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The Preface to Heaven

Those who seem to be “obsessed” with the book of Revelation often use the terms *pre-millennial*, *amillennial*, and *post-millennial*. To be honest, I do not fully know what I’m talking about when I ask these questions. I have never been obsessed with eschatology I say this not to imply that if you have a millennial view you are “obsessed” with eschatology. Rather, when faced with whether or not to study the person and work of Christ or amillennialism (for example), I have always opted for the former. And thus if you asked me today what my Eschatological view is (pre-millennial, amillennial, or post-millennial) I would say, “*I have the least amount of problems with the Amillennial view.*”

This is not to say that studying the end times is not important. Rather, this is to say that an analysis of the passages dealing with that portion of redemptive history preceding the Second Coming of Christ can be confusing. For example, it has been reported that when John Calvin was asked if he was going to write a commentary on Revelation he said, “I will leave that to more capable theologians.”

And yet, this does not mean that there are not some very important truths about the end times that each of us must know and affirm. While the book of Daniel was a “sealed book” to Daniel's initial readers

(Daniel 12:9), the book of Revelation on the other hand is an “open book.” The Holy Spirit specifically called John NOT to “...seal up the words of the prophecy” (Revelation 22:10). And there is a pronounced “blessing” on all that read and understand the prophecy of the last days (Revelation 1:3 and Revelation 22:7). Thus it behooves us to be theologians when it comes to eschatology. However, the question remains what exactly ought we to know? First we must affirm five truths about the end times.

1. There is a real end to the world.

2 Peter 3:10, “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

There are three phrases from this text that are riveting. First “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night” (2 Peter 3:10a) The Day of the Lord will be unpredictable. We do not know when Christ is going to come again. It could be this afternoon, or it could be in millennia.

1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, “For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.”

Truly, the day of final judgment will occur at a time when we are not expecting, and it will catch many off-guard.

2 Peter 3:3-4, “Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with *their* mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For *ever* since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’”

2 Peter 3:10b, “...in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat...”

This is a picture of awesome judgment. On the Last Day does occur, all things will be refined with fire, nothing shall be excluded.

2 Peter 3:7, “But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”

Truly, this earth is going to burn!

2 Peter 3:11b-12, “...what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!”

And yet for the believer, his hope and anticipation is a New Heavens and New Earth.

2 Peter 3:13, “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.”

2 Peter 3:10c, "...and the earth and its works will be burned up."

This may be shocking to some. Not only will this world be subject to the fiery judgment of God, but even our works. And that which was folly and useless will be consumed. Paul says this about the final judgment.

1 Corinthians 3:13-15, "Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire."

Let us not neglect this sobering truth: The end of the world is real! Before we enter into the New Heavens and the New Earth all that is on and in this world will be destroyed!

This is an important doctrine for us both to see and to affirm! We live in an age that pretty much has denied eternity altogether. Today's mantra is this: "If it feels good do it!" and "Never mind tomorrow, we have today!" And the temptation as believers is to accept this world view and then we too can be found living for today. Just look at how we spend our time, money, resources, and talent. However, one of the characteristic elements of the child of God is that they are to have an eternal perspective.

Colossians 3:1-2, "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth."

All that the child of God is and could be must be defined NOT by what rewards us today or gives us pleasure or satisfaction in the present. RATHER, what we are and do must be defined by what ultimately is an investment in eternity! What is it that ultimately determines:

- What you will do with your time?
- The satisfaction you will have on the job?
- How you will care for your family?

If it is that which provides for the "most pleasure" and "most fulfillment" than you are not living for eternity. Let us all realize that on the horizon of this world there awaits a terrifying day of destruction and ruin in which this world, and all it contains, will be destroyed! And so let us live not for today, but for

- Tomorrow!
- The land flowing with milk and honey.
- The New Heavens and the New Earth.
- The glory and honor of God that someday will be revealed in its fullness.

Peter tells us this by way of exhortation:

1 Peter 3:11-12a, "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God..."

2. Christ will Return Again

Speaking right after Christ ascended into glory Luke wrote this:

Acts 1:11, “And they [the angels] also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.’”

Christ is coming again! In fact, notice some of the specifics of His return.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

What a wonderful truth! As a bridegroom comes to meet his bride at the altar, so also will be the nature of Christ’s Second Coming (Matthew 25:1-13). Christ is coming again to reunite us once and for all to Himself. This word “meet” is very special. The idea behind this word is a formal reception of a newly arriving magistrate. It denotes a royal reception (see also Acts 28:15; Matthew 25:6).

In Christ’s day when a dignitary paid an official visit to a city, the action of the leading citizens in going out to meet him and escorting him back on the final stage of his journey was called the *ἀπάντησις* *apantēsis*, or “the meeting.” Paul had this in mind when he tells us that Christ will return a Second time and that by His glorious power and grace, we shall meet Him and escort Him back to this earth! What an incredible day that will be! And what an incredible truth! Before we enter the New Heavens and the New Earth Christ will come again!

Now it behooves us all to respond to this truth properly. The doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is proclaimed in 1 Thessalonians NOT to make us prophets, BUT to give us comfort, 1 Thessalonians 4:18! It is proclaimed in Revelation NOT to make us prophets, BUT to give us a burden for the lost, Revelation 22:17! And the book of Acts does not proclaim the Seconding Coming to make us prophets, BUT to make us devout in our walks with God, 1 Peter 3:11-12! If you want to cultivate a disposition that is comforted by God, that longs for the lost to be saved, and is wholly devoted to God, confess with your heart the glorious truth that Christ is returning again soon!

When one surveys church history, you discover that there is a correlation between the comfort we have during difficult times, the burden we have for seeing the lost saved, and the devotion of our heart unto God and the longing of our hearts when it comes to the return of Christ. When we integrate this truth into our day to day living, life is put into a proper perspective. All burdens and blessings are determined only as they stand in relation to this truth!

What truly is a burden? The loss of a house? Ill-health? When viewed from the perspective of eternity these are seen to be inconveniences at best. A genuine burden is NOT being ready to meet the Lord when

He returns!

What is a blessing? Knowing, loving, and serving the Lord! If this is you, then of all people, you have been most blessed!

3. **There will be a Final Judgment**

2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

This is a significant verse. When Paul was ministering in Corinth, he was dragged by the unbelieving Jewish leadership before the βῆμα (bēma), Acts 18:12, 16. This was a raised platform designed for intimidation typically placed in the market place before which criminals would be judged by the local official. This was designed to be a brutal event for the criminal as their life would hang in the balance (not to mention their health, cf. Acts 18:17)! Paul was brought before this horrible platform where in God’s providence Gallio (the proconsul of Achaia) dismissed the case judging it to be a matter of theological debate amongst the Jews.

This no doubt left an impact both on Paul and the Corinthians. The message here in 2 Corinthians 5:10 would have hit very close to home when Paul said, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat” NOT of Gallio, BUT “of Christ!” And this is the case for every man! All of us someday will stand before the tribunal of God and be judged! In fact, Revelation 20 puts it in these terms:

Revelations 20:11-13 “And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. 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. 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.”

From these texts we conclude that before we enter into the New Heavens and the New Earth, everyone of us will stand before God’s judgment seat and be judged. This is both a sobering and a comforting doctrine. Sobering, because someday we will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ! And there we will stand face-to-face before the Creator and King of this Universe. And at that time, we will give an account for the deeds we have done in the body.

Matthew 12:36, “And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment.”

What will you say to Christ, who lived thirty-three years in this state of sin and misery to redeem you, when He asks you to give an account for

- The time you refused to give to Him?
- The talents you wasted?
- The gifts you held back?

- Those times you willingly pursued the lusts of your flesh?

What can we say but, “Guilty! Guilty as charged!” And yet in the words of Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress... When from the dust of death I rise to claim my mansion in the skies, ev’n then this shall be all my plea, Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.” (Great Commission Publications 1990, Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousnes)

And it is this that leads to comfort. Because while God is our judge, He also is our Savior! He loves us, and through Christ, He has removed His wrath and anger. There never again will come a time that He will burn in anger at us! And thus, rather than condemning us on account of our sin, on the Last Day, God will commend each of us in Christ with the words:

Matthew 25:21, “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.”

The Day of Final Judgment will be an awesome day.

Hebrews 10:31, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

But it also will be a day of delight, for as we look into our Judge’s face, we will see our Savior who at that moment will be delighting in us, as He is today! May the knowledge of this day

- Sober us that we might live the rest of our time in the body for the Lord, and
- Encourage us that we might pray with John, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20)!

4. There will be a Resurrection of the Just unto the New Heavens and the New Earth

Matthew 25:31-34, “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

All of us will someday stand before the throne of God and be judged. However to the one whose Savior and Lord is NOT themselves, BUT Jesus Christ, the Day of Judgment will be the ultimate day of graduation. We shall be translated from this present state of sin and misery into the final and glorious state we call the New Heavens and the New Earth. In light of this, what greater definition could there be for the child of God than “Blessed of the Father” (Matthew 25:34)!

1 Corinthians 15:50-55, “Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, 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 must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality,

then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'"

Isn't this the most incredible news? The day will come when we shall inherit the kingdom that God has for us; a kingdom prepared for us before the foundation of the world.

- What is your true inheritance?
- What is your true possession?
- For what ought we to live this day?

Do you not realize that, if you are in Christ, this very moment there awaits for you the kingdom of God? Martin Luther described the only fitting response to this doctrine, let us respond accordingly:

...let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still; His kingdom [prepared and planned for us before the foundation of the world] is forever. (Great Commission Publications 1990, A Mighty Fortress)

Hebrews 11:13-15, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return."

Let goods and kindred go. Let that which is most precious in our eyes be spent for the glory of God. Let Satan strip us of our wealth and health. Let the world reproach us and say with Job's wife, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). But in light of the glorious future that awaits us all in Christ, let us never lose our longing for the New Heavens and the New Earth at which time we shall behold Christ face to face!

5. There will be a Resurrection of the Unjust unto the Lake of Fire

Matthew 25:31-33, 41, "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left... Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

There is perhaps no more sobering reality than this: Some hearing my voice this day may spend eternity separated from God. And what will this state be like? John calls it "a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). Paul equates it with daily experiencing the "wrath, indignation, tribulation, and distress" of God (Romans 2:8-9). John describes it in these terms, "And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14). Isaiah describes the future in light of the present:

Isaiah 66:24, "Then they shall go forth [from the temple] and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me [in the Valley of Gehenna]. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched [think of Dickens, "A Christmas Story" and the chain that Marley's foul deeds created for himself; so it will be in hell for all non-Christians- the worm and the fire by which

they suffer will be of their own doing!!!]; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind.”

As awesome and brutal a reality that this is, nevertheless we must recognize it is true! Before we enter into the New Heavens and the New Earth, God first will cast all those who do not know Christ into the Lake of Fire.

What a sobering reality this presents! Men and women waste the life that God has given them by spending it NOT in the Service of our King or for the cause of Christ, BUT upon themselves, pursuing the e desires of their flesh. They forsake the Savior of the world; Jesus Christ, and choose to stand before God on the basis of our own merits. This causes them to remain under the wrath of God on account of sin. And to do that is to face the terrifying expectation that at the consummation of the ages you will be cast into the Lake of Fire to suffer both physical and spiritual anguish forever!

Truly to comprehend this and yet live with the knowledge that Christ is not your Savior is a weight too heavy to bear! To be saved by Christ is to know that at any moment you could be whisked away to your home with God in the New Heavens and Earth; but to be an alien to Christ is to know that at any given time you could be a moment- a step- away from Hell!

Just how far is hell? The story is told of a congregation listening to a preacher speak about heaven and hell. At one point in the service, the preacher spoke about the distance that separates us from heaven and hell- and that distance being sin. At the end of the service, a group of teenagers who did not know Christ left the auditorium with these words of derision, “How far is it really to hell?”

The next day, their obituaries ran in the paper; they died that night in a car crash. For those of you who aren’t saved, for these three teenagers who rejected Christ, hell was just a couple of miles down the road! How far is it from you?

Oh how I plead with you: Don’t spend another moment in your sin; don’t delay! Turn from your sin to God! Ask God to take away your sin. Trust in Christ and His work as the basis upon which you will stand before God. Do this, and you shall be saved!

Works Cited

Great Commission Publications. *Trinity Hymnal*. Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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