

DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS

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Lecture 1: The Second Coming of Christ

Welcome to Defenders. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Today we begin our final locus, or theological topic, in this Defenders course, namely, the doctrine of the last things. I looked the other day at our website and discovered that we have been through over 250 previous Defenders podcasts up to this point. Many of you have been with us that entire time and now, at long last, we are coming into the home stretch and beginning our final locus. If you are a newcomer to Defenders and haven't been with us all of those years, then I want you to know that transcripts as well as videos of all the lectures in Defenders 3 are available through our website ReasonableFaith.org. It's a tremendous resource for your own personal theological education. It's with a sense of accomplishment and gratitude to the Lord that at long last we are now completing our course.

Today we turn to the doctrine of the last things. The theological word for this locus is *eschatology*, from the Greek word *eschatos* meaning "last" or "final." So this locus concerns 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. It is the teaching of the New Testament that the eschaton – the final conclusion and culmination of human history – will come with the return of Christ to the earth.

To begin with, let's look at some of the biblical data concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

First, let's look at some Old Testament background material. In Old Testament Judaism there was a 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 a Davidic king who would be in charge of the government of Israel and who would bring about a reign of peace and justice and righteousness that would endure forever.

Turn over to Isaiah 11:1-10. 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,
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.

This messianic king will reign over the world and bring peace among the nations with justice and righteousness. This was the hope for the Jewish people – a 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 in verse 13 he sees 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 we have this human person presented before God and to him God delivers the kingdom and all authority over the peoples of the earth. Jesus picked up on this description by Daniel to describe himself as “the Son of Man.” Not just “a” son of man, (notice, a human being) but rather “the” Son of Man, with the definite article, referring back to this prophecy in the seventh chapter of Daniel.

Turning to the New Testament, we find that 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 take a look at just a few of these, some of the most important of them.

Turn first to Mark 13, where we find Jesus’ so-called Olivet Discourse. 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:

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.”

[They then leave the Temple Mount, cross the Kidron Valley, and climb the Mount of Olives looking across at the Temple Mount with Herod's beautiful temple at the summit.]

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

"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. Next week, we shall look together at those teachings of Paul. Until then, may God guide and bless you.¹

¹ Total Running Time: 16:02 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 2: The Rapture Interpretation

Last time we began the final locus of our Defenders class – the doctrine of the last things. We began by looking at some of the biblical data concerning the Second Coming of Christ. Today we want to continue our examination of those biblical data.

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 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 the same event that Jesus discussed in his Olivet Discourse, namely, the return of Christ, the in-gathering of the elect, and the resurrection of the dead. Paul 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 the exhortation, "In the meantime, purify yourself in the same way that Christ is pure."

Let me now say a word about some of 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*. *Parousia* is often translated as the word “coming” or the “presence” of Christ – his appearing, his becoming present, or simply his coming. 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.”

Another word that is used is *apokalupsis*. The word *apokalupsis* is translated “revelation” – the revealing or disclosing of something. 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.” Hence Christ’s Second Coming is often referred to as the Apocalypse or the revealing of Christ when he comes again.

A third word is *epiphaneia*. This will often be translated by the English word “appearance.” 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 coming of Christ is his *parousia*; the appearing of Christ is *epiphaneia*.

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.

The question that we now want to address 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 imagine, on this question among Christians.

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 is, I’m sure, 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 an Irishman 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, this view has become enormously popular in pop culture through the writings of authors like Hal Lindsey, who's *The Late Great Planet Earth* some of you will remember, or more recently the series by Tim LaHaye called *Left Behind*, which was 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 the 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 that is not preceded by this invisible return in which he snatches believers out of the world.

So let's examine the biblical basis for this view. Returning to the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 which we previously read, I think in all candor we have to say that 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 Great 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 event is said to take place after the tribulation and is clearly a visible event that people will see and experience.

There is nothing in this Olivet Discourse that would suggest the idea of a secret rapture of the church prior to the visible 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 Jesus' 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 rapture interpretation holds that Paul is describing a rapture event in which the elect will be snatched 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. Jesus' teaching is reflected in the Thessalonian letters. So why would we see this passage as teaching something different than what Jesus taught about the return of the Son of Man?

You might say then, "What about the expression 'meeting the Lord in the air?'" The Greek word here is *apantēsis*. 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. *Apantēsis* 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 in the Olivet Discourse. What Paul describes 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 to Earth.

Next week, we'll examine further Paul's teaching about the Second Coming of Christ in assessment of the rapture view.²

²Total Running Time: 18:18 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 3: The Rapture Interpretation Continued

Today we want to continue our discussion of the so-called rapture view according to which prior to Christ's decisive Second Coming to establish his physical, visible Kingdom in this world, there will be a sort of preliminary coming of Christ to snatch out of the world the elect and take them to be with him.

We've been talking about Paul's discussion of the coming of the Son of Man in his Thessalonian correspondence.

Notice that the coming of the Lord described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is the time at which the resurrection of the dead occurs. 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 time 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 time of 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.

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 the unrighteous dead will rise for judgment.

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

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 itself 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 transformed into their resurrection bodies to live with Christ forever, exactly as Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4.

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 event. 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.

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 finally be 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, 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.

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 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.” *Parousia* is the word for Christ’s coming. 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.

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 there 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 sacrilege or abomination of desolation that will be set up. This is something that must happen before this coming of the Son of Man.

Also, notice that 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.”) is plausibly 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 *episyngo* – “he will gather the elect from the four corners of the Earth.” Then in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 Paul uses the noun form *episyngoge* – “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.

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 time of 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.

Next time, we'll continue our discussion of the rapture view. Until then, may God give you a great week.³

³Total Running Time: 13:49 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 4: The Rapture Interpretation Concluded

We have been talking about eschatology (or the doctrine of the last things), and we've been discussing the question whether there will be a single return of Christ to Earth or multiple returns of Christ. We have been looking at one of the most prominent multiple views (at least in evangelical circles), 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 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 biblical 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.

Let's continue our discussion today of this subject. Some persons suggest that in 2 Thessalonians 2 there is, at least implicitly, the teaching of a rapture. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Paul writes,

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 says don't be shaken or excited by anyone telling you that the day of the Lord has already come. Paul goes on to explain that that day will not come until quite a number of things take place first.

Here we face 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 based upon conjecture.

The question that we face here is what is meant by the expression "the day of the Lord". 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, 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. 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 Jesus 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 that Jesus did – as coming like a thief in the night. Then in verse 4 he says, "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 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 to think that Paul is talking about the 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 of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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 about a man whom 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 the day when Christ will be revealed and when he will come again.

So I think that when Paul assures the Thessalonians that “the day of the Lord” 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 Second Coming of Christ had already occurred? Is there any place in the New Testament like that? Well, yes, there is. In 2 Timothy 2:15-19 Paul talks about certain persons who 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 was already past. Since the day of the resurrection is the day of Christ’s return, in effect they were saying the Second Advent had 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. Gnosticism 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 were some sort of Gnostic teachers here that were saying that the resurrection is not a physical, bodily event but a sort of spiritual event, and it is already past.

We know from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that in Corinth there were people who objected to the idea of a physical resurrection. Therefore, Paul goes to great lengths in chapter 15 to answer the question: With what kind of body do they come who are raised from the dead? What sort of body is it that they have? For the Greek mentality the idea of the resurrection of the physical 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 in Thessalonica would be something similar, some kind of proto-Gnostic teaching that the resurrection and the day of the Lord were 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. Proponents of the rapture doctrine will say that the Thessalonians feared that the rapture had already occurred and they had missed it. But 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 already occurred, the graves should be empty and Paul would be gone and not writing to them. So, I just don't see any reason to read any sort of rapture doctrine into what Paul says.

Having said that, again I say, this is conjectural. We don't know what Paul's opponents in Thessalonica were saying. It's possible that they were *not* saying that the Second Advent of Christ and the resurrection had already occurred. The Greek word used here is *enistemi*, which 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 may have been saying that 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. 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, and Paul wants to correct that error. But there is nothing in the passage to suggest that they thought the rapture was past or that it was near or that it had failed to take place.

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, I think is clear. We don't know what his opponents taught, but 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 to happen first. Therefore, the day of the Lord, the return of Christ, is neither past nor imminent. It still lies sometime in the future.

Next time we will turn our attention to other versions of the theory that there are multiple returns of Christ.⁴

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Lecture 5: The Preterist Interpretation

In our discussion of the doctrine of the last things, we've been looking at the Second Coming of Christ. We began by looking at views that posit multiple comings of Christ. Last time we looked at the so-called Rapture view and saw its biblical deficiencies. Today we want to turn to a second interpretation that also holds to multiple comings of Christ, and this is the so-called Preterist view. You may have heard from your English teacher when she taught you English grammar something about the past-preterite tense. The tense of a sentence communicates that something is past when it is in the preterite tense. This is what the preterist thinks with regard to the Second Coming of Christ. Preterism says that the coming of Christ predicted by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse has already occurred.

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 descriptions from the Jewish historian Josephus, really was indeed terrifying. It was a horrible siege as people began to cannibalize one another, even to eat their own children, 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 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; rather this is a description in apocalyptic imagery of the events in AD 70 and the presentation of the Son

of Man before God. Compare, for example, Isaiah 13:10. In these verses, as we see from verse 1, this is a prophecy concerning 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 a very similar sort of imagery to what you have in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse. Or turn over to Ezekiel 32:7. This, as you can see from the first and second verses, is a prophecy concerning Pharaoh, the King of Egypt. 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 you have astronomical language used to symbolize the judgment of God that is coming upon Egypt.

Lest anyone think this sort of language 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 that people experienced hearing the disciples speaking in other languages and they saw tongues of fire resting upon their shoulders. In Acts 2:16, Peter explains that this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel. 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” (v. 19). Clearly those things weren’t literally happening on the day of Pentecost; yet Peter says it is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. It is apocalyptic imagery used to describe the earth-shakingly significant events that God was bringing to pass.

So the preterist says that Jesus’ description of the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man in terms of astronomical images shouldn’t be taken in a literal sense.

Moreover, if you turn back to Daniel 7 where the coming of the Son of Man is predicted, preterists 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, glory, and dominion. So the coming of the Son of Man that Jesus predicts in Mark 13 is not meant to be a visible return of Christ to the Earth but rather his enthronement in heaven.

What about the gathering of the elect from the four winds when he sends out his angels to gather the elect? The preterist would say that this is, again, in symbolic language the prediction of the worldwide preaching of the Gospel and the gathering of the great harvest for the Kingdom of God from every nation in the world. People throughout the world will be brought into the Kingdom of Christ through the preaching of the Gospel.

I'm sure you will agree that this is certainly an interesting interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, but I think that what really motivates this view has not actually 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 that all of these events predicted by Jesus did take place within the lifetime of his hearers. They did occur just as Jesus predicted they would within the lifetime of those who heard Jesus. These events literally occurred and Jesus' prophecy 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 all literally 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, 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 having to posit 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.

Next time, we'll look in greater detail at exactly why I claim that this is so and in what ways it is problematic.⁵

⁵Total Running Time: 13:41 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 6: The Preterist Interpretation Continued

I concluded last time by saying that despite the initial attractiveness of a preterist view of Christ's Second Coming, I cannot at the end of the day accept it because it forces upon us an implausible division of Christ's return spoken of by Paul and the coming of the Son of Man spoken of by Jesus. How might this be seen? Let me make three points.

1. It seems to me that, according to Jesus and according to 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; rather like "here" and "there." "Here" is where somebody comes; "there" is where somebody goes. To see how such words are used in the New Testament, look at Acts 1:11. This is a nice 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 to his disciples about the "coming" of the Son of Man, this is a description of his coming to Earth. It is where they 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 is going to be visible and public, just as it is described. It is not going to be some sort of secret, invisible event; it is going to be observed. Look at Mark 13:26: "And then they will see the Son of man coming in 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 similar words. Mark 14:61-62:

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 Jesus says to the high priest, "You will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" – just as he said in the Olivet Discourse. Notice that this coming is in sharp contrast to the false Messiahs that are predicted 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 on Mark, the distinction between the true coming of Christ and the coming of 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 an overpowering, public event that will be plainly evident to everyone.

Compare in this connection, Matthew's version 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.

Christ's coming 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, where these false Christs are.

Also look at Revelation 1:7 to see that this was the view of the early church 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 Christ's coming is a public event that will be witnessed by all people.

If that is right, then 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 on Earth saw. It will be the 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 the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 Christ is enthroned in 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 before the supposed coming of the Son of Man in AD 70. So Paul's perspective is one of looking forward to that event. It hasn't occurred yet in AD 55 when Paul wrote this letter. Referring to the resurrection, Paul says,

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.

So 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. Paul continues,

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.

So according to Paul, God has already put all things under Christ’s dominion. But obviously that excludes God himself. God put all things under his feet; but that doesn’t mean that God is under his feet. God is the one who put all things under Christ’s feet. Paul proceeds,

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 begins by 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 when he is then 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. *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 of his 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, being 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. What the preterist is therefore forced to say is that what Paul is looking forward to and 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 the dead are raised. 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. The preterist has to say that what Paul is talking about in Thessalonians and his other correspondence is this end-time event, not the event that Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse. That seems to me to be extremely *ad hoc* and implausible. It seems to me that the natural understanding of Paul's teaching is that he and Jesus were 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.

Next time we meet, we'll continue our discussion of the return of Christ.⁶

⁶Total Running Time: 17:16 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 7: The 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 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. Rejection of the Rapture view and Preterist view leaves us, I think, with the classical Christian view that the return of Christ will be a singular, visible, decisive 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 view that best represents biblical teaching.

Today we want to move ahead to our next point which is the nature of the Second Coming. Here I would like to make four points.

1. *The Second Coming of Christ will be a personal coming.* The classical view entails that the Second Coming will be Christ's personal return to Earth.

Turn to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15. Paul writes,

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.

Those who have died in Christ are now in an 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 clearly implies that this involves a literal personal return of Christ again with the deceased saints who are currently with Christ.

Also, look at Acts 1:11b. There the angels at the ascension of Jesus 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. They are analogous.

2. *The return of Christ will be glorious.* In contrast to the humble state of Christ's first coming, the Second Coming will be in 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 the return of Christ is a visible public event of power and glory.

Compare Mark 14:61-62. This is a description of 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. Here Jesus says that he 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 the return of Christ will be a powerful, glorious event.

3. *It will be a decisive event.* By that I mean that this is the termination of human history. The return of Christ brings human history to a close. In 1 Corinthians 15:22-24 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. 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 delivers his 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 says:

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.

This passage 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 believers precisely because they do not know the time of his return.

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

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 fact 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.

In short, the nature of the Second Coming of Christ is such that it will be a personal, glorious, decisive, sudden and unexpected event terminating human history.

That brings us to a good breaking point, so we will simply have a shorter lesson today. Next time we'll look together at the purpose of the Second Coming. Why does Christ come again? What is the purpose of this event? Why do we have this doctrine at all? That will be our subject next time. We'll see you then.⁷

⁷Total Running Time: 11:34 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 8: The Purpose of the Second Coming

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

1. *Christ's Second Coming completes the work of redemption.* It completes the work which was begun with the cross and the resurrection of Christ and is now finally consummated by his return. 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 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, the Second Coming of Christ completes the work of redemption, freeing us decisively from Satan, death, and hell.

2. *Christ's Second Coming is the occasion 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 subject 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. 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 graves at the time of the return of the Son of Man for judgment.

That forms a nice segue to the third point.

3. *The Second Coming of Christ will be for the purpose of judging all people.* As Jesus said, people in general 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. Jesus says, "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 executed by 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. 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 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 will occur at the time of the return of Christ.

4. *The Second Coming serves 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 God, of the Christians who are still alive at the time of the return of Christ. The dead will be raised and the elect Christians will be gathered and together they will be ushered into the Kingdom of God.

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

Next time we’ll look at one of the most interesting and difficult questions concerning the Second Coming of Christ, namely the question of the time of the Second Coming. When is Christ going to return to raise the dead, judge all people, and gather the church? As you can imagine, this is a controversial question on which there are a variety of views. So we’ll look forward to discussing that with you next time.⁸

⁸Total Running Time: 12:04 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 9: The Time of the Second Coming

We've been talking about the Second Coming of Christ. Today we come to one of the most interesting and controversial questions – the question of the time of the Second Coming. When is Christ going to return to raise the dead, judge the world, 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 event 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' question, "When will this be and what will be the sign when these are to be accomplished?" In Mark 13:5-6, Jesus predicts there will be a period of religious apostasy:

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 be many false Christs who will lead people away from the truth. Jesus also predicts persecution and a worldwide witness of the church in Mark 13:9-11, 13-19. 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 throughout the world. 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 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 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 as though 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 saying that a lot of things must happen first before the day of the Lord comes, 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. 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 that has come upon ethnic Israel, 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 and there will be a turning to Christ among ethnic Jews. You will remember 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 that Paul speaks of 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 Christ’s return is a long way off. There is going to be wars, rumors of wars, persecution and apostasy, worldwide preaching of the Gospel, a tremendous harvest among the Gentiles, a turning of ethnic Israel to Christ, and then finally Christ will come again.

Therefore, it is so surprising to find Jesus saying things at the end of the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 and in certain other passages that suggest that in fact he thought the return of the Son of Man was going to happen within 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.” This verse unexpectedly seems to suggest that Jesus thought his return was going to happen within the lifetime of his listeners. This is not the only verse like this. Look also at Mark 8:38-9:1. Jesus says,

“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 parallel passage in Matthew – Matthew 16:28. In Matthew’s

version the verse is sharpened. It becomes even more obvious. Jesus says, “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 says, “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.”

How do you deal with these sayings? 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 do we deal with this? That is the question that will preoccupy us next week. Until then, may God bless you.⁹

⁹Total Running Time: 13:27 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 10: Delay of the Parousia

We've been talking about the time of the Second Coming of Christ. In our last lesson we saw that we have on the one hand abundant evidence both in Paul as well as from Jesus that the Second Coming of Christ was not something that was going to happen soon. It looked as though a lot had to happen first. Yet we also have some very puzzling sayings of Jesus that seem to suggest that he was predicting his return within the lifetime of his hearers. This problem is known as the delay of the *parousia*. How can we best deal with this problem?

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

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

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

Another alternative is the revised prophecy view, which holds that Jesus' prophecy was simply provisional and that it was susceptible to change. We have in the Old Testament certain examples of prophecies like this. Think, for example, 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!" (Jonah 3:4). The Ninevites had forty days, a specific time limit, and then God's judgment was going to fall on Nineveh. But the predicted judgement never came. Why not? Because Nineveh repented!¹⁰ 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 may remember.¹¹ He wanted to see these pagan Ninevites judged by God. But the prophecy was provisional. If things change then God would not do what he had said he was going to do.

Another example is to be found 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

¹⁰ Jonah 3:5-10

¹¹ Jonah 4:1

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 life for another fifteen years.*” So the prophecy was not fulfilled. Once again there was a prophecy given that 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 that perhaps this was also the case 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 about this return was delayed and delayed and delayed. And we still live in this period of the delay of the *parousia*. Maybe this is just another instance of prophecies of this nature.

Well, that is possible, I suppose. But the problem with this explanation is that in this case nothing seemed to change that would alter the prophecy. In the case of Nineveh, the people repented, so that God’s judgment of them became inappropriate. 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, it is not as though anything changed; he gave all of these signs, and everything seemed to be happening just as he predicted. So it seems implausible to think that what Christ was giving were merely provisional prophecies that were later revised.

I am going to suggest a different view that doesn’t have a name, so I’ll just give it a name myself – the apparent conflict is due to what I’ll call *contextual ambiguity*. The idea behind this proposal is the well-known fact that context critically affects interpretation. How a sentence or saying is to be interpreted depends crucially upon the context in which it appears. I think all of us recognize that this is the case. For example, take the statement, “That’s exactly what I think.” That is completely ambiguous unless you know the context in which it is spoken. Context is crucial to interpretation.

Now in the Gospels, it is a well-known fact among New Testament scholars that the Evangelists 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 an example in the Gospels that I consider to be a knockdown argument for this sort of contextual ambiguity. 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 mission that occurs early in Jesus' ministry. In fact, it is prior to the death of John the Baptist. We read about this mission in Mark 6:7-13.

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 so far 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 turn over to Matthew 10 and look at the way Matthew relates the story of the sending of the Twelve in Matthew 10:5-23. Remember that Matthew is using Mark's Gospel. Mark was the earliest Gospel, and Matthew uses Mark as one of his sources. I want you to notice 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 Matthew is basically following Mark's narrative with minor changes . 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; *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 that before the mission of the Twelve is completed – before they go through all the towns of Israel – the Son of Man will return.

Where does this extra material that Matthew inserts into the narrative come from? Well, it comes from the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13! Look again 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 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 that he has taken words from Jesus' Olivet Discourse about the end times and he has inserted them into Jesus' charge to the disciples for the mission of the Twelve when they go out preaching in the towns of Israel. As a result, it creates the bizarre impression 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 before they have completed their mission! We know that Matthew didn't believe that, right? Matthew tells about how the disciples come back and report to Jesus. He relates the rest of the Gospel story of Jesus' ministry and then his death and resurrection. 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 his material borrowed 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 as if it means different things when it is read in different contexts. Given the editorial freedom that the evangelists exercise, I'm suggesting that we can't know for sure that Mark 13:30 meant that before everyone listening to Jesus at that time died, the Son of Man would return. Ironically, I think the best way to solve the problem of the delay of the *parousia* is not to try to soften the problem; rather you try to sharpen the problem. You point to what Matthew has done in Jesus' charge prior to the mission of the Twelve in order to see exactly the kind of textual ambiguity that I am speaking of.

Next time we'll look more closely at Mark 13:30 and Jesus saying about those of his generation to see how this is affected by the original context.¹²

¹²Total Running Time: 18:34 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 11: Delay of the *Parousia* Continued

Last time I argued that a saying about the return of the Son of Man can look as if it means different things when it is read in different contexts. Given the editorial freedom that the Evangelists exercise, I'm suggesting that we can't know for sure that the sayings like Mark 13:30 meant that the Son of Man would return before everyone listening to Jesus would pass away.

So let's look again at this pair of verses that constitute the problem we're dealing with. I want to suggest that these, too, could appear to take on different meanings when moved from 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 the material that Matthew inserted into Jesus' charge to the twelve disciples before their mission to the cities of Israel.

Look first at Matthew 16:28. Here is Matthew's version of this saying: "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 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 kingdom of God has come with power."

Now that is a very different rendering of these words. Mark's passage uses the perfect tense: "There are some standing here who will see that the kingdom of God *has come*" (perfect tense). That looks back to the past. So what will those people who are standing there see? They will see that the Kingdom of God has come with power. That's very different from what Matthew says. Matthew says "they will see the Son of Man coming in power." He is paraphrasing Mark's words in a way that gives them a very different sort of meaning. What Mark says is that they will see that the Kingdom of God has already come with power.

Notice that in Mark there is a 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 Mark breaks in, "And he said to them," and then here comes this saying of Jesus. Has Mark appended the saying here, as the break may suggest? What was the original context of that saying? We don't know. But look at the wider context. What is Jesus talking about in Mark 8:31ff? "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.” Jesus is predicting his death and resurrection from the dead. Mark adds, “And he said this plainly” just to make it clear. Mark proceeds, “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.’” Now, suppose Jesus then said, “There are some standing here who will not die before they see that the Kingdom of God has come with power.” Jesus could be talking about his resurrection from the dead. That is the context more broadly. So the Kingdom’s coming with power may not be a reference to the Second Coming of the Son of Man, but rather to his resurrection. What Jesus is saying is that after the resurrection, Peter and the others will look back and say, yes, the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus really has come with power. But Matthew gives back the words of Jesus in a somewhat different way that gives a different impression. So I’m suggesting that it may well have been that Mark 9:1 wasn’t really about the Second Coming. It could have been about the resurrection.

Similarly, look at Mark 13:30 in 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 in Mark 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 uses this phrase 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?” Then in verse 23, after describing the destruction of Jerusalem and the false Christs that will come, Jesus 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, we ask, what are “these things”? The things that he has been talking about with respect to the destruction of Jerusalem! “These things” will happen *before* the return of the Son of Man. 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 in the original context this saying could well have been about the destruction of Jerusalem and the tribulation that will happen at that time. But because Mark has in verses 24-27 a passage about the return of the Son of Man, one gets the impression reading verse 30 that Jesus is saying that the Son of Man is going to return before this generation dies off. But it may well have been that in the original context

what was being discussed is the destruction of Jerusalem and the trials and the signs that will occur prior to the Son of Man's return.

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 does not know when the return of the Son of Man will take place?

So 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 a prophecy predicting the return of the Son of Man before that generation passes away, 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 Jesus saying in Matthew 10:23 that before they have gone through all the towns of Israel they will see the Son of Man come.

Next time we'll have a look at certain interesting parables about the delay of the *parousia*. Join us next week.¹³

¹³Total Running Time: 11:28 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 12: Parables of the Delay of the *Parousia*

Last time I argued that passages about the Second Coming of Christ that appear to imply that Jesus thought this event was going to take place within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses create a false impression due to what I called contextual ambiguity.

If this weren't enough, what I have not yet shared with you is that while we do have a pair of troubling verses about this generation's not passing away and some's standing here who will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom of God 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*. It is going to appear to be delayed. Look at these, starting with the parable in Matthew 24:45-51:

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.

This same parable is also to be found in Luke 12:35-48.

As if that weren't enough, Jesus gives another 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 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 we have the delay of the return of the bridegroom. The lesson is: always be watchful.

Again, if the disciples still hadn't gotten the point, here's 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, the long time during which this money could be invested and gather interest and grow even if it was simply put into the bank. So you have here once again a prediction of a long time before the return of the master.

Now, would you think the disciples still haven't gotten the point? 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.

In this parable you see again that even though Christ is absent – the people involved have never seen Jesus personally – the church ministers to the sick, the poor, and those who are in prison. It teaches that as they did these works to the least of these his brethren so they have done it to Christ, whom they have never seen. This parable is explicitly contradictory to the predictions that Jesus would return within the generation of his contemporaries. It is describing the ministry of the church to others in future generations that will transpire before the master finally comes again and does the reckoning.

So I think that when you consider on balance the teachings of Jesus about his return, it is clear that Jesus says that he doesn't know the time of his return, that nobody knows when he is going to come again. But he prepared the disciples over and over again for a long time – a delay of his return – during which time 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 contextual ambiguity. It may well be the case that in the original historical context in which Jesus uttered those words he was not talking about the Second Coming or the return of the Son of Man at all.

Next time I'll share some final thoughts with you about the time of the return of Christ.¹⁴

¹⁴Total Running Time: 13:03 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 13: Final Thoughts on the Time of the Second Coming

We've been dealing with the question of the delay of the *parousia*. I suggested a solution to this question that I called contextual ambiguity; that is to say, the sayings of Jesus concerning his coming apparently within the generation of his contemporaries may reflect a quite different original context than the context in which we find them in the Gospels. So they did not, in fact, originally claim that Christ would return as the triumphant Son of Man within the lifetime of his hearers. We had a good example of this in Matthew 10:23 where you will remember Matthew, by inserting certain passages into 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 from their mission trip to the towns and cities of Israel. Moreover, we saw several parables of Jesus teaching that the *parousia* would in fact be delayed.

Today I want to offer some final thoughts on the time of the second coming.

1. Jesus emphasized that his Second Coming is something that will be unexpected and could be delayed. That implies that we always need to be ready for it, since it is coming at a time when we are not expecting it to come. Therefore, we should not use any unfulfilled signs of the Second Coming as an excuse for not living as disciples of Christ. In Matthew 24:45-51, Jesus says,

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 suggesting that the coming of Christ is not 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.

2. Keep in mind that God's timetable is different than ours. God, who is eternal, isn't bound by our human timescales. 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 that the Lord is going to come unexpectedly. This universe will be consumed and destroyed. But, he says, just because this may seem a long way off to you, to God it is like the day before yesterday. It has now 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 for him it is like the day before yesterday that Christ died and rose and ascended to heaven. God's timescale is different than ours, and he is not in any hurry to bring these things to pass. Rather he is forbearing, wanting as many people as possible to be saved.

3. Christians have always believed that theirs was the last generation. So we should not get overly worked up about thinking that Christ is going to return within our lifetimes. We should be ready because he is going to surprise us. But every generation, including ours, has thought that it is the last. One of the most notorious of endtimes 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. Whisenant then said, *I made a miscalculation*. So he recalculated the date, but that then didn't come to pass either. So 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, the Second Coming is going to catch us by surprise. I don't think we should get overly worked up thinking that the end is near and that we are living in the end times.

4. Finally, I want to say something about the credibility of the Second Coming. If we are honest, I think we have to admit that it is 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 are going to be destroyed and we will be ushered into the presence of Christ. It's just so wholly other than what we normally experience! Everything seems to be going along very well – doesn't it? – operating according to natural law. It's hard to believe that next Tuesday all this might be over.

But if you think that, then you're not really saying anything different than what the early New Testament Christians confronted. Look at 2 Peter 3:3-4, talking about the Second Coming of Christ:

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?*

What these scoffers did not and could not have realized is that even on a purely physical, scientific approach to cosmology, 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. Cosmology is divided into two sub-disciplines: cosmogony, which is the study of the universe’s past and the beginning of the universe, where you have the familiar Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe. 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 universe’s future and the end of the universe – the study of the last things.

In physical eschatology there is the real possibility of an imminent, unexpected worldwide destruction of the universe. If the universe is not in the lowest energy state of the vacuum but is hung up in a so-called false vacuum, which is not the lowest energy state that it could possibly have, then given enough time it will inevitably make a quantum physical transition to the lower energy state. When it does so, it will bring about a complete metamorphosis of nature. 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 near light speed to bring about a transition of the entire universe to this lower-energy state. 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 their book *The Five Ages of the Universe*, two cosmologists (Fred Adams and Gregory Laughlin) describe this physical apocalypse that may be coming. They write,

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.¹⁵

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. The parallels between them are unmistakable. They bring about a complete metamorphosis of nature, suddenly, without warning, like a thief in the night, unavoidably, issuing in a new heavens and a new Earth, a renovated universe!

Now, please don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I am not saying that 2 Peter 3:8-10 is a poetic description of a quantum phase transition in the history of the universe. I'm making a much more modest point. I am simply saying that if physical eschatology involves apocalyptic doomsday predictions that, for all we know, could be realized tomorrow, 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 of this world from its shortcomings and the ushering in of the new heavens and new Earth that God has prepared for us.

I think that physical eschatology provides a very interesting analogy that can help us with respect to believing in the reality of the Second Coming of Christ.

Next week we'll wrap up this section by talking a little bit about some of the practical application of the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming. See you then.¹⁶

¹⁵ Fred C. Adams and Greg Laughlin, *The Five Ages of the Universe: Inside the Physics of Eternity* (New York: Free Press, 2000) p. 154.

¹⁶Total Running Time: 17:20 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 14: Practical Application of the Second Coming of Christ

We come now at last to the end of our discussion of the Second Coming of Christ, and today I want to say what application this doctrine 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 is 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 something you can prepare for. His return 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 the 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 and to be at peace with ourselves and with others.

Paul draws a similar application in Romans 13:11-14. Paul writes,

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 we have 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 in 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. The end of the world 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 known as 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 said, “We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work.” Whether either our own death comes or when Christ returns and brings about the end of the world, it will then be too late 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 his church.

3. Finally, *the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is the basis of our hope.* Christ's return is the church's blessed 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.

Here Paul talks about how the whole creation and we ourselves groan and yearn. For what? For the redemption of our bodies; that is, the eschatological resurrection. We have the first fruits of the Spirit – our spirits are born anew – but as Paul says elsewhere, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. That regenerate 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 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.” This isn’t the language that the people spoke in Corinth in Greece. It is the original language of the mother church in Jerusalem. Paul is passing on here the words of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem. What were they praying for? They were 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!” This is our hope and our prayer. This is the hope that should give our lives an optimism and buoyancy because of our confidence in the future.

So I think that the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ has tremendous practical application. It is an incentive to moral living. It is a call to be involved in fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, and it is a hope for deliverance from the shortcomings and the finitude of human existence.

You’ll notice that thus far I’ve said nothing about the subject of the millennium. That’s because this has not been an area of intense study for me. Nevertheless, when we meet together next week I will share with you a few brief thoughts on the subject of the millennium.¹⁷

¹⁷Total Running Time: 12:49 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 15: The Millenium

Hello, and welcome to Defenders. I'm glad that you could join us today.

We closed out our session last time by saying that I have not said anything about the subject of the millennium. This is simple because this is not a topic that I have studied at all, and therefore I have no firm opinions about it. What I thought I would do is share a few thoughts with you about the subject of the millennium. What I am going to do is to lay out for you some alternative positions and arguments pro and con which are reviewed very nicely in Wayne Grudem's popular one volume *Systematic Theology*, and then leave it up to you to make up your own minds.

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

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 Satan will be released and a final cataclysmic conflict takes place. Then people will go into their eternal state.

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

The first view we could call *amillennialism*. This is 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. Many amillennialists 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 precede the establishment of this literal earthly thousand year reign of Christ.

The second view is *premillennialism*. It 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. Traditionally in church history, those church fathers and others who have been chiliasmists 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 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 the classical premillennialist position 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 rapture doctrine. 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 a great harvest comes into the Kingdom. God's Kingdom is established on Earth through the preaching and dissemination of the Gospel to all nations; in effect the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Then Christ will return after that.

So we have three different perspectives on the subject of the millennium. 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 the millennium purely symbolically. But the postmillennial view sees an additional element in that the millennium is a 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.

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 Scripture*. It is found only 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. It 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. The whole book of Revelation is permeated by symbolic, apocalyptic elements that aren't meant to be taken literally. This really gives one pause, I think – why should we take the millennium literally if it is found only in the book of Revelation in Scripture, a book that is noted for its symbolic and apocalyptic imagery? It would be much more convincing if the doctrine of the millennium were also found in the teachings of Jesus and in the teachings of Paul just as the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is. But to base a doctrine totally upon one passage in the book of Revelation, I think, ought to give us serious 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 review a few passages concerning this. Daniel 12:2, for example, 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 again Jesus speaks of a resurrection of both 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 have risen. They are now no longer earthly beings; 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. These are glorified saints. Yet we are to imagine them living in a society with mortal, sinful, corruptible people? Is this the kind of interrelationship that they would have? It just seems inconceivable that you would have that sort of mixture.

4. *If in the millennium Christ is present and reigning as described, then how can people persist in sin?* The whole idea of the Kingdom of God having been established is to do away with sin and with the enemies of God. So how is it that Christ is 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 established on Earth when sin and death will be done away with.

5. The amillennialist says that *the millennium serves no purpose.* Why have such a thing as this strange, earthly kingdom? Why not simply, upon people's 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 the millenium, 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 literal, temporal sense. So there is a distinction between those prophecies fulfilled in his first coming and those that will be fulfilled in the Second Coming, and premillennialists will insist that these prophecies about an earthly Kingdom go to support the idea of a 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 today. 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.

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 rather the subjects of the resurrection. Nevertheless the premillennialist could say that here two resurrections are described and these might be temporally separated.

3. What about the third argument that the idea of sinners living alongside of and having relationships with glorified, resurrected saints is just unbelievable? Premillennialists would point out that Christ was on Earth in his glorified resurrection body for forty days following his resurrection before ascending to heaven. So this isn’t an idea that is completely absurd.

That is a fair enough point, I think, but it really doesn’t go to speak to the issue. It seems to me quite another matter to imagine a whole society, a whole planet, which is populated by ordinary, mortal sinners but then living in their midst and maybe even married to some of them are these glorified, resurrected, immortal, righteous persons. That really is quite unlike saying Jesus was temporarily with the disciples for forty days after his resurrection and prior to his ascension.

4. What about number (4) – if Christ is present and reigning in the millenium, how can people persist in sin? What premillennialists point out is that people resisted Christ during his earthly life when he was present among them, and people continue to resist Christ today even though the Holy Spirit is present among us.

Again, I think that response 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 a period of humiliation where Christ takes the form of a servant. He lowers himself, as it says in Philippians 2, and is obedient until death. But that 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.

Next time we'll look at arguments pro and con for postmillennialism and premillennialism. See you next time.¹⁸

¹⁸Total Running Time: 23:25 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 16: Postmillennialism & Premillennialism

We're going to be continuing our discussion of various views of the millennium. Having looked last week at amillennialism, today we want to consider 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 indeed fulfill that Commission. The 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 Great Commission and be successful in its mission. For example, Matthew 13:31-32.

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 that from its ignominious beginnings, the Kingdom of God is going to spread throughout human society and become a great cultural influence and indeed transform the world. Jesus tells a lot of parables of this sort. There are many passages that suggest that there will be this tremendous harvest of souls that will come into the Kingdom of God as the church fulfills the Great Commission.

Postmillennialists employ the same sorts of arguments against the literal interpretation that the amillennialist has already given. But they add this additional note – there is a great triumph that will occur through the church's obedience to its Great Commission.

Against postmillennialism many people have said 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 the withdrawal of the colonial powers from the third world in the aftermath of colonialism. But I'm 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 our lifetime could just be a tiny blip in the whole scheme of human history. If Christ returns, say, in AD 5,000 or AD 12,000 then what happens in the present century could be nothing. The fact is that the Christian church *has* grown from the most ignominious beginnings in the first century throughout the entire world, so that now there are over three and a half billion people on Earth that at

least claim to be Christians. The Christian church and the Christian movement is in fact the largest, most successful movement in the history of mankind. It really is 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 and say that just because the past century has involved a lot of evil and suffering 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 without parallel in church history. The last twenty-five years of the 20th century were a period of church growth around the world that was simply unprecedented, as in Africa, Asia, and Latin America the church has grown by leaps and bounds. So we must not be misled by the disastrous things that are happening in our world to think that the church is failing in its Great Commission.

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

1. Passages about the Kingdom of God's growing from the size of a mustard seed to a large tree, or about the leaven that a woman puts in the lump until the whole dough is leavened don't really say exactly how large the Kingdom of God will grow to be among humanity. It could be true that there has been and will be a 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 a 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 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 a falling away in the last times. Jesus 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 tribulation that is going to precede Christ's return. You'll remember that Jesus taught there would be a terrible time of tribulation before Christ would return and establish his Kingdom. 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 requires that they take a kind of preterist view of those predictions. 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 already 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 the dead.

Those are some of the arguments for and against postmillennialism.

Now let's say something about premillennialism.

First, the premillennialist will appeal to Old Testament prophecies of an earthly kingdom which will still involve mortality, sin, the presence of enemies, and so forth. In these Old Testament prophecies of God's Kingdom, it says that these things such as death, sin, and the enemies of God will not be decisively done away with. So the premillennialist would say that the idea of a millennium such as John describes in the Apocalypse is right in line with these Old Testament prophecies about God's Kingdom.

Secondly, they point out that believers are supposed to reign with Christ here on Earth. 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 now reigning with Christ in human history. This will require the return of Christ and the establishment of the millennial kingdom that these prophecies concern involving the co-regency of believers with Christ here on Earth.

What might be said 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 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, where once again animal sacrifices are going to be offered to God. Now, wait a minute! The book of Hebrews talks about how Christ is the final sacrifice for sin. He has done away with the animal sacrifices of the old covenant permanently. 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 postmillennial or the amillennial approach. You have to ask yourself, aren't the prophecies of the Kingdom predictions of Christ's spiritual Kingdom – that is ruling right now and will come to completion when Christ returns?

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 earthly Kingdom being established. Then Christ will be the King over all of them. But one needs to ask why is this something that happens on the present Earth? Why couldn’t this be the establishment of Christ’s Kingdom when the new heavens and the new Earth are ushered in and we reign with Christ in eternity, rather than just for this thousand-year period?

As I said earlier, I don’t have any final verdict on this debate. This is not a question 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. You can make up your own minds.

Next time we will begin to look at the state of the soul after death. What does the Scripture have to say about the destiny of people after they die? Do we go immediately to heaven or to hell when we die? That will be the question that we take up next.¹⁹

¹⁹Total Running Time: 15:13 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 17: State of the Soul after Death

Hello! I'm glad that you could join us in Defenders today.

In our discussion of the doctrine of the last things, we have been talking about the Second Coming of Christ, but of course up until this time in human 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 happens to people when they die – people who do not live until the return of Christ?" Let's talk first about the biblical view of what happens when a person dies.

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 only to the Jews. Yet, in the New Testament, Paul speaks of the mystery hidden for ages in God, and that mystery is to reconcile both Jews and Gentiles together in Christ. He said this mystery hidden for ages in God is now fully disclosed through the teaching of the apostles to the church (Colossians 1:25-28).

So these are 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.

Let's begin by talking about the concept of immortality as it appears in the Old Testament. In much of the Old Testament you do not find an optimistic, hopeful perspective on what happens to people when they die. Rather, the destiny of the departed (whether righteous or unrighteous) is a 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 of the Scriptures that refer to this notion of Sheol.

First, 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.

We also find this referred to in the book of Job. In Job 7:9-10 we read: "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 Sheol – do we? – in a passage like this. Rather, it seems that Sheol is the 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,
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 shades – a sort of ghostly spirit that is just a pale vestige of the robust human being that once

lived. For that reason I don't think we can agree with those who say that Sheol simply means the grave or death. Rather, as I say, it seems to be a nether realm of departed spirits – wraiths – who are the vestiges of the people who once lived. They are here 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, and 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 for example 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 is an explicit teaching of the resurrection of the body, which therefore calls 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 the resurrection. 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.

Thus the Old Testament picture is mixed. The older view seems to have been one that speaks of a realm of the departed 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 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 these 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.

Next time, we’ll look more closely at Jesus’ argument with the Sadducees and see which side of the debate he comes down on. Until then I wish you godspeed.²⁰

²⁰Total Running Time: 13:16 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 18: State of the Soul after Death: Jesus' Argument with the Sadducees

Last time we surveyed briefly views on the state of the soul after death in the Old Testament and saw that the belief in the resurrection of the dead was a gradually developing doctrine within Judaism.

Although the belief in resurrection was widespread in Judaism during Jesus' time, it wasn't universally held. Jews were divided about this doctrine. We see this division explicitly in Acts 23:6-10 where we have this marvelous story about how Paul exploits this division between the Pharisees and the Sadducees to his own advantage. Paul had been arrested and was 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* which immediately parts the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

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 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 doctrine. Look at Matthew 22:23-33. Matthew writes,

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 chortling to themselves at how clever they were, trying to trap Jesus with this silly thought experiment.

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. 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 that 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 as authoritative Scripture from God to say that God is the God of the living, including the past patriarchs, which suggests that they are in some sense still alive.

So in Jesus’ argument with the Sadducees, we see him affirming his belief in the resurrection of the dead. The Christian movement that followed Jesus, of course, believed not only in Jesus’ resurrection, but they considered that Jesus’ resurrection was the foretaste and harbinger of our own eventual resurrection from the dead. As Paul wrote, Christ is risen from the dead, “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). That is, Christ is a representative sample of the harvest that will come.

So the early Christian view was essentially the same as the Jewish view of the resurrection of the dead with this important difference – one person’s resurrection has already 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 on which our hope in immortality and resurrection rests.

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, for most of us, or at least all Christians up until this point in history, have not and 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 deaths.

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 finally 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 film was *Heaven Is For Real* in which a young boy – Colton Burpo – describes his experience of what he calls “going to heaven.” He says that he saw there 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, since that won't happen until Christ returns.

If you say, well, people have to wait until the resurrection from the dead, then what happens to the souls of the departed? Where are the souls of the saved or the unsaved during that interim period before Christ returns and the dead are raised?

These are the sorts of questions that we want to address next time.²¹

²¹Total Running Time: 10:44 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 19: Immortality in the New Testament

Today we want to begin 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 at what he says in Philippians 1:21-24. Talking about whether to die or to continue to live 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. Paul 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 be with Christ.

Paul discusses this intermediate state of the soul somewhat more fully in 2 Corinthians 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 mortal body in which we live. The contrast between the earthly tent and the heavenly body which is described as a building from God eternal in the heavens 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 Paul draws is between this fragile, perishable, mortal body that we presently inhabit, and then the eternal resurrection body that we shall have some day in heaven. He then 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 – that is, 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, this state of disembodied existence. We long to put on that heavenly dwelling so that by putting it on we may not be found naked – that is to be 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 that we don't want to have 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. Paul is saying that this would be the best scenario – that we should not be unclothed, stripped of the mortal body, but that we should be further clothed so that what is mortal would be swallowed up by life, by the resurrection body. He then says,

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

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

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 of existence, it is better to be in the disembodied, interim state because then you are closer to the Lord. You are at home 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 intermediate state 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 but who live until the *parousia* and receive immediately their resurrection body.

But that puts Paul into a kind of Catch-22 situation, doesn't it? In order to get to 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 to the best state you've got to keep living in the worst state.

Paul 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 meant to illustrate usually one or perhaps two central truths. It would be a mistake to press these stories or illustrations for doctrinal exactitude, as though they were teaching systematic theology. Nevertheless, what Jesus says in this parable is very interesting. 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 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, 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 place of paradise or blissful fellowship with God or in a place of torment.

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 for the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns.

We might ask ourselves: What about these people who have died and seen their 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 these people 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 like 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 so 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 as if 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. The rich man is in flames, in torment, he wants his tongue to be cooled, and he *sees* and recognizes 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. This is just a speculation, of course, but it would make sense of these experiences.

Next time we'll continue further our discussion of what happens to a person when he dies. Until then, I wish you God's best.²²

²²Total Running Time: 19:28 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 20: The Souls of the Unrighteous Dead

We've been talking about the state of the souls of the righteous dead. But 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, Hades is the Greek word used for Sheol. In this sense, Sheol in the Old Testament describes most 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, would certainly be an accurate description of those in Hades.

In Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we have Hades referred to along with a place called 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. Hell is the final state after the resurrection of the dead. Hades is this intermediate state of the disembodied, unrighteous souls as they await resurrection from the dead.

So the unsaved are also in an intermediate state, but far from being 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. John 5:25-29, a verse that we've read before 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, 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.

For God's judgment, see 2 Corinthians 5:10. Paul writes, "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."

In 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 in 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 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.

Here Paul contemplates Christians who have built upon the foundation of Christ with solid lasting materials as those who receive a blessing from God 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, as it were, with the smell of smoke on their garments.

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 at the time 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 [*that is, 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 be raised and will be given eternal punishment.

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

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 on 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. They go from Hades into Gehenna, or the final state which is called hell.

That brings up appropriately to the end our study of the doctrine of the last things. In the final two lessons of our Defenders class, I'll share some final thoughts on what we've learned.²³

²³Total Running Time: 10:55 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)