

"Last But Not Least"

(Eschatology)

A basic fundamental of the Christian faith is that God as Creator and Redeemer has been active in time-space events we call human history. And insofar as God has removed Himself from His transcendence to become immanent, thereby touching His creation with His divine power, so has human history been transformed and conformed to the divine purpose of God, so that one cannot properly understand human history without previously seeking to understand, if only minutely, the divine purposes of God. This is true whether we are speaking of God's creative act, whereby He formed man from the dust of the ground, of His mighty deliverance of Israel from Egypt, of the glorious incarnation of His Only Begotten Son, or of things to come when Jesus Christ, the Righteous Judge and King, comes to bring this present age to its final denouement.

Eschatology, the study of last things, must always keep two facets in focus: (a) the incapability of man's knowledge in foreseeing the future, and (b) the absolute certainty of God's accomplishing perfectly His divine will. We must be humble enough to say, with Paul, *"For we know in part, and we prophesy in part"* (1 Cor. 13:9), and *"now we see in a mirror dimly"* (1 Cor. 13:12). But we must also hold fast to the hope that *"when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away"* (1 Cor. 13:10), and wait with assurance that the time is coming when we shall see *"face to face"* (1 Cor. 13:12) the One who is to be revealed at the end of the ages.

Out of the work of scholars and students of the Scriptures have come varying interpretations of the biblical passages on the last things. The dividing line between liberal and conservative scholars is drawn along the question, Do passages of Scripture which deal with last things, for example, Daniel and Revelation, forth-tell the events of the writer's own day, or do they foretell the events of history future to the writer's own day? Liberal scholars largely endorse the former view, while conservative scholars lean toward the latter. However, neither view by itself is sufficient to explain the kind of biblical literature Daniel and Revelation represent. It is certainly true, for example, that the apostle John, in writing the Revelation, was concerned to address the Christians of his own day. Seven churches and their present situations were addressed; they were commended, exhorted, or reproved. But in an effort to encourage them and clarify for them the purposes of God in the persecutions they were then suffering, John also says he was shown the things that *"must take place after these things"* (Rev. 4:1). There was still to come the vindication of those whom the Lamb did *"purchase for God"* (Rev. 5:9). Satan and all the powers of evil were yet to be defeated in the coming Judgment of God, and there was still to come a *"new heaven and a new earth"* where the saints of God would forever reign with Him who sits upon the throne (Rev. 22:3-5).

Thus in eschatology, there is both a forth-telling and a foretelling. The point is this: while there is certainty of the coming of the last things, they should not be studied in isolation of our present situation. While holding before us the hope of things to come, the last things should also inform us about God's purpose for us now in living righteously and in readiness for the coming of the Lord. (see Matt. 24-25; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; 2 Thess. 2; Heb. 10:23-25; 2 Pet. 3).

A central turning point for discussions of the last things among conservative scholars is the millennium, or thousand-year reign of Christ, in Revelation 20:1-10. Post millennialism, popular in the early twentieth century, sees Christ's return after the millennium, which has been brought about by the spread of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Pre-millennialism places Christ's second coming before the millennium, which is established by the supernatural intervention of God in Christ. It is interesting that many of the early church Fathers had sympathy for this view. Those who hold to amillennialism see the millennium as a figurative expression of the accomplishment of God's Word to Israel, fulfilled in the church. Within any of these three groups, one will find variations of thought concerning particular aspects of the viewpoint under discussion. This should lead us to be cautious about being dogmatic for any single viewpoint of the last things.

But uncertainty in these areas should not be cause for despair, as there are other things about which the Christian can be sure. First could be mentioned the resurrection of the body. The vividness of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, while revealing the restoration of Israel, was in itself a vision of a resurrection to life from the grave (Ezek. 37). Daniel 12:2 speaks of a resurrection: *"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt."* Paul says Christ's own resurrection is the assurance of our own resurrection: *"But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming"* (1 Cor. 15:23). Second, we may be sure of Christ's second coming. Daniel 7 is the reference point for the New Testament doctrine of the Son of Man coming *"with the clouds of heaven"* (Dan. 7:13). As the disciples watched Jesus ascending into heaven, the angels told them that they would also see Him *"come in just the same way"* (Acts 1:11). Paul told the Thessalonians that His coming would be preceded by the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:1-4). The coming of the Son of Man will be accompanied by *"great power and glory"* (Mark 23:26). Third, there will be judgment. Joel 3 says the Lord will enter into judgment with the nations. Peter speaks of the *"judgment and destruction of ungodly men"* (2 Pet. 3:7). Paul says that *"we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body"* (2 Cor. 5:10). The final judgment will take place before the very throne of God (Rev. 20:11-15). And after all is said and done, when all tribulations have been suffered, when all of Christ's foes have been defeated, when all things have been made subject to Him, then the new Jerusalem will be *"ready as a bride adorned for her husband"* (Rev. 21:2). God shall dwell among men, wiping away every tear, all death, every mourning and pain. The saints of God will drink from the *"river of the water of life, ...coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb"* (Rev. 22:1). The final purpose of God will then have been accomplished when the saints of God join the myriads in saying:

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever" (Rev. 5:12, 13).

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