

## **Back to the Basics**

### **The Last Thing(s) on My Mind**

You should be happy to know that I do NOT intend to start off this morning with another public opinion poll – the one I did last week may, or may not, have caused some marital dissension. However, having firmly established my pre-disposition to all things organized, logical, and quantitatively supportable, I feel comfortable asserting the following opinion. If a survey were to be taken asking people what was currently on their mind, the percentage of responses indicating Christ’s return to the earth would be “statistically insignificant.” Yes, there are probably more people practicing **ompholoskepsis** (contemplating your belly-button) than are pondering the return of Jesus to the earth. Why is that? When I take a moment to conduct a cost-benefit analysis and compare the scope and magnitude of the possible repercussions between these two options vying for our attention, somehow, the belly-button comes up short. Even if you aren’t a big navel fan, most of us would rather think about almost anything rather than considering what will happen at the end of the world as we know it. It is so daunting a subject; you may even say it is the “last thing on my mind.”

This morning I intend to persuade you to change your perspective concerning Christ’s second coming. I want you to renounce any indifference, avoidance and trepidation and embrace a joy-filled anticipation of our Lord’s return. In order to convince you to accept this concept, I need to explain a few things about the Doctrine of “Last Things.” My hope is that by shedding some Biblical light on these rarely-discussed topics, you will be able to contemplate them prayerfully and consider them as the good news promised to believers. The doctrine of last things can be categorized into five related topics.

## **Death and the Intermediate State**

## **The Resurrection of the Body**

## **Christ's Second Coming**

## **Judgment and Eternal Destiny**

## **A New Heaven and Earth**

While each of them could be a sermon series of its own, I will touch only briefly on each of these topics this morning to give you an overall understanding of what the Bible tells us will happen as God directs human history to His Pre-Ordained Goal. It is no coincidence that Christ's second coming is the centerpiece of this sermon since it is the cornerstone on which all the other topics rely. Let's start with a brief discussion about death and the inevitable question, what then?

### **Death and the Intermediate State**

It is no surprise that most people, believers or not, don't want to think about our physical death. It is generally considered a culturally taboo subject not mentioned in polite company. However, even non-believers freely admit that the two things that are certain are death and taxes (obviously, they never lived in Alaska where tax is a four-letter word). As I mentioned earlier in this sermon series, God made man unique from all His other creations. Being made in the image of God, man has an insight that no other created being possesses. Man has the awareness of his own mortality and the cognitive power to ponder death. Christians should think through the doctrine of death, for its meaning is quite different than for the unredeemed. Death for the Christian has been compared to birth.

When an infant is in the process of being born into this world, he resists. The womb is a comfortable, safe environment and the only one he knows. The pain and uncertainty of birth causes him to resist. But, when he enters the world outside the womb, he finds a world so large he spends lifetime learning about it and marveling over all the love and joy which enrich his existence. When a Christian dies, he resists the experience, for it is painful and the world beyond is unknown. The womb of this world is comfortable and it is the only one he knows. Yet when he passes through the womb of death, he is born into a new world that is much greater than earthly life – just as earthly life had proved to be much greater than his mother’s womb. Eternal life with the Master, with its absence of sin and sorrow, with love and joy and a thousand other experiences, enriches his existence.

Christians believe in the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15). The question that troubles many is, what happens to the Christian between the time of his death and the resurrection of his body upon Christ’s return? Like many other questions, the Bible does not spell this out for us in the detail we would like. However, there are some central truths in the Scriptures which provide us with some assurances.

1. When we die, our bodies are put aside and go back to the earth and our spirit enters an intermediate state described by one theologian as *the conscious existence of both the righteous and unrighteous after death and before the resurrection.*” The Christian spends this time in the presence of the Lord. Paul affirmed this truth in 2 Corinthians 5: 6, 8) <sup>6</sup> *Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—* <sup>7</sup> *for we walk by faith, not by sight—* <sup>8</sup> *we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.* When a believer dies, that person is **at home** with the

Lord. The body has been set aside, and a new, resurrected body is promised; but in the meantime, the person is with the Lord.

2. When believers die and go to be with the Lord, they are said to be in Paradise. Jesus promised the repentant thief that he would be with Him in paradise that day – the very day of the man’s death (Luke 23:43). The word paradise is referred to two other times in Scripture (2 Cor. 12:4 and Rev. 2:7). So when a Christian dies, he is in a conscious state, alive and aware of the presence of God. But, he is also in an incomplete state until the resurrection of the body which will occur at Christ’s second coming.
3. When non-believers die, they too separate spirit and body but their spirit enters hades where they will experience pain and torment. The familiar story of the rich man and Lazarus recorded in Luke 16: 19-31 is a great illustration of what happens between the time of physical death and the second coming. Both the rich man and Lazarus died, but Lazarus was carried to Abraham’s side where he was comforted (v. 22-25). Obviously, Lazarus was conscious in a state of rest, comfort, and joy. His condition was that of a saved person in Paradise. The very opposite was true for the rich man. He went to hades, but for him it was torment and agony. He was conscious of his suffering and cried out to Lazarus for just a drop of water. Although the suffering of the unrighteous during the intermediate state is not their final hell, it is clear that those who die outside Christ go to a place of punishment.
4. The intermediate state between physical death and the second coming of Christ, then, is a time of conscious joy for the saved and conscious punishment for the lost. When we die, we experience one or the other.

## **The Resurrection of the Body**

The resurrection of the body is clearly taught in the Bible. ( John 5:25, 28-29) <sup>25</sup>  
*Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live...<sup>28</sup> Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, <sup>29</sup> and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.*

Even though those who have died are already either in paradise or in punishment, humans are not destined to spend eternity in a disembodied state. The resurrection awaits all of us. References to the resurrection are abundant in the NT, but Paul emphasized in 1 Corinthians 15 the importance of the doctrine to the Christian faith itself. Christ was raised from the dead, a fact witnessed by many. His resurrection is the basis of the believer's hope to be raised from death. If, on the other hand, there is no resurrection of the body, even Christ has not been raised, and our faith is hopeless and futile. Those who rightly understand the resurrection are able to face death because they know that it is only a step into a new dimension of life.

There is much more to be said about the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, but allow me to end this brief description of it by telling you two things. First, that our resurrected bodies will be different from our earthly bodies –they will be immortal (I am looking forward to that one). Second, the resurrection of the body will occur when Jesus returns to earth. Paul records the sequence of events in 1Cor. 15:51-52, <sup>51</sup> *Behold, I tell you a mystery (SECRET); we will not all sleep (DIE), but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the*

*last trumpet (SIGNIFYING CHRIST'S RETURN); for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*

Hallelujah! I want that perfect body.

### **Christ's Second Coming**

Southern Baptists have never made views of the second coming a test of faith apart from the conviction that Christ will literally return and establish a new heaven and earth. There are a number of views held by Christians throughout history. These views are referred to as millennial in reference to what one believes about the millennium. The word *millennium* does not appear in the Bible. A Latin word meaning *thousand*, it refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ suggested in Revelation 20:2-7. Adding *pre* to the word (premillennial) indicates a belief that Christ will return PRIOR to the millennium; adding *post* to the word (post millennial) indicates a belief that Christ will return AFTER the millennium; adding *a* to the word (amillennial) refers to a belief that the millennium is not a literal reign but refers to the time extending from Jesus' ascension to His second coming. Although there are relatively few postmillennialist in modern times, there are a number of premillennialist and amillennialist amongst Christians and Bible Scholars. Whichever view one holds, it is essential for Biblical faith that one believe in the literal return of Christ. The certainty of Christ's return is based solidly on Scripture (John 14:28, Acts 1:10-11, 1 Thes. 4:16). A mature understanding of this doctrine provides enormous power to the Christian to be aggressive and persistent in evangelism, missions, and ethics. He IS coming again!

### **Judgment and Eternal Destiny**

And what will His CERTAIN coming again bring? For one thing, it will bring the Day of Judgment which will determine our eternal destiny. After God has sought

again and again to bring people to redemption, the Day of Judgment is sure (Rev 20:12-13) <sup>12</sup> *And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.* <sup>13</sup> *And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.* No one will escape it, whether believer or nonbeliever.

The Christian is safe in the blood of Christ, but even so both joy and sorrow will abound when each of us stands before God's judgment and answers for our faithfulness (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10). The feeble excuses we give for not putting God first that seem so understandable to us today will stand in stark contrast to what God reveals as truly important. The unredeemed will quake before God as He recounts with amazing detail the number of times they had opportunities to repent and did not and their sentences of condemnation will be seen to be righteous.

The Bible does not tell us a great deal about heaven, but it nevertheless affirms the reality of heaven and describes it in terms that picture incredible glory. Several truths found in the Bible about heaven are: 1) it is a place (John 14:2); 2) Jesus will be there (John 14:3); 3) God will be there (Rev 21:4,7; 21:22-23); 4) no sin or suffering but only purity will be there (Rev 21:4, 27; 22:1-3); 5) different levels of reward will be assigned, based on faithfulness (Matt. 25:14-30); 6) we will praise God constantly with great joy (Rev 5:11-13; 15:2-4).

The Bible deals also with the reality of hell. It is a popular assertion in this world that heaven may exist, but hell doesn't. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Jesus referred to hell several times (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 18:9; 23:15; Mark 9:43-47). Revelation describes hell as a lake of fire (20:14-15). Jesus referred to hell as a place where, “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). Other words of Jesus concerning hell are found in every one of the Gospels and John, in Revelation, referred to it as, “the lake of fire.” It is logical to believe in hell if you believe in hereafter. If there is a land of joy and rest for God’s people, there is a hell for the unredeemed. Do not be deceived – Hell is a real place of eternal torment for those without Christ.

### **A New Heaven and Earth**

And finally, the end result of Christ’s second coming – the consummation of history will take place when the world as we know it passes away and a new heaven and earth are created (Rev. 21:1) *21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.* We don’t know what all that event means either for the creation or us personally, but we have glimpses of its glory. We are told to wait for it expectantly (2 Pet. 3:13). Paul wrote of its coming in exalted terms: of creation being set free, of groaning in the pain of childbirth until the time of redemption (Rom. 8: 18-22). He described that coming event in 1 Cor. 15:24-28. Every enemy will be defeated, even death, and then Christ will deliver the kingdom to His Father. This new heaven and earth are inextricably linked to Christ’s redemptive work for it is the ultimate development of the kingdom of Christ, the reign of Christ in the hearts of people. The perfect society we learn about in the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus will finally be realized, for only the redeemed will be there, and God will be its light.

At the beginning of my message today I said my intent was to persuade you to change your perspective about Christ's second coming. My desire is for you to joyfully embrace and expectantly wait for this marvelous event which will be the crowning glory of Christ's Kingdom. While the subjects of death, judgment, and hell don't normally register as "joyous" to most people, in light of their relationship to Christ's second coming and the fruition of His Kingdom, the believer can view them with eager anticipation because we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Jesus said, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." That certain knowledge should reassure each believer and instill in us an overwhelming joy and anticipation of that glorious day. He is coming again – that is sure. Are you sure you're ready?

