

KEY AREAS IN ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

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SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTORY MATTERS IN THE STUDY OF ESCHATOLOGY

I. Introduction

A. The Meaning of “Eschatology”

This word is derived from two Greek words, *eschatos* (last) and *logos* (word or discourse). So, it means the Scripture’s word or discourse concerning the last things.

B. Distinctions in the Study of Eschatology

1. All biblical prophecy vs. “end times” prophecy alone

The distinction here is between all prophetic writing which, when written, pertained to something to happen in the future (from the pt. of view of the writer), vs. writings which are about the last things in God’s program of summing up all in Christ.

2. Inaugurated vs. Future Eschatology

Inaugurated eschatology deals with the present reality (the “already”) of certain aspects of the promised age to come which have already been introduced, while awaiting the completion (the “not yet”) of the fullness of all that was prophesied. For example, the Kingdom of God in some sense came or was inaugurated when Jesus came, and yet its complete coming is in the future. Future eschatology concerns the complete fulfillment of God’s plans in the end times, including the full establishment of the Kingdom of God and the New Covenant, the millennial reign of Christ, final judgments and the eternal state.

3. Personal vs. General Eschatology

Personal eschatology deals with personal concerns of life and death and so includes such areas as the intermediate state, the resurrection of the body, final judgments of moral creatures, and the ultimate destiny of each person. General eschatology concerns God’s dealings on a more global basis in finalizing His plans for human history as we know it. So, the main topics are the second coming of Christ, rapture, the tribulation, the millennium, the new heavens and new earth, heaven and hell.

C. Value of Studying Eschatology

1. Gives us an understanding of God’s world-wide, cosmic purposes. God has let us in on His plans for the whole of creation He has brought into being. He has not left us to wonder whether good will triumph over evil, or the reverse, whether history has meaning or if all is despair and meaningless. Rather, God has told us of His overall design including the end of all --the summarizing up of all in Christ before whom all will bow. We are privileged to know our place in their great cosmic battle and its consummation.

2. Gives us hope. Not only do we know what God has planned, we gain great hope both for our personal lives and for the creation as a whole when we learn that God is good and all-powerful and is bringing all to a perfect completion. No matter how bad things appear, or how bad they really are, God is in control, and He has a perfect plan that will, without fail, be carried out.

3. Give us endurance in this life. Rom 8:24 says it is in hope we are saved, hope of our full and final salvation along with the full restoration of creation. But hope is not in something now seen. But since it is a sure hope, though we don't see it now, we wait patiently and with perseverance and endurance.
4. Motivation for holiness. 2 Pet 3:11-12 stresses that since we know that all that is merely fleshly and earthly will be destroyed, we are urged to live holy lives, thus living now the only kind of life that will endure forever. 1 John 2:15-17 makes the same point: don't love the world, it is passing away; rather do the will of God, for this alone abides forever. Holy living - one of the main reasons God has told of us His plans for this world and the one come.
5. Reassessing Values. When we understand the brevity of this life and the certainty and eternity of the life to come, we are able to see more clearly what really matters now in light of eternity;
6. Motivation for Witness. Heaven and hell are real. The final judgment is real. The necessity of belief in Christ in this life for entering eternal life is real. Should this not lead us to long to see the gospel spread?
7. Cause for Greater Worship. Consider the scene portrayed at the end of Rev 5. Here is worship in its purest form, in light of the triumph of the Lamb and the victory that has been won for all of creation.

II. Intermediate State

A. Unbelievers and the Intermediate State

Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) seems clearly to refer to the state of existence between physical death and the final state. We see here conscious existence in a place of torment that is fixed and permanent. The clearest statement of the state of unbelievers between their death and final judgment of 2 Pet 2:9 – God will “keep the unrighteous under [ongoing] punishment [pres. ps. prtc.] for the day of judgment.”

B. Believers and the Intermediate State

Phil 1:21-24 – “to depart and be with Christ . . . is very much better”. The time Paul refers to is not at the future resurrection of the body, but immediately upon death.

2 Cor. 5:6-8 – “absent from the body, at home with the Lord.” This refers to an immediate transition from an earthly bodily existence to a non-bodily ‘heavenly’ existence. In light of 1 Thess 4:16 where the dead in Christ rise physically to be with him, it appears, then, that we will be with Christ in the intermediate state in a non-bodily form, and still await the resurrection of our bodies when he comes to meet us in the air.

Luke 23:42-43 – “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Here is another confirmation that believers are with Christ when they die, though the resurrection of their bodies awaits the second coming of Christ.