

## Sermon Notes "Last Things"

Material for this message was drawn from a series of sermons by Dr. Calvin Wittman (2009)

### **Introduction**

As we continue in our study, we come to article 10 of our doctrinal statement, the Baptist Faith and Message. It is concerned with eschatology, or the doctrine of the end times.

Article 10 of our confessional statement says,

"God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord."

People are fascinated with what will happen after this life is over, whether that means the end of the world or merely the end of their life on this earth, people are interested, many are fearful, but most are curious about the future. Dr. Russell Moore picks up on this reality when he writes:

"A Christian's eschatology does not consist in his prophecy charts but in his funeral service. At a funeral", he says, "the church is perhaps at its most theological. Our crying reminds us that death is not natural but a horrible curse to be abhorred. Our recitation of Psalm 23 and John 11 reminds us that in Christ we have already been delivered from the power of death, that His story is our story. Our placing the body in a casket reminds us of the metaphor of sleep used often in scripture to convey to us that the one who sleeps will also wake. Our burying the body in the earth reminds us that we are only creatures, formed from the clay, but creatures who will one day be called forth from the dust again. At a funeral our choice of hymns are the most theological, the most resistant to the fads and trends of Christian music. We sing of looking across 'Jordan's Stormy Banks,' and of understanding things better, 'by and by, when the morning comes.' That's because all Christian theology points to an end, an end where Jesus overcomes the satanic reign of death and restores God's original creation order." (A Theology for the Church, Daniel Akin, editor)

All too often, especially when we talk about last things, people are more concerned with when and how this or that will occur rather than being content with the assurance that it will happen. Jesus Himself tells us in **Matthew 24:36** that no one, not the angels in heaven, not even the Son Himself, knows when Jesus will return. Only the Father knows. That's why it's futile to spend our time worrying about the when. We need to focus rather upon the fact that He is coming again, and how we should live in the light of that knowledge.

We will also not spend our time dealing with things like the pre-millennialism, post-millennialism, or a-millennialism, or the pre, mid or post tribulation positions on the rapture. Our confessional statement is intentionally vague on these areas because within Southern Baptist life there are a variety of positions held. Neither time nor the purpose of our study require us to go into the details of what might happen, rather we will concern ourselves with the basics upon which nearly all of us can agree, we will talk about what we can know instead of speculating upon that of which we cannot be certain.

## **I. What We Know Will Happen**

Article 10 of the Baptist Faith and Message begins with an affirmation that, "God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end." More simply stated we could say that the end of this world and the end of time as we know it is coming. Furthermore, this will only happen by God's power and in His time. As we consider this concise statement concerning eschatology, or the study of the end times, the Bible gives us several promises of which we can be certain. I wish to draw your attention to 5 of them.

The first certainty found in this statement is that God is sovereign or is in control of all things. In **Genesis 18:14** Abraham is told that there is nothing too hard for God; **Job 9:12** assures us that God is all powerful, and **Psalms 103:19** says, "**The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all.**" Jesus Himself tells us in **Matthew 19:26** that with God all things are possible.

Perhaps there is no better passage to assure us that God is sovereign over all that happens than **Acts 1:7** where Jesus, responding to the disciples inquiry about when He will restore the kingdom to Israel says, "**It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority.**"

Our confessional statement affirms what scripture clearly teaches, that God is sovereign over all things. So, when the end comes, it will be God who makes it happen. There is something comforting about that isn't there? There is something very reassuring about knowing that God is on His throne and is ultimately in control of all things. He who controls the universe is in control of our lives. This should give us peace today.

This brings us to our second certainty, which affirms that the end of times will come only when and how He chooses to make it happen. The second certainty we find here is that the end is coming.

This is something to which the scripture gives witness throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament. We find this in passages like **Isaiah 65:17** which says, "**For I will create a new heaven and a new earth; the past events will not be remembered or come to mind,**" and **Revelation 21:1** which says, "**For I will create a new heaven and a new earth; the past events will not be remembered or come to mind.**" In

clear and unambiguous language, the scripture speaks of this present world coming to an end and God creating something new; something unspoiled by sin and death.

**1John 2:17** tells us that the world and its desires are passing away. Every day we live the world moves just a little bit closer to its end. God promises us that a day is coming when the things of this earth will be no more. This is one of the reasons it's so foolish to lay treasures up for ourselves here on earth, like all the other things of this world, they cannot and will not last. Instead, we are exhorted to lay up our treasures in heaven, where thief cannot steal, and moth and rust cannot destroy.

The third promise is that Jesus Himself will return to earth. The second sentence in article 10 says, "According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth;"

In **John 14:1-3** Jesus gives us this promise when He tells His disciples, "**Your heart must not be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if not, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come back and receive you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.**" The return of Jesus is something which is based on a promise directly from Jesus.

The angels at the ascension of Jesus told the disciples the same thing. In **Acts 1:11** they said, "**Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven.**"

In **Matthew 25:31** Jesus tells us that when He returns it will be in glory with all the holy angels with Him. **Philippians 2:10-11** assure us that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus will personally return to earth, visibly and in glory.

There are many uncertain things in our world today. The stock market is uncertain, it seems our health is uncertain, the political stability of our world seems uncertain, but friends, this one thing is absolutely certain, Jesus came once, and He is coming again. He gave His word and He will see it come to fruition.

Not only does the Bible tell us that Jesus will return, it also informs us that He will come suddenly and unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. In **Matthew 24** Jesus says, "**So this is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be: Then two men will be in the field, one will be taken and the one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming...because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**"

In **Matthew 24** Jesus tells us that as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be when He returns. People will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. People, even God's people, will be so preoccupied with the ordinary affairs of this life, that they

will have given little to no thought about Jesus returning. He will come again, and it will be sudden and unexpected.

The fourth thing our confessional statement brings to our attention, is the biblical promise that the dead will be raised. The Bible teaches that we will experience a bodily resurrection. The Gnostics of the first century taught that the body, because it was physical, was evil therefore would not be resurrected. They taught that we would exist in eternity as disembodied souls. They denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus and thus they also denied that we too would be bodily raised. Part of the story of redemption is that Jesus, through His redemptive work on the cross, died not only to save our souls, but to save our bodies as well. Many see this promise as merely concerning divine healing in the here and now, but within the larger scope of God's redemptive plan, we can see that someday, because of the finished work of Jesus Christ, our bodies will also be raised.

In **1 Corinthians 15**, while defending the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, the apostle Paul assures us that even as Christ arose from the dead, we too shall rise. In some of the most beautiful and yet powerful language in all the New Testament, Paul says,

**“In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. For this corruptible must be clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal must be clothed with immortality.....Then the saying this is written will take place, Death has been swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin; and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God Who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

**1Thessalonians 4:13** and following assures us that the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive and remain will be caught up to meet them in the air. This is what is commonly referred to as the rapture, a term which is not found in scripture but is used to describe an event foretold in scripture.

Just like Jesus rose with a real and glorified body, we who are in Christ will be resurrected in the same way. But not only will we be raised, one of the other biblical certainties our doctrinal statement affirms is that at the resurrection, all men will be judged.

And that's the fifth thing I want you to see about the end times – All men will be judged. Some to everlasting life and some to eternal damnation. **Matthew 25:31** and following give us insight into what this will look like. The scripture says,

**"When the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 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 by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...Then He will say to those on the left, depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.'**

You see, scripture clearly teaches that there is coming a day of judgment, a day when all wrongs will be made right, a day when everyone will give an account for his or her actions on this earth. Knowing this enables us to endure the injustices of this world, we know that someday everyone will give an account and The Judge will execute righteous judgment. In eternity every injustice will be made right. Every evil deed will be addressed, and every unseen kindness will be rewarded.

In **Matthew 12:36-37** Jesus says, **"I tell you on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."**

The scripture is clear that those who know Jesus, those who asked Him to forgive their sins and who submitted their lives to His control will be ushered into heaven to spend eternity with the Lord and with those who have gone on to be with Jesus before us.

The bible tells us that Heaven will be a place of reunions, where we will see our loved ones who have gone on before us; it tells us that Heaven is a place for rewards, where the righteous will be rewarded for their lives on earth; scripture tells us that Heaven will be a place of rest, where we will no longer have to struggle against sin and all of the pain it cause; and the Bible tells us that heaven will be a place where the radiance of God will shine so brightly that we will need no other light. It will be a glorious place of wonder and worship.

But while scripture paints a beautiful picture of heaven, it is equally descriptive of the horrors of Hell. Hell is a place of eternal torment and pain.

The Bible has more to say about hell than it does heaven. To deny the reality of hell is to deny the infallibility of the word of God. That there is an eternal hell where the wicked will be tormented forever and ever is not a religious fable used to scare the wicked into becoming religious people, Hell is taught over and over again in the Bible.

In the Old Testament the word Sheol is translated Hell or Hades, sometimes it is the grave, the world after death. It is sometimes translated "Abaddon," or a place of destruction. In the Old Testament Hell is described as a place of finality from which there is no return.

- **Job 10:21-22** tells us that Hell is a place of Darkness
- **Psalms 143:3** designates Hell as a place of the dead
- **Psalms 115:17** says Hell is a place of silence where no one can praise God.
- **Psalms 139:** pictures hell as a place of continued existence not annihilation

In the New Testament Hell is always referred to as a place of Divine judgment.

**Revelation 20:13-15** says, "Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."

God's judgment and wrath are part of His righteous nature. If there is no Hell, then there is no punishment for sin, and if there is no punishment for sin, then God is not just and we do not need a Savior, and if we don't need a Savior Jesus died in vain and if Jesus died in vain then He was a fool and we of all men are to be pitied because we have placed our faith in someone who was not who He said He was and did not do what He said He could do and did not come for the reason He claimed to have come and cannot give us what He said He could give us. All the other major biblical doctrines hinge on the fact that there is a hell to shun and a heaven to gain.

Knowing these things are true, that God is sovereign over all creation and that at the appointed day, the trumpet will sound and the skies will unfold, Jesus will return, the dead will be resurrected, some to eternal life and some to eternal retribution, knowing that it will happen when we least expect it.....knowing all this...What impact should this knowledge have on our lives? If we really believed it, if we truly thought that Jesus could come back today, it stands to reason that it should impact our lives profoundly.

## **II. How Shall We Then Live?**

According to a Gallop poll, 81 percent of Americans believe in heaven and 70 percent believe in hell. An earlier Gallup Poll found that 77 percent of Americans were optimistic about making it to heaven. Very few saw themselves as headed to hell.

You don't need a pollster to tell you what most Christians believe about the second coming of Jesus; all you must do is watch how they live their lives. Most Christians profess to believe that He will return someday, but most of them are truly not expecting it to be any day soon. The truth of the matter is, the church has lost its sense of expectancy; it has lost the anticipation which characterized the faith of their Christian forefathers.

Considering the truth that Jesus could come back at any time, how shall we then live? This is the question Peter asks in **2 Peter 3:11** when he asks, "**Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people should you be in holy conduct and godliness as you wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of the God.....?**"

The scripture is filled with exhortations about how to live till Jesus returns. There are two groups of people to whom this speaks. The first message is addressed to Christians, to those who know the Lord.

## A. Live with Eternity in View

**1Thessalonians 5:8** tells us to be self-controlled and alert, knowing that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. This means that we cannot go on living like our lost neighbors. We cannot live as though this life is all there is. This life, as C.S. Lewis said, is the vestibule to eternity. It is the foyer to forever, what we do here, whether we are truly followers of Christ or merely those who say Lord, Lord but fail to do the will of the Father, all of that will be shown here on this earth.

But, says Paul, if we are truly believers, if Jesus has really redeemed us and filled us with His Spirit, we must live with the kind of awareness and self-control which speaks of our readiness for His return. **2 Peter 3:14** says, "**Therefore beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless, and blameless . . .**" Live with eternity in view, knowing that the end is nearer than we think.

## B. Make the Most of Your Time

**Ephesians 5:15-16** tells us that we should make the most of our time, walking in wisdom, because the days we live in are evil. Knowing that Jesus is coming should motivate us to live everyday as though this day was the day of His return. In **John 9:4** Jesus says, "**We must do the works of Him who sent Me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.**" This is the impetus behind our great missionary mandate. This is the motivation behind sharing our faith both here and abroad. The day is coming when the last tract will have been shared, the last sermon preached, and the last invitation given. The day is coming when the last chance to be saved will have come and gone. We must work while the sun shines for night comes when no man can work.

## C. Live in Anticipation of His Return

In **Matthew 24:12** Jesus says that before His return, many will not look for Him to come again because of iniquity, the love of many will have grown cold. Does this not characterize the religion of many who claim to be Christians today? They have a form of godliness but they have no power in their lives. They have no power over sin, they have no power of discipline in their Christian walk, they have no power over the impulses or desires of the flesh, they are not walking in fellowship with God, filled with His Spirit and in the flow of His plan. Like a frog in a pot of hot water, their temperature has adjusted to the world around them and their love for the Lord and the things of God has grown cold.

Should not our attitude be that of Paul's in **Philippians 3:20** when he says, "**But our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...**"

Our prayer should be that of John the apostle in **Revelation 22:20** when he says, "**Amen, Come Lord Jesus.**" We should live in anticipation of His return.

But there is another group to whom this message is addressed; it is spoken to those who have no certainty or peace about their eternal home. It is addressed to those who not sure where they will spend eternity.

Again, **Revelation 22** has a message for you. **Verse 17** says, "**Both the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And the one who is thirsty should come. Whoever desires should take the living water as a gift.**"

### **Conclusion**

What about you? Are you ready for Jesus to return? Do you know where you will spend eternity? Are you living everyday as though it were the last day? Can others notice this in the things you say and do? What will you say to Jesus when you stand before Him? What if it were today?