Eschatology
The Doctrine of Last Things*

by Bruce Ware

Contents:

I. Introduction
II. Intermediate State
III. Views of the Millennium
IV. Views of the Tribulation
V. Final Judgment and the Eternal State.

I. Introduction

A. The Meaning of "eschatology."

The term “eschatology” is taken from two Greek terms *eschatos* and *logos* and simply means the study of what is last, or words or discourse concerning what comes last. As we think about this in Scripture, we realize that there is a lot in Scripture about what is going to happen in the end. Some of it has already been fulfilled in part. For example, the prophets will speak of, in the latter days, “I will pour out my Spirit upon mankind.” So there is a sense in which we ought to see ourselves as living in the time of the *eschaton*, the time of the last things that are taking place. This is why a number of theologians, in fact most Evangelical theologians, have now adopted an understanding of eschatology that is called "already, not yet" or "inaugurated" eschatology. That simply refers to the fact that we understand, from a biblical point of view, that much of what was prophesied to happen in the last days is already being fulfilled, yet there is more to come. We would err if we thought that all of what the Bible spoke of as future has already happened. We would also err if we think of the Bible's teaching about the last times as being strictly in the future. The fact of the matter is, we are living in an age right now in which some of the reality of the last times is taking place for us now. I think a beautiful statement of this is in Hebrews 6, which is, admittedly, a very difficult passage. Among the things that the writer says is true of these who reject Christ, he also says this, "In the case of those who have once been enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, have tasted the good word of God and," here it comes, "the powers of the age to come". Here, we are recipients now of the powers of an age yet future, the age to come. So, we live now in the already, while we await the not yet.

In this study of eschatology, we will be focusing primarily on the "not yet"; that is, we will look at aspects of biblical teaching that focus upon what is yet to happen, what we can anticipate happening in the future. Some of these things are clear and all Evangelicals agree upon them. We all agree that Christ is coming again, his coming again will be physical and bodily and he will come to earth. We all believe that there will be a final judgment of all people, men and women, all races; every individual will stand before God in the day of judgment. We all believe that there will ultimately be a heaven and hell for all individuals. The nature of hell, in particular, is much under dispute today, and we will talk a bit about that as we move through this. Nonetheless, everybody believes there will be this eternal state of people. There are, though, areas of disagreement, and a good portion of what we will talk about in this lecture will deal with areas where we have differences of opinion among us. I just want you to know at the beginning of this, though, that what is comforting, I believe, is to realize that the main things are clear; God will win, Christ is coming. If we belong to him, we will be with him forever. If we do not belong to Christ, in the traditional view and in my view, we await the certainty of divine judgment, the certainty of eternal conscious torment forever and ever. We may not know with certainty and confidence all of the details and the exact timing of different things that will take place, but we do know the big picture and there is large agreement on these things.
B. Value of Studying Eschatology.

Let me suggest for you these seven items here.

1. Understand God's Cosmic Purposes.

It helps so much to realize that God has a plan for the end, or for the consummation, of all things and has had this plan from the very beginning. God is not playing it by ear, moving ad hoc or making adjustments as he goes along, wondering whether things are going to come out in the right way in the end. No, the God of the Bible is a God whose plan and purposes have been set, and he is accomplishing those purposes.

2. Gives us Hope.

It gives tremendous hope to us to realize that these purposes mean God will be victor in the end; we are on the winning side. We do not need to fear that, ultimately, Satan will somehow triumph or evil will win out over good. We have tremendous hope that, no matter how bad things are now, no matter what we may experience in life, God will succeed in accomplishing his purposes. All we really have to do is make sure we are following him. I can remember a time when I was with my family in downtown Chicago at Grant Park, with at least a million people, for what is called Taste of Chicago. It was so crowded; it was the most claustrophobic, most crowded I have ever been. My little daughter, Rachel, was about six or seven years old at the time. I said to Rachel, "You've just got to hang onto my belt," she was walking behind me, "Hang onto my belt. Wherever I move, you move; stick with me." So she did that. I think this is what we need to do, just hang onto God; he is the victor. We need to follow him and then we can have hope.


This also gives us endurance, because we realize that "this world is not our home; we are just passing through; our treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue". We can endure affliction and persecution; we can endure the trials and tribulations of life, whatever God calls us to. We can live our lives with abandon, realizing how brief this life is. The Bible speaks of it as a vapor, that is here and vanishes; then comes heaven, the joy and the glory that awaits all who have trusted in Christ and lived faithfully before Him. So, we can live this short life with endurance and faithfulness, knowing with certainty what is coming in the end.

4. Helps us Reassess our Values.

We realize that, what matters is what lasts for eternity and so much of what the world values now will perish. In the words of 2 Peter 3, there will come an end to all these things in the world, so the Christian ought to have his or her heart focused upon, not the things of this world, but Christ, the gospel, and the eternal life that we will share with God forever. Let me read these verses that apply to this point and also the next point, Motivation for Holiness. Peter writes in verse 10, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness."

5. Motivation for Holiness.

It is very clear that we reassess what matters in life when we understand the transient nature of this life and what really matters for eternity. We seek to live lives that are holy, realizing this is our true identity; this is who we really are as Christian people. We are called to be God's holy people, so we seek to live in ways that are consistent with this true identity that we have with him.


Obviously, a study of eschatology provides a motivation for witness as we realize that this is the day of salvation,
now is the time when people have the opportunity to hear the gospel, believe in Christ and be saved. “It is appointed unto man once to die and then will come the judgment.” So we need to take seriously the mandate of Christ and the empowerment of the Spirit to be witnesses for him in the various contexts in which God puts us. For some of us, it will mean being open to God's call upon our lives to be involved in full-time ministry, and perhaps involved in missions where we take the gospel message to people who have never heard it before. There needs to be, in this age, a host of people raised up as missionaries, those who proclaim the good news of Christ in other lands and among people groups who have never heard of Christ.

7. Motivation for Worship.

Finally, a study of eschatology provides tremendous motivation for worship because we see, in Revelation 5, for example, this vision of the Lamb, the One who is on the throne. We see the glory of this God, who has created history and who consummates it exactly as he has planned and purposed it. He is exalted and triumphant in the completion of all that he has purposed for history to be. He is worthy of worship. He is the exalted glorious God to whom we give our praise and our adoration.

II. Intermediate State

Let us move into the very substance of areas we will look at in eschatology. First, is the Bible's teaching on what is called the “Intermediate State”. This is simply the state of people's existence after physical death. We all understand that, because of sin, we die in this world. That was stated by God in the Garden of Eden. "In the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will surely die." The New Testament confirms this in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." In Romans 5, Paul has said, "Through sin death entered the world." We understand that, apart from the coming of Christ when we will be raptured and taken to be with him, more on that in a few moments, we can all expect to die in this life. The question becomes then, what happens after that?

A. Unbelievers.

Essentially, unbelievers can anticipate, whether they know it or not, that they may be experiencing, upon their physical death, torment and punishment as they await the final judgment of Christ. There are a couple of passages that indicate this. 2 Peter 2:9 is the first one we will look at. Peter says here, "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation and to keep the unrighteous under punishment awaiting the day of judgment." Here is a very clear statement that those who are unrighteous are not in some kind of unconscious experience, soul sleep or something like this, but rather they are consciously experiencing punishment awaiting this day of judgment. The term that is used there, that they are under punishment, is a present passive participle, indicating the ongoing nature of this punishment they are enduring.

Another passage that I believe is relevant to this is Luke 16, where Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. You may recall this. Beginning at verse 19, the rich man enjoyed many benefits in this life. The poor man, Lazarus, used to lay at his gate covered with sores and long to be fed with crumbs that came from the rich man's table. But now, they both have died, and the rich man is in Hades, it says, while the poor man is at Abraham's bosom. We read this concerning the rich man, in verse 24, "He cried out and said 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger into water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said to him, 'Child, remember that during your life you received good things, and Lazarus bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able to do so, and that none may cross from there to us.' And then the rich man in Hades said, 'Then I beg you, father, send someone to my father's household, for I have five brothers, in order that he may warn them, so that they will not come to this place of torment.' And Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'"

A couple of things about this are interesting. It is very clear that this is happening in the intermediate state. This is
not a statement of the final judgment. This is not hell or the lake of fire, as we read about it in Revelation 20. Rather, this is a time period between this man's physical death and the coming of Christ. How do we know that? Because he appeals for someone to go and speak to his brothers who are still out there. Other people have not died yet. This is prior to the end of the age. Another interesting thing is that this man is conscious and experiencing torment during this time. He wishes for just a drop of water to be brought to him, but nothing of the sort can be done; there is this chasm fixed. Finally, notice that, because this chasm is fixed, there is no way in which one could transfer from one side to the other. People who are in this horrible place of torment cannot move to the place of Abraham's bosom of blessing nor the other way around. So, it seems to be clear from this that our ultimate destiny is secured at the point of our physical death; there is no point after our physical death in which it can be changed. Hebrews 9:27 confirms this when it says, "It is appointed unto men once to die and after this comes the judgment."

B. Believers.

For believers, the picture is similar in one sense, in that there is conscious, ongoing existence that takes place between the time of one's physical death and the second coming of Christ. But, the quality of life is dramatically different. The picture we have in the New Testament of what believers anticipate being with Christ is so glorious and wonderful. Listen to these passages. For example, in Luke 23:42-43, Jesus said to the thief on the cross who had trusted in him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Even using the word "paradise" indicates this place of joy and blessing where he will immediately be with the Lord. In Philippians 1:21-23, Paul sort of debates whether he should die or whether he should remain living for the benefit of the believers. He says this in verse 21, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain, but if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me, and I don't know which to choose, but I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ for that is very much better yet to remain on in the flesh is necessary for your sake." Here it is clear that, when he says, "depart and be with Christ," he means his physical death, because in the next verse he says, "yet to remain on in the flesh." So Paul understands that, what it means to die as a believer is this joyous reality of departing and being with Christ, for that is very much better. This is confirmed in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, where Paul says, "Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we were at home in the body, that is, living physically in our physical bodies, "we are absent from the Lord--for we walk by faith and not by sight--we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body," that is, die physically; our bodies go to a grave, "and to be at home with the Lord." So the prospect for believers is a very joyous one. At the point of physical death we are with the Lord and enjoying the pleasures of his presence and company. The New Testament clearly places our ultimate hope, not at the point of our physical death but at the point of the return of Christ and our resurrection to the fullness of what God has for us. Let me put it this way; as wonderful as the intermediate state is for believers, we are with the Lord, it still falls short of the fullness that God has for us when we are given glorified bodies and restored fully into the image of the risen Christ to live with him forever. Our real hope is the blessed coming of the Lord when the resurrection takes place. The intermediate state is simply a step in that direction, not the fullness of what God has for us.

III. Views of the Millennium

We realize right from the very beginning that we have differing views among Christian people here; Bible-believing, sincere Christian people just hold different views on what Scripture teaches.

A. Postmillennialism.

The postmillennial view holds that the millennium happens in this church age, and the second coming of Christ happens after the millennium, hence the term postmillennial. According to this view, postmillennialists hold that, in the church age, between say, the cross and the second coming, between the first and second comings of Christ, we experience a tribulation, first of all. They interpret, for example, the bulk of the book of Revelation, that speaks of the tremendous tribulation that takes place, the seal judgments, the trumpet judgments and the bowl judgments, as happening in the church age. Then, a point will happen in the church age where the millennium will begin to dawn.
They believe the millennium to be a golden age, in which the kingdom of Christ will increasingly grow on earth. They envision great numbers of people coming to faith in Christ, so much so that, across the world, cultures and civilizations will be Christianized. Because the vast majority of people become Christians, this has a transforming effect upon the entire society and culture and, in fact, upon the nations of the world. At the end of the millennium, after the flowering of the kingdom has taken place, they believe Christ will come, post millennium.

What support do postmillennialists give for this? They believe, for example, that we should understand Scripture's teaching about heaven as being a large expanse, opposed to hell. They have a confidence that heaven will incorporate or encompass the vast majority of people. Hell will, in fact, be quite limited in nature. They take the images in the Bible as indicators of this. For example, heaven pictured is a kingdom or a country, whereas hell is pictured as a prison or a pit or a lake, and that indicates the relative difference in the size of the two.

They also hold that, because the gospel is to be preached to the whole world, it will ultimately have its desired effect. Look at Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, so little, and then becoming this large bush that even the birds can settle in, or the little leaven that leavens the whole lump of dough. Both of these parables indicate to them the spread of the gospel through the whole world and the great number of people being saved.

They also hold that Revelation 20 indicates that during this millennial reign of Christ, when many, many people are being saved, Satan is bound, and he is not able to do the ongoing work of blinding the nations that he had been doing earlier. Revelation 20:1-3 reads as follows, "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the Abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, that is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it over him and sealed it, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed. After these things he must be released for a short time." Obviously, the thousand years here is not a literal thousand years. It means a period of time. But, the significant thing, as they see it, is that, because Satan is bound, the gospel can be spread to all the world.

B. Amillennialism.

Both the postmillennial and the amillennial views are held predominantly in Reformed traditions. There was a time when the postmillennial view, at the turn of the twentieth century for example, was by far the dominant view. But its optimism that the world will be Christianized was shattered by World War I and, of course, the subsequent wars of the twentieth century. Now, postmillennialism does not have the pride of place any longer. Amillennialism is far more prominent, although we have seen, in recent years, a sort of resurgence of great interest in the postmillennial view, partly among a group of people who have been called theonomists or reconstructionists, and another group that are referred to as preterists. In any case, the postmillennial view is having a new life in certain ways today; but the amillennial view is still the more prominent one in Reformed circles. The term simply means that there is no literal millennium. Amillennial is not denying that there is a millennium, but it is denying that there is a literal millennium in the way that premillennialists understand it.

What do amillennialists hold? They hold that the millennium happens, but not as a literal time after Christ returns, as premillennialists do. It happens as the time period for the entirety of church history. When we read the book of Revelation, we should understand the church as being involved simultaneously in the tribulation that takes place as that book describes it. It is characteristic of all of church history, with some time periods being more turbulent than others, having greater tribulation than others. Nonetheless, through all of church history the church endures the tribulation, but also, during this same time period, the millennium is happening. Amillennialists say that Christ is reigning over his church during this time. The amillennialists would understand that Revelation 20:1-6, which refers to this thousand year reign of Christ when Satan is bound and when Christ is reigning, as indicating the defeat of Satan by Christ through the cross and the resurrection. That is the binding of Satan, they would say, and the reigning of Christ over the hearts of his people. So, we really are in a kingdom right now. We are in the millennial kingdom; we have been, in the words of Colossians 1:13, "Transferred from the dominion of Satan into the kingdom of his beloved Son." So we are in Christ's kingdom as we are believers in Christ. They would see the book of
Revelation to be interpreted in a kind of recapitulation manner, with these cycles, as it were, that return. One of these cycles begins in Revelation 20; it sort of begins again the story of the church, during this age, in which we live simultaneously in tribulation and in the millennium.

Amillennialists appeal to this view because they believe that it makes clearer certain things that are made muddy or difficult in the premillennial view, in particular. They understand that there will be one judgment that takes place in the future. Jesus, in John 5, spoke of the coming judgment, where everyone would be raised to life or to punishment. One advantage of both the postmillennial and amillennial views is that they anticipate that when Christ comes there will be one common resurrection, one common judgment, and then the eternal state follows from that. They find it complicated and less clear from Scripture's teaching that we should divide up the resurrections into more than one and the judgments into more than one.

C. Historic Premillennialism.

In the historic premillennial view there is a commitment to the notion that the millennium is, in fact, a literal millennium, that is, a thousand year reign of Christ that happens after the return of Christ. The term premillennial means that the return of Christ is pre or before the millennium happens. They understand that we are not in the millennium, in any sense, in this church age now. The postmillennialists understand that the millennium happens at the end of the church age as we shift from the tribulation into the millennium and the vast majority of people are converted. Amillennialists believe that the entirety of the church age is, in fact, the time of the millennium, but premillennialists believe that the literal millennium will occur on this earth after Christ returns to earth.

They have a number of reasons for holding this view. Let me give to you what are some of the prominent ones. For example, they read the book of Revelation, chapter 20, where we read about this millennium, this thousand-year reign of Christ, where Satan is bound and Christians are raised to life and reign with Christ. They understand the events of chapter 20 to follow chronologically after the events of 19. This really makes all the difference if you agree to this, if you really do enter into a premillennial view of one kind or another. In chapter 19, verse 7, you can see the rejoicing for the marriage supper of the Lamb that takes place. Then, following that in verse 11, we have the coming of Christ. This is the the great triumphant second coming of Christ, where he comes on his white horse with the swords extending from his mouth, the Word of God, with a robe dipped in blood and a name written upon him "King of King and Lord of Lords". He comes to earth and he vindicates his reign over the nations and brings judgment against them. At the end of this chapter, in verse 20, we read, "The beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast; and the two of them were thrown into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone." The premillennialists will argue that, as you look through the book of Revelation, it is clear that there are three main figures, not two. There is the beast and the false prophet, but there is also Satan. So, what about Satan, is the question that would come to any readers mind as you end chapter 19, and that is right where chapter 20 picks up is, "Then I saw an angel coming down holding the key of the Abyss. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent, the devil, Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." He is bound for this thousand years and then he is released. Then, in Revelation 20:10, we see that, “The devil who had deceived the nations was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they are tormented day and night forever and ever.” Premillennialists understand that the story continues, let us put it that way; the narrative of chapter 19 continues in chapter 20. That simply means that the return of Christ in 19 is followed by the millennium that happens in chapter 20.

Here is another reason that premillennialists hold this view. They argue that the binding of Satan, that is spoken of in 20:1-3, is of such an extent or to such a serious degree that it is not a binding that is true of Satan now. Satan right now, yes, is a defeated foe. Christ has conquered Satan and sin, but in the New Testament, after the resurrection of Christ, after the ascension of Christ, we still read of Satan. For example, 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that "He is the God of this world who blinds the minds of the unbelieving." We read in Ephesians 2:1-3 that, "He is the prince of the power of the air." Satan is described in the New Testament as having enormous hold over the nations, a hold over unbelievers. Premillennialists argue that, when you see in Revelation 20:3 that Satan is thrown into the Abyss, there is a seal put over him where he could not deceive the nations any longer. This is describing a reality that is future,
that is not true now; so they look to this to be fulfilled in the future millennium rather than in this age now.

The third argument that premillenialists give in Revelation 20 has to do with verses 4-5. Let me read those verses to you. "Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection." Of course, the first resurrection is referring back to verse 4, of those who had come to life and reigned with Christ. The point that the premillennialist wants to make here is that the two comings to life or two resurrections that are spoken of here must both be physical resurrections. The first one is the coming to life of those who were beheaded during the tribulation; this is clearly physical resurrection. It is hard to understand how you accommodate this in an amillennial view. Many try to turn this into a spiritual resurrection; they come to life as they are reborn spiritually. The problem with this is that the dead who come to life are already Christians; they were martyred for their testimony of Jesus. So rather, it seems clear that these are believers who die and then they come to life at the end of the tribulation and reign with Christ for the thousand years. Likewise, the rest of the dead, that is unbelievers, come to life and then are judged by Christ at the end of the thousand years. So the parallel nature of the two comings to life, both of them being physical in nature, argues for a premillennial view.

Why is this historic premillennialism? Simply because this was the view of the early church and the view which has been characteristic through more of church history than the others, so it has that appeal to what has been the church's prominent view.

D. Dispensational Premillennialism.

It is very much like the historic view with this exception, in the dispensational premillennial view there is more of an insistence that the millennium actually serves the purpose of accomplishing things that have to do with the nation of Israel, to fulfill Old Testament promises that have yet to be fulfilled, than is often times seen to be the case by historic premillennialists. In other words, dispensationalists believe that God's purposes with Israel are not fulfilled in the church exclusively. They see a day when God will fulfill those promises to Israel of being restored to their land and having their king, being a saved people. They say this happens as massive numbers of Jews come to faith in Christ in the midst of this horrible tribulation that is taking place. Then Christ comes, delivering them from the nations at the end of the tribulation and reigning over them, along with all Gentile believers, but in particular, over them as promised--the king of David coming and reigning over Israel. Dispensationalists understand there are more Old Testament promises at stake, requiring both tribulation and millennial time periods in order for those promises to be fulfilled.

IV. Views of the Tribulation

We have to realize that these are positions that are held by premillennialists. There is no dispute that there is a rapture, because the Bible does speak of it, when the trumpet sounds we will all be raised and we will be brought into the presence of Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff Paul comforts peoples with these words, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep," that is, those who have died, "and so do not grieve, as the rest who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ will be raised first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So we will always be with the Lord." Everyone holds, because the Bible teaches this, that there will be a rapture of Christian people at the resurrection when Christ comes, but amillennialists and postmillennialists believe that happens just at the end of the age. Christ comes; the rapture takes place, and then comes heaven and hell, the
eternal state. It is the premillennialists who differ over the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation period, the seven-year tribulation period. There are three main positions.

A. Midtribulation Rapture.

The Midtribulational view, holds on this that the church is raptured, that is those who are alive and remain are brought up to be with Christ. Those who have died before that time in Christ are raised and meet Christ as 1 Thessalonians 4 describes. This happens at the midpoint of the tribulation. Part of the reason they hold this is because they believe that the first half of the tribulation is a time period of judgment, tremendous tribulation and affliction, but at the midpoint of the tribulation the outpouring of God's wrath occurs. They argue that the seventh trumpet that you see in the book of Revelation is the trumpet that sounds in 1 Corinthians 15 when we are called to be with Christ. Then, after the seventh trumpet sounds, begins the final display of God's wrath through the bowls of wrath that are poured out upon the world. So, they hold a view that the church endures the first half of the tribulation, but then escapes, by the rapture, the second half of the tribulation.

B. Posttribulation Rapture.

The Posttribulation view holds that the rapture of the church is posttribulation, it happens at the end of the tribulation. According to the this view, we all ought to anticipate, as Christian people, being called by God to live through the entirety of the tribulation. Many of us will be martyred; but nonetheless, we should have the mindset and hope and faith in God of enduring the tribulation rather than thinking of possibly escaping it by some preliminary rapture. Posttribulationists argue that this is likely the view that the apostle Paul held. I believe one of their strongest arguments comes from 2 Thessalonians 2, where Paul writes to believers who have evidently been told that they are currently in the day of the Lord or in this time of tribulation. He writes to them and says, “No, you are not in it.” He says in verse 3, "Let no one deceive you, for it," the tribulation or the day of the Lord, “will not come unless the apostasy,” this departure from the faith, “comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed.” The point that the posttribulational position would want to make here is that, if Paul had a pretribulational mindset, he would say to these believers who thought they were in the tribulation, "Hey I have got good news for you, you won't be in it. The rapture happens before the tribulation." But instead of saying that, all he does is clarify that the tribulation they are going through now is not the tribulation of the day of the Lord, of the last days. That tribulation will be marked by the man of lawlessness coming forth and performing all of his signs and wonders and the like.

C. Pretribulation Rapture.

Finally, the pretribulational view holds that the church is raptured prior to the very onset of the tribulation period. Christ will come through the clouds, according to this view, and all of those who have died in Christ will be raised. All who remain on earth when Christ comes through the clouds will be brought up, raptured, to be with the resurrected saints and be brought into Christ's presence. Then all of these will be with Christ in the heavenlies during the seven year period while the tribulation is taking place on earth. At the end of that tribulation period the church that has been raptured will, after experiencing the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19, come with Christ as he descends and brings his judgment upon the nations of this world. What reasons do premillennialists have for this? A couple of things. They argue that the wrath of God that is poured out in the tribulation period is not something that is designated for the church to endure. In fact, the church is given indication that she is not to endure the wrath of God. Revelation 3:10 indicates that the church is exempt from the wrath of God. At least a number of pretribulationalists will argue this position.

Secondly, the imminency doctrine of the church is presented by a number of pretribulationalists. In so many places we are told that Christ's coming is like a thief or could happen at any moment. If this is the case, then it seems difficult to reconcile with a posttribulational view, where certainly we will know it at some point when we are in this tribulation. How could we mistake the kind of devastation that is described in the book of Revelation? At some point, it seems clear that we will know that we are in this tribulation. If the coming of Christ is imminent, it could be at any moment. Doesn't that mean it has to happen before the tribulation occurs?
Lastly, premillennial proponents will argue that there are certain things about the millennial period that require that the church be raptured before the end of the tribulation. For example, in the millennium there are two realities that are true. Number one is people die in the millennium and this is indicated to us in Isaiah 65 where we read of children who live to be a hundred years old and die at that age are considered young. Still they die. This is an amazing thing. We wonder from that how it can be if the church is raptured at the end of the tribulation, how could there be any people in natural bodies who then go into the tribulation? The answer is since all are killed there is no one. This provides a way of accounting for people in their natural bodies going into the tribulation as believers who endure the tribulation go into the millennium and then are able to have children, reproduce, and many of those children, evidently, over a long period of time, remember it is a thousand years, do not live, at least some of them die during that time.

The second thing that is true during this time period is that at the end of the millennium you remember that Satan is released from the Abyss and he gathers a host of people in rebellion against Christ. And the question is where do these people come from? If everyone in the millennium are believers who are these people who are rebelling against Christ? It seems to be that there is a need for unbelievers in the millennium. How do you get unbelievers? Since all unbelievers were killed at the end of the tribulation, then it must be the case that believers who come into the millennium have children, some of those children evidently do not believe, evidently a great number of them do not believe. When Satan is released he gathers these together against Christ at the very end of the millennium. I think one lesson in this if this is in fact the case is that it shows how deeply rooted sin is in the human nature that even in this environment where Christ is reigning over the world; I mean the kingdom truly is Christ's kingdom here on planet earth, yet even in this environment where you could not ask for anything better to be the case, yet these people given the opportunity when Satan is released will join him in outright rebellion against Christ. This is how strong sin really is in us.

Let me just conclude this section by indicating that the millennial views, the postmillennial, amillennial, and premillennial and the tributational views are all views held by Bible-believing, Orthodox, Evangelical Christian people and we do have divisions on them certainly. We all wish for greater agreement on this, but we also realize that, in many of these cases, God evidently, purposely did not give us all the information that he could have to make these things clearer. So we hold these things with the degree of conviction we ought to, based upon the weight of the evidence that is before us in Scripture. So we will probably continue to have some disagreements over these matters and do so with love and charity toward one another.

V. Final Judgment and the Eternal State.

A. Final Judgment.

Yes, there will be a final judgment that takes place for all people. The reality of this judgment is proclaimed all through the Scriptures. Think, for example, of Psalm 96:13, "The Lord will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth." Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, "God will bring every act to judgment, everything hidden whether good or evil." Jesus, in Matthew 25:31-46, his parable about the sheep and the goats, says that the sheep are put on his right to inherit the kingdom, but the goats on his left go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Romans 2:5-11 speaks clearly about these two realities, those who do good receive eternal life, but those who do not obey God's truth experience wrath and indignation. So yes, there is a judgment that is coming and it comes upon all people. Unbelievers, it is very clear, are subjects of God's judgment. Let us consider these passages. Matthew 13:39-42 speaks of the harvest at the end of the age where the tares are pulled up and separated from the wheat, sinners are thrown into the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hebrews 10:26-27 speaks of deliberate and perpetual sinning resulting in a fearful expectation of the judgment of God and of raging fire. 2 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 20:11-15 speak of where the books of works are opened at the great white throne judgment and unbelievers are judged according to their deeds and thrown into the lake of fire. Look also at John 5:28-29; Matthew 28:36-37; John 12:47-48; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; and 2 Peter 3:7.

There is a judgment for believers as well. We are told about this, for example, in 2 Corinthians 5:10 where Paul says
to believers, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each may be recompensed for his deeds in the body whether good or bad." Romans 14:11-12, "Why judge your brother? We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God," he says. This judgment will culminate in the final destinies of people being decided by God, being a place of either eternal conscious torment or eternal joyous bliss.

B. Hell.

Yes, the Bible does teach the reality of hell. Jesus spoke of it more than anyone else did. Look, for example, at Matthew 5:22, 29-30; Matthew 10:28; Matthew 18:8-9; Matthew 25:41, 46; Matthew 13:41-42; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9. Revelation 14:9-11 is a very sobering passage because it indicates the permanence of this horrible reality, where hell is described in just unspeakably terrible terms. Let me read verse 9 for you, "Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and his image, or receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will drink of the wine of the wrath of the God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of his anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day or night, those who worship the beast or his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.'" Clearly hell is eternal, is permanent, and is conscious torment forever.

C. Heaven.

In contrast to that is heaven, which is eternal yes, but joyous and remarkably wonderful for God's people. Here are just a few passages that speak of the reality of heaven, Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 66:22-23; Daniel 12:3; John 14:1-3; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:4; 2 Peter 3:13. Then, wonderfully, the last two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, speak of heaven. It does appear from those chapters that heaven is on earth, that is, the New Jerusalem descends to the new earth. So it appears that in glorified bodies we will populate a physical environment and will reign with Christ over this time period. The quality of life in heaven is described by God in a variety of different ways, but all of them indicate nothing but joy, pleasure, no more sinning, no more crying, no more pain, and nothing but endless delight in the presence of the Lord. What a joyous future that awaits believers, giving us hope in this life and endurance to anticipate what God has for us. What sober reality awaits unbelievers. May God help us to live lives faithful before him that we may anticipate the joys of heaven and warn others of the horrors of the certainty of hell.

© 2007 Bruce Ware

* From: TH103 - Systematic Theology, Lecture 10 - Last Things

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by BiblicalTraining.org.