



HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

9 - Last Things and Last Lecture



ESCHATOLOGY, JUDGMENT, AND THE FUTURE

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When students hear the word *eschatology*, they often think of apocalyptic movies, fiery destruction, or cryptic predictions about the end of the world. Has anyone watched *Left Behind*, *the Road*, *the Seventh Sign*?

Yet in Christian theology, eschatology is not primarily about predicting the date of a cosmic catastrophe to come. Instead, it is about hope, justice, fulfilment, and the overall meaning of history.

The word comes from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning “last” or “final”. Eschatology asks ultimate questions: What happens when we die? Will justice prevail? Does history have a goal? What does it mean that Christians believe in resurrection and judgment?

ESCHATOLOGY, JUDGMENT, AND THE FUTURE

The answers to these questions shape how Christians understand salvation, ethics, suffering, worship, and mission in all sorts of ways.

In this lecture, we will explore Christian teachings about death, resurrection, and judgment, examine the theological and scriptural foundations of heaven and hell, and reflect on the broader role eschatology plays in Christian theology and daily life.



DEATH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

DEATH AS THEOLOGICAL REALITY

Sadly, death is a universal human experience. Biologically, it marks the end of bodily life. Theologically, it is more than a biological event – it represents rupture and loss.

In the Christian tradition, death is closely connected to the problem of sin that we looked at last week. The Genesis narrative portrays human mortality in relation to alienation from God (Genesis 3). Paul later interprets death as entering the world through sin (Romans 5:12).



DEATH AS THEOLOGICAL REALITY

This does not mean that each individual death is a direct punishment for personal wrongdoing, but rather that death belongs to a fallen condition in which humanity no longer lives in full communion with God.

At the same time, the Bible does not present death as ultimate or final. In 1 Corinthians 15:26, Paul calls death “the last enemy” that will be destroyed by the coming of Jesus and talks of the bodily resurrection of believers.



THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

One question that arises immediately is: what happens between our death and the final resurrection?

The Christian tradition has proposed a number of different answers to this drawing on verses in the New Testament which offer suggestive but not systematic descriptions.

For example, Jesus tells the repentant thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul expresses a desire “to depart and be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23).



THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Some traditions speak of an “intermediate state”, where souls exist in God’s presence awaiting the resurrection of the body.

The Roman Catholic tradition developed the doctrine of purgatory, understood as a state of purification for those destined for heaven but not yet fully sanctified.

While controversial, the idea reflects the conviction that salvation involves moral and spiritual transformation – something we talked about in the previous section.



THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Other Christians, especially during the Reformation, emphasised the idea of “soul sleep”, the idea that the dead rest unconsciously until the final resurrection.

One of the most important facets of this, is that the Christian tradition’s idea of what comes after death is not a disembodied existence but an eventual bodily resurrection.

Across traditions, Christians affirm that death does not annihilate our personal existence and while it is a passage, serious and sorrowful, it is not the final word.





RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

So, Christian eschatology centers not on the immortality of the soul, but on the resurrection of the body.

This distinction is crucial and quite different to the kind of religious visions that went before. Greek philosophical traditions often described salvation as the soul's escape from the body, a final release of the "true" from the grubby experience of the flesh.

In contrast, Jewish and Christian traditions affirm the goodness of embodied creation and anticipate its renewal, mirroring some of the issues we saw in our consideration of the doctrine of Creation.



BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The clearest New Testament discussion appears in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul insists that if Christ has not been raised, Christian faith is futile. Christ's resurrection is described as the "first fruits" of those who have died. Just as Christ was raised, so too will believers be raised.

Paul speaks of a "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon*), which does not mean an immaterial ghost, but instead a body transformed and animated by the Spirit.

The resurrection body is continuous with the present body yet radically transformed. In Paul's vision it is imperishable, glorious, and powerful.



THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The doctrine of bodily resurrection affirms that creation matters and Christian salvation is not an escape from the material world, but the redemption of it.

This has really quite profound implications for anthropology and ethics, because human beings are not just souls trapped in bodies; they are embodied persons whose physical existence participates in God's purposes.

God redeems the whole person – both body and soul.



JUDGMENT

Part of the further development of the idea of the bodily resurrection is its connection to the notion of judgement, as Christian teaching affirms that each person will stand before God in judgment at the resurrection.

For example, Hebrews 9:27 declares, “It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment”. In Matthew 25, the separation of sheep and goats hinges on acts of mercy toward “the least of these”.



JUDGMENT

This suggests that the judgment that we face is not merely a case of adjudicating doctrinal correctness, but an accounting of our lived compassion.

I think it is also important that we recognise that judgment is not opposed to grace – that judgement is not opposed to forgiveness, or overrules forgiveness.

For Christians, the judge is also the savior, and the one who judges is the one who has borne suffering and offered forgiveness.



JUDGMENT

This perhaps runs counter to many of our visions of the end times, filled with fire and brimstone, while the Book of Revelation portrays thrones, opened books, and divine judgement (Revelation 20).

That apocalyptic imagery communicates not a literal account of violence, but a really important theological conviction of the Christian tradition – that injustice will not endure forever.

For oppressed communities, this promise is the good news that Jesus came to share and that God promises them.



HEAVEN & HELL

HEAVEN

Our vision of Heaven is often as a distant realm above the clouds full of shiny angels.

However, Biblical descriptions tend to focus more on a relational account rather than a spatial one with heaven depicted as the dwelling of God, the place of divine presence and glory.

Jesus speaks of preparing a place in the Father's house (John 14:2). Paul describes being "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2).



HEAVEN

The most profound theological description of heaven is the idea of the “beatific vision”, a vision of God in which the relationship between the self and God is direct.

According to medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, the human intellect finds its fulfillment in this seeing God “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

It is this openness and fulfillment of relationship that is at the core of the concept of heaven for the Christian tradition, a healing of the broken relationship between God and ourselves that we experience in this life, mended in the hereafter.



HEAVEN

Heaven represents a restored communion, joy, and our full participation in divine life. It is not static boredom but dynamic fellowship in and with God.

Importantly, heaven is not the final stage in isolation from creation – it is not a divorce from our bodies, or a leaving behind of the created world.

Many theologians emphasise that the ultimate Christian hope is new creation – that heaven and earth are reconciled – rather than an escape to a distant heaven.



HELL

Similarly, our vision of Hell is usually one of fire and violence, ruled over by Satan.

The New Testament uses various images to evoke this: Gehenna (a burning garbage valley outside Jerusalem), outer darkness, unquenchable fire, and exclusion from the wedding feast.

In Matthew 25, those who neglect acts of mercy face “eternal punishment”. Revelation speaks of a “lake of fire”.



HELL

Christian theologians and artists and writers have interpreted hell in different ways and massively extended the cultural language and symbology that we have for it – Satan, demons, pitchforks etc.

The traditional view within Christian theology, arising from the work of Augustine, affirms that hell is the eternal conscious separation from God of our selves.

An important part of this is the ‘conscious’ nature – that Hell is due to our ongoing choice to separate ourselves from the forgiveness of God through pride.



HELL

Regardless of interpretation, hell underscores the centrality of human freedom and moral responsibility for the Christian tradition.

Love cannot be coerced and therefore if heaven is communion with God, hell is self-exclusion from that communion.

As Augustine writes: “All that are in Hell, choose it”.



THE FUTURE AS PROMISE

Christian eschatology weaves together death, resurrection, judgment, heaven, hell, and the promise of a new creation into a unified vision of hope and moral accountability.

This means that death is an enemy, but not ultimate or final, because Christians live with the promise of resurrection.

This means that oppression, no matter how bad, is temporary, because Christians live with the promise of God's eventual judgement.

This means that creation will pass away, but the new creation proclaims the renewal of all things.

THE FUTURE AS PROMISE

Much as we might enjoy a good end-of-the-world film, and there are plenty of social reasons for why they have become more popular lately, for the Christian tradition, the end of the world says quite a lot about the world now, and the world to come.

For Christians, eschatology is not about speculative timelines, but fundamentally about trust. The future belongs to God and because it does, Christians are called to live now in the light of that promise – to live with courage, compassion, and hope that the final word of history is not destruction, but renewal.



READINGS

Revelation 21–22

Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Introduction