

## The Beginning, the Middle, and the Last Things

For those who would like to see a detailed examination of the end time position of each major church group, I direct you to this site: <http://arkhaven.org/eschatology-overview-of-all/Mike%20Presentation%20End%20Time%20Synopsis-12-09.pdf>

There you will find a summary of each position: premillennial, postmillennial, etc. Under each summary is a list of those theologians and seminaries who champion that position.

The second installment of *The Hunger Games* trilogy has been drawing a lot of interest at movie theaters. No surprise there. The second book was as good as the first. But it will be interesting to see what the movie makers do with the third book. Many readers heavily criticized the ending that Suzanne Collins gave to her story. A common criticism was that the main character's (Katniss Everdeen) actions at the end of book three were not consistent with her character as it had been developed through the first two books. The ending did not seem to match up with the beginning and middle.

N.T. Wright makes the statement that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Our doctrine regarding Christ's return, the *parousia*, would obviously deal with the end of the story, the end of time. It seems, though, that when dealing with the end of the story, one should not become so focused on it or obsessed with it that he or she forgets/ignores what happened at the beginning and in the middle. Such obsession with the end of time, churches studying nothing but Revelation, may explain the popularity of theological positions that are disconnected from the Creation and the cross of Christ.

On the other hand, it does not make sense for us to treat the end of the story as if it were unimportant, a moot point. Books like N.T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and *Surprised by Hope* have reminded me that it is not enough to teach that there will be no rapture. It is just as important that we teach what will happen at the end, making sure to connect the last things with what happened in the beginning and at the climax, the fullness of time. In fact, I don't know how we can teach a Bible Class on the last things and hope for our people to have a Biblical understanding of them unless we carefully tie the end back to the middle and to the beginning. Consider the words of the Apostles' Creed and how it reflects this deep connection between the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Bible's story, which is also God's story and our own.

It is good to begin with the right question. There are plenty of *good* questions. What will become of me when I die? Will I go to heaven? When will Jesus return? What we need, though, is the *right* question. When we begin a Bible study on the last things, perhaps we should begin with our feet in the same dust as that of the cross. From that vantage point, we ask, "Who is God, and who am I, and what is our relationship?"

The answer is, we do not know God apart from how He revealed Himself to us down here in His creation. The God who reveals Himself is the God who comes down into the dust with us. "Not in flight beyond the clouds, but in the dust of the grave, God has come to tell us like it is about Himself and humanity." (Kolb, p.443) John 14:8-10.

The crucifixion and burial of Jesus remind us that we are but dust. These point us back to the beginning when God first made man. Gen. 2:7. God is our Creator. We are His creatures. We are not, nor have we ever been, free agents, existing apart from God. Why, then, do we picture eternity as a place where we just play baseball or as much golf as we want (as much fun as that would be)? God created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And to take care of one another (Gen. 2:15-18).

Adam and Eve believed the lie that they didn't need God and could become free agents. They accepted the lie that they could have life apart from the Creator. They could be like Him.

Was God's response to simply trash His creation? No. He exiled Adam and Eve from His presence. God's first act of judgment. Now, the good and perfect work He had given them would often become toil, work done in vain. Genesis 3:17-18. The good creation, also, bore the curse of their sin. Adam and Eve, exiled from God's presence, would toil amid suffering, evil, sickness, and pain. (I doubt that the first question they would have asked upon leaving the Garden would have been, "How can I get to heaven?") All the same, God had not wadded them up and thrown them away (Genesis 3:15). There was not only judgment but Gospel also. New creation (Psalm 51:10) and return from exile (Exodus 3:7-8) would become recurring themes in the lives of God people. They would become recurring themes in the Bible, as well.

Nor did God throw away His creation in the Flood. He saved Noah and his family and as many animals as could fit on the ark. There was judgment and salvation.

Later, when God chose Israel, He was present with them in a manner that brought them out of exile with the promise of a land that would reward its laborer. Exodus 3:8. This was not the end goal. The Lord's plan was to choose for Himself a people through whom He would bring redemption to all nations. This was the work He had given them to do. This chosen people was to tell of God's love, mercy, and justice. They were to proclaim God's presence in the midst of evil and suffering. The covenant that the Creator created also created relationship with God unto life, rather than death. But the end was not yet. The Law was not intended to bring redemption. Sin would continue: idolatry and every act that dehumanizes man. Return from exile would have to be repeated again and again. God's climactic rescue and redemption were yet to come.

In the fullness of time, in the middle of the story, where the former times end and the latter days begin, the Creator sends His only Son, the True Israel, down into the same dust in which we stand. Hebrews 1:1-2. Exile. He was made of the same dust of which we are made. God did not merely express sympathy for our plight. He came down and joined in our exile. At the cross, the Creator reveals just how ruined by sin are the creatures He made and loves. "In the cross, God renders His verdict upon sin: it is evil, and it must be destroyed." (Kolb, p.454) God judged sin. God had come to "engage evil at its ugliest on the cross to defeat every evil," (Kolb, p.455), to do what we could not do.

Upon Jesus' death, the Creator once again did not trash His creation. He raised Jesus' body from the dust of the earth (see Daniel 12:2). It was the resuscitation of a corpse, but not merely the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus' body was transformed. It became the first part of the New Creation.

When Jesus returns to heaven in His Ascension, He ascends bodily, with the promise that He will return to earth in the same way. Acts 1:11. With power. And in the flesh. The Ascension of Jesus is great

comfort to us that our loved ones' souls go to be with the Lord when they die. They are at rest. Yet, it is the bodily return of Jesus to this earth on the Last Day to which Paul points when he gives comfort to the Thessalonians: Jesus' bodily return and the resurrection of our bodies. 1Thessalonians 4:13-18.

In the meantime, we, too, become a New Creation, in Christ. There's the relationship aspect. In Christ. 2Corinthians 5:17. No free agents, doing whatever we want. By Baptism, the Creator is also the Re-Creator (Kolb, p.461). We cannot restore our relationship with our Creator anymore than Adam and Eve could. "No repairs, no improvements, no optimistic encouragement are possible. You must be born anew. As in the case of Adam and Eve, sinners must die, eternally or baptismally." (p.461) Only the Creator can do this re-creating work. Only the Lord God can bring us back from the ultimate exile of eternal death (Ezekiel 37, Jeremiah 31, Isaiah 40). Here in Baptism is one of those places where heaven and earth are not so far apart (Revelation 21:1-2).

Dying to the old creation with Christ, buried with Him by Baptism, God restores us to the fullness of humanity (Kolb, p.455). Romans 6:1-7, 1Corinthians 3:16, 1Timothy 6:13-16. Raised by the Holy Spirit to new life in this body, now a temple of the Holy Spirit, we look forward to the Day when the same Spirit will raise this same body (Romans 8:11). Shall we go on sinning in this body that will be raised on the Last Day? "By no means!" (Romans 6:2)

Raised to new life with Christ, the believer looks forward to being raised on the Last Day from the dust of the earth (p.455). Isaiah 26:19, Ezekiel 37:11,6,12. This is the ground of our hope. Not, dying and going to heaven. When the emphasis in my life is on being a baptized child of God, along with my fellow baptized, since it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18 and the outstretched arms of the Body of Christ), then though I look forward to rest in heaven, I look forward all the more to being raised with the Church to the life and work we will have in the New Creation, as we live in a perfectly restored relationship with our Creator.

By Baptism we have been freed from exile in a way that the Old Israel never was. We are a new creation in Christ for telling of God's love in Christ, His mercy and His justice, for being good stewards of God's creation, and for being a helpmeet to one another. Raised with Christ, we walk with Him in relationship, used by Him to bring His redemption to the nations. This is an "out look," not a "gazing up" into heaven. It is not a wish to escape this mess either by dying and going to heaven or by being raptured. It is an outlook that believes God will not trash His creation on the Last Day but will restore it. It interprets 2Peter 3:10-13 in the light of Romans 8:21. It believes that the liberation of the creation for glorious freedom

*"cannot have a double meaning: blessed eternal glory for the children of God, annihilation for the creation. To call the latter a liberation is an odd use of language. It has been well said that not the cosmos itself will pass away but only the form of this present world (1Cor.7:31). The fire mentioned in 2Peter 3 must be the fire of purification. The new heavens and new earth are not new in the sense of never having existed before, but in contrast with the old, different from what heaven and earth formerly were. Rev. 21 states that the present separation of the Holy City from the earth shall end in a union of both. God's plans are never defeated. He does not replace but restore." (Lenski, p.538)*

This enables us to not seek some theology that promises us an escape from the mess that is this world. No more do we need to escape or retreat or use the excuse that the world is too far gone and there's nothing

we can do. The promise of the resurrection of the body and the restoring of the creation on the Last Day enables a return to the clear words of Paul. We don't need to escape. We can "stand firm, knowing that our labor" for the proclamation of the Gospel, the extending of mercy, the resistance of evil, the standing up for justice in this world "is not in vain," not merely toil (1Cor.15:58), even if we suffer for it (2Cor.4, 2Cor. 12, Phil.3). All of this world's history is moving toward the day when God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. This "fosters a defiance ("defiant hope") of evil and the assurance that the people of God can move through life on the solid ground of the love Christ revealed on the cross." (Kolb, p.459)

*"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body." (Phil.3:20-21)*

1. *Interpretation of Romans* by R.C.H. Lenski
2. *Luther on the Theology of the Cross* by Robert Kolb, *Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. XVI (2002)
3. *Surprised by Hope* by N.T. Wright (though not marked in the document, the ideas in this book are relied on heavily throughout this Bible study)
4. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by N.T. Wright (though not marked in the document, the ideas in this book are heavily relied upon throughout this Bible study)