement, how can we have these sorts of qualities and a victorious Christian life? The answer, I believe, is through the fruit of the Spirit.¹¹⁹ It is the filling of the Holy Spirit that will enable a person to live a life which increasingly conforms to the image of Christ and produces these sorts of qualities in abundance.

Look at Galatians 5:16, 22-23. Paul says, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Then he goes on to talk a little bit about characteristics of the flesh. But then in verse 22 he says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” As we are filled with the Holy Spirit, that is to say, under the control of the Holy Spirit, empowered by the Holy Spirit in our lives, the result of that will be this so-called fruit of the Holy Spirit. These are really the earmarks of the spirit-filled life, not charismatic gifts like speaking in tongues or miraculous healings. When you look at the church of Corinth for example, they abounded in charismatic gifts like speaking in tongues and miracles and so forth. And yet Corinth was the most carnal church in the New Testament. The real sign of the fullness and the power of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life is the production of the fruit of the Spirit – these character qualities that result from walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you look at this list of the fruit of the Spirit, you immediately see the overlap with the list of character qualities that Peter says are the key to successful, fruitful, persevering Christian living. For example, one of the fruits of the Spirit is love. That matches up with one of the qualities on Peter’s list. Joy and peace don’t seem to be found there. These seem to be the products of the filling of the Holy Spirit in your life – a joyful and contentful Christian life. But then notice patience and faithfulness. When these two are had in combination, that results in perseverance. If you are faithful and patiently endure then you will persevere. Kindness is also found on the list as brotherly kindness or affection. Goodness is the same as virtue – the production of moral goodness in our lives. Gentleness, I don’t really see there, but then there is self-control which, again, is explicitly mentioned in Peter’s list. As for godliness: godliness, you will remember we said, is having a spiritual orientation, not a material orientation. That is, of course, produced by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So if we want to have the kind of character qualities that Peter says are so vital to the Christian life, these will be had through being filled with and walking in the Holy Spirit. As our lives are yielded daily to the empowering and convicting and guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, we will be changed and the Spirit will produce in us exactly these kinds of qualities.

Do you notice there is one of those qualities that is not produced by being filled with the Holy Spirit. I thought this was so interesting. Knowledge! Knowledge is something you’ve got to do on your own. Being filled with the Holy Spirit isn’t going to give you a knowledge of Christian doctrine. You are going to have to study and take a class or read some books or something like that. So the fruit of the Spirit will help to produce all of these Christ-like qualities in our lives, but knowledge is something that we are going to have to do by studying Scriptures and reflecting upon them philosophically in order to

¹¹⁹ 5:03

develop correct Christian doctrine.¹²⁰

So I think you can see that while what we are doing in Defenders class is not by any stretch of the imagination a full-orbed curriculum in Christian discipleship, it does deal with one essential part of it; and that is, knowledge. For the rest what we need to do as individual Christians is to yield our lives daily to the power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit so as to develop these Christ-like qualities in us.

As you think about these qualities, these aren't the sorts of things that just happen overnight. Perseverance and godliness and love – these aren't the sorts of things that just appear in your life suddenly. These are virtues that develop over time. So it is not just a matter of being filled with the Holy Spirit at a certain time. It is a matter of what Paul calls “walking” in the Spirit. That is to say, logging time in the Spirit – being filled with the Holy Spirit, empowered and guided by him day-by-day, year-by-year, over a long period of time. So in Galatians 5:16, 25 he says, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

So I would encourage you every day that you get up before your feet hit the floor: ask the Lord, “Lord, fill me today with your Holy Spirit. Help me to walk today in a way that is pleasing to you in word and deed and thought. Convict me of sin when I am not yielded to your Spirit but am yielded to my own flesh instead.” When you become aware of that or convicted of that, confess it immediately and ask him to fill you again with his Spirit and to take control of your life and to guide you. Keep short accounts with God. Don't let sin fester or be swept under the rug. The moment you are aware of it, confess it immediately, claim his promise that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Then ask him to fill you again with the Holy Spirit. As we do that – as we walk in the Spirit – then his promise is that the fruit of the Holy Spirit will be produced in our lives and thereby the kind of characteristics that ought to attend a true disciple of Christ and will guarantee a fruitful and effective ministry.

Those are some of the thoughts that I wanted to share with you to wrap up our Defenders curriculum.

DISCUSSION

Question: I would just like to note that in 2 Peter there are two “knowledges” – there is one that is *gnosis* which is a kind of head knowledge, and there is *epignosis* which is knowledge of Jesus Christ, of saving knowledge. In the verse that you cited, that is *gnosis*. In verse 8 it says if you do all these things it leads to true *epignosis*, which is also provided by the Holy Spirit.

Answer: That is very interesting. You are saying that in that promise that these will prevent you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ – this is not mere *gnosis*, not mere doctrinal knowledge, but this knowledge of Christ, knowledge of God.

¹²⁰ 10:15

Question: I would like your thoughts on verse 5 [2 Peter 1:5]. I've often wondered if there is an implied progression in these traits. In other words, you will notice the wording, "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness, and to goodness, knowledge, and to knowledge, self-control." In other words, is there some thought that perhaps it is a pyramid where faith is at the base and in order to add the latter elements, the former elements are required?¹²¹

Answer: I've thought about that, too, and wondered about it. It would seem like love would be the appropriate pinnacle, doesn't it? That that would be the climax. But I must say that for many of the other qualities, it wasn't obvious to me that there would be that sort of relationship – that you would first add virtue to your faith and then supplement virtue with this sort of knowledge and then knowledge with self-control. To me, I did not see there a kind of logical progression. It seemed to me that these qualities are not necessarily built like a pyramid. But I could be wrong there and maybe you are able to see how that might work. But I didn't see it. I wondered the same thing and wasn't able to see that clearly myself.

Question: Just to build on that, the same thing is in John 14:26, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." The way I see it, all these things come by work anyway. You have to work on all of them – the patience, the love. It just doesn't come to you right off the bat unless you have that faith in Jesus Christ, unless you jump in 100%. Then it all just comes to you – the knowledge, the love, the peace, the kindness, the goodness, all of that. That is what I see in this.

Answer: Certainly, there is that element in the passage in Peter where he talks about being diligent or making your best effort and being zealous. So from the human point of view that is right. You don't just sit back passively and expect these qualities to magically appear in your character. You go out and work on them. You make an effort to do these things. But at a deeper level, you are really trusting in the Holy Spirit to remake you from the inside out as you engage in, for example, service to others or being involved in study or showing mercy or things of that sort. So it is a paradox. There is definite effort that is required by the person, but then on the other hand at this deeper level it is God who is at work in you, as Paul says, to will and to do his good pleasure.

Question: That is wonderful that you've compared the two lists. But I would propose one more list – that is, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. I think it is very interesting that someone asked about the progression. I think with the Beatitudes, we start from our condition – poor in spirit, who mourn, and meek, and who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on. But in 2 Peter it is from God's revelation. We received that faith and that goodness, then the knowledge is basically . . . some people . . . we all have this structure that we can hang the knowledge on. If we have a structure of believing in God then the things of God can hang on our understanding. But if we have a "denying God" mindset, that is a structure that only those things that deny God can hang on. So it is important that we have a structure where we can hang the knowledge that concerns God on – that is the goodness. Then we work out our self-control and everything. So I think those two lists – one is stemming from us (our condition), and one is stemming from

¹²¹ 15:09

God's revelation to us that we receive.

Answer: If I understand your point, I think you are emphasizing the importance of thinking in worldview terms as Christians. A theistic view of the world is very different than an atheistic worldview. It has a different structure, as you say. They are different realities. So viewing things within a theistic worldview is the way we as Christians need to learn to think. That will be part of this reformation of our knowledge that will happen through Christian doctrine.

Question: I thought I would try to have the last word, Dr. Craig. I just wanted to thank you on behalf of all of us for your dedication and service to this class. We all benefit immeasurably from your ministry. Thank you for the last three years, and we look forward to the next three!

Answer: Thank you! It is a joy!¹²²

¹²² Total Running Time: 20:47 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)