

Personal Eschatology with a Focus on the Believer

Eschatology can be defined as the study of the end times, or final things. The term is rooted in the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning, last times. It can be further broken down into two parts; general eschatology and personal eschatology. Thiessen defines these two branches of eschatology as so,

‘General eschatology covers the sweep of future events from the return of Jesus Christ on to the creation of the new heavens and new earth. Personal eschatology relates to the individual from the time of physical death until he receives his resurrection body.’.

This paper aims to detail the latter of the distinctions, personal eschatology. This being so, when first discussing death, it will be focused on physical death, rather than spiritual death or eternal death which would be better discussed under the banner of general eschatology.

Being finite creations, we will all experience a physical death. Our bodies were not made to live eternally in their current state, simply evidenced by the fact there are no double-centurians in our midst. The oldest recorded and fully authenticated human life in modern times was one hundred and twenty two years, one hundred and sixty four days. Therefore, personal eschatology is something that will certainly affect every one of us, and is consequently something of the utmost importance to us. The Bible describes physical death as a judgement, a curse, and the separation of body and soul (Ecclesiastes.12.7, Acts 7.59,

Romans 1.32, 5.16). Possibly the most interesting of these referenced verses is Ecclesiastes 12.7, which says,

‘and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.’ (ESV).

Here we read plainly and simply, our bodies have a finite end coming in which they return to the dust of the earth from which the Lord God formed them (Genesis 2.7), and our spirit returns to God.

The physical death can be brought about by many sources and can happen for a variety of reasons. Clinically and medically, we could proffer the definition of death as the absence of a heartbeat, the absence of brain activity, or the absence of vital signs.

Interestingly, all the aforementioned definitions include something missing, rather than the presence of something measurable.

However, to define death from a spiritual perspective rather than a clinical one, we may say that physical death is a separation of body and soul.

Death, for the regenerate Christian who has put their faith in Christ, is simply a part of the process, so to speak, an entrance into the presence of our Lord and Saviour. Through His wonderful and conquering sacrifice on the cross, we are able to look at death as one more stop our train must take on the journey to our final destination as believers, being with Him forever.

Contrastingly, for the unbeliever death brings a far less glory-filled experience. Rather than coming into the presence of Jesus Christ, the unbeliever faces condemnation, eternal judgement, and separation from the Lord (John 3.36).

Following the physical death we all must experience is the intermediate state. This can be defined as the ‘...condition of humans between their death and the resurrection.’. A clear and simple definition, then; the time between our aforementioned physical death, and the glorious resurrection of believers.

On this intermediate state between physical death and the resurrection of believers John writes about in Revelation 20.4-5, Theologian Millard J. Erickson writes this, ‘The doctrine of the intermediate state is an issue that is both very significant and problematic...[because there is a] relative scarcity of biblical references to the intermediate state.’.

The soul, being immortal and therefore not subject to the inevitable physical decline and death our body is, continues to live on. First and foremost, we can say that the soul of the regenerate, Christ-believing, faith-filled person goes to be with our Lord and Saviour, Jesus. This should fill the believer with hope, joy and peace in equal measure.

In Philippians 1.23 Paul writes, ‘I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.’ (ESV). From his writing, we can see that Paul had no doubt that upon closing his eyes in death, he would open them in the presence of His Lord and Saviour. On this, David Guzik writes,

‘Paul probably had many motivations to depart...he would finally be done with sin and temptation...he would see those brothers and sisters who had gone to heaven before him. Most of all, going to heaven meant being with Christ in a closer and better way than ever before.’.

From this passage of Scripture we see that death is not made out to be tremendously better than life, meaning we should go and seek it out (Philippians 1.21-22), but that when

death does happen for us all, we are going to experience something that leads us to Christ (v.23).

Even though the Lord has blessed us with life abundant here on earth (John 10.10), we read that this intermediate state, being in the presence of Christ, ‘...is a condition to be preferred above the present state.’

This intermediate state is not to be confused with the rapture and glorification that will occur when only He knows, as this will be preferable to the intermediate state, which in turn is, as Paul writes, preferable to the current human condition (2 Corinthians 5.2-3). From this we can see a clear chronology of events; physical death, followed by the intermediate state, followed by resurrection and judgement.

Writer Sam Storms puts it this way,

‘In summary: the intermediate state for the Christian is immediate transition upon death into the presence of Christ during which time we experience holiness (no longer being at war with the flesh, although final glorification awaits the resurrection), happiness, a heightened sense of consciousness, and knowledge of Christ in its fullest. For the non-Christians a heightened sense of consciousness, but one of torment, agony, irreversible separation from Christ (Luke 16).’

To further support the soul’s conscious survival after the physical death we all will experience, we can gather theological evidence. Both the nature of human beings and the nature of God can be used to substantiate this claim, that the soul lives on after the mortal body has died.

First, we can confidently state that God is able to maintain the soul after the body cannot; He is creator, sustainer, and omnipotent, therefore surely able. However, as Geisler writes,

‘...simply that God *can* cause the soul to survive does not mean He *will* - there must be sufficient cause for His doing so. That is rooted in His good will...God wills to keep the soul alive...because of His mercies...’.

Further, we can assert that the soul lives on from the words of Genesis 1.27, ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’ (ESV).

This reason is, as Geisler writes, anthropological, and stems from the verse above; we are made in His image. This being so, we are made by God, in God’s image, and therefore for God to destroy the truly individual part of us that resembles Him the most would be tantamount to God destroying Himself. Logically this idea simply does not compute.

Clear, then, that the intermediate state is a real, positive and logically proven stage on the journey of the believer from earthly mother to heavenly Father.

Following on from this intermediate state is the resurrection of the body. The intermediate state will be a joyful experience for the believer, but it is still incomplete. The Bible very clearly teaches that those who believe in the name of Jesus will be resurrected and glorified (John 5.28-29, Romans 8.11, 1 Corinthians 15.12-58, 2 Corinthians 5.1-10).

As a quick note of comparison, Jesus Christ Himself took on a human body and was resurrected in it, contrary to heretical teachings that confuse His two natures in one body, such as docetism, arianism and nestorianism, to name but three. The fact that Christ was

resurrected in His human body gives credence to the notion that we are to be resurrected in our own earthly bodies, initially.

Geisler writes on the resurrections, ‘There is overwhelming biblical support for the bodily resurrection of all human beings...one [for] the saved...and [one for] the unsaved...’.

The resurrection, physically, of believers seems to occur immediately before Jesus returns to reign on earth for one thousand years, His millennial reign. 1 Corinthians 15.21-26 is illuminating on this point,

‘For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also **in Christ shall all be made alive**. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then **at his coming those who belong to Christ**. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.’ (ESV, emphasis added).

From this we can infer that those who died in Christ, as fully regenerate believers during their earthly lives, will reign with Him during the millennium, as the chronology present in the passage clearly shows that believers are raised prior to the millennium.

Further strengthening this point is Revelation chapter twenty, which states,

‘Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. **They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.** This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who

shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and **they will reign with him for a thousand years.**' (ESV, emphasis added).

Again, quite clear that those who are raised physically in the first resurrection, having been in the intermediate state with Christ following their physical death, will reign with Him during His millennium.

As with the continuing existence of our souls post-physical death, we can assert theologically that we will be raised bodily. God's omnipotence allows Him to create life, maintain life, but also resurrect life. This was evidenced through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

However, just as with the prolonging of the soul, just because God can raise the dead does not mean He will. Without a benevolent, all loving, all good Father in heaven, there is no hope for us. On this, and with thanksgiving in heart, Geisler writes, 'Were it not for His mercy, His justice would allow the punishment of death to go unreversed. Thanks be to God's omnibenevolence, for on it's foundation He is moved to redeem us both in soul and body.'

Clear, then, that God is able to raise us from the dead to reign with Christ in His millennium, but also willing.

To again draw from the words of Genesis 1.27, God must certainly resurrect us bodily from our physical death as we are made in His image. To leave us dead and decaying would be to give up on His image, to allow His image to be less than perfect. This idea is simply contrary to the character of God the Bible so clearly details.

To summarise thus far, as human beings we must all endure a physical death. From this point, regenerate believers will go on to be with Christ in the intermediate state, which, as discussed, is preferable to the current human condition. This is, however, not comparable to the next stage of the process, the coming physical and bodily resurrection of believers and the millennial reign of Christ on earth.

The final stage for the regenerate believer and unbeliever alike is the final judgement. As Erickson writes, ‘For those who are in Christ, it is something to look forward to, for it will vindicate their lives.’.

As with the previous eschatological elements discussed above, the final judgement takes place in the future, and is as certain to come as physical death, the intermediate state and the resurrections. In Matthew 11.24 Jesus Himself referenced the final judgement, ‘But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.’” (ESV). The Apostle Paul also referenced the final judgement in Acts 17.31.

As with many other things that He could accomplish perfectly well without our help, Scripture points us toward thinking that Jesus will share the work of the final judgement with believers. Revelation 20.5 alludes to this, as does 1 Corinthians 6.2-3.

This, however, does not remove us as believers from the judgement itself. As Paul writes in Romans 14.10, we will all stand before God to be judged. The comfort and confidence-inducing fact here for the fully regenerate believer in Christ is that, even though our sins will be brought before God and as we stand for judgement, those sins will be presented as forgiven due to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf.

As one would expect from something titled ‘the final judgment’, it's finality is assured, and there is no returning from this point. Both sets of people, those judged righteous

due to faith in Christ and those judged unrighteous, will be sent to their respective places (Matthew 25.46).

In conclusion, everything detailed above is certain to come, either due to the explicit teaching of the infallible and inerrant Word of God, or due to the logical and rational corollaries we can draw from the teachings of Scripture. For those who have placed faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the physical death, the intermediate state, the resurrection and the final judgement should induce no apprehension.

On the contrary, it should steel the resolve for living in the here and now, it should cause the believer to overflow with thankfulness and gratefulness due to the certainty they hold about the future. It should cause the believer to be able to minister to a grieving brother or sister in Christ, and it should light a fire inside for them to reach those around them with the good news of Jesus Christ.

For a final word on the personal eschatology detailed in this paper, Erickson writes, ‘In view of the certainty of the [the eschaton], it is imperative that we act in accordance with the will of God.’

For a final word on the response of the fully regenerate believer to the personal eschatology presented in this paper, it is hard to look past the words of Revelation 22.20b, ‘Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’.

References

- End times* | *Theopedia*. (2017). *Theopedia.com*. Retrieved 10 October 2017, from <http://www.theopedia.com/end-times>
- Erickson, M. (2013). *Christian theology*. (Third Edition). Michigan: Baker Academic.
- Geisler, N. (2011). *Systematic theology*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House.
- Guzik, D. (2006). *Study Guide for Philippians 1 by David Guzik. Blue Letter Bible*. Retrieved 17 October 2017, from https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/archives/guzik_david/studyguide_phl/phl_1.cfm
- Herrick, G. (2004). *9. Eschatology: End Times*. Retrieved 10 October 2017, from <https://bible.org/seriespage/9-eschatology-end-times>
- Individual Eschatology*. (2014). *The Disciplined Order of Christ*. Retrieved 17 October 2017, from <https://dochr.org/2014/05/12/individual-eschatology/>
- Oldest person ever*. (2017). *Guinness World Records*. Retrieved 28 October 2017, from <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/oldest-person>

Riddlebarger, K. (2017). *What Happens after Death (and before Resurrection)* (Kim Riddlebarger). *Crossway.org*. Retrieved 10 October 2017, from <https://www.crossway.org/articles/what-happens-after-death-and-before-resurrection/>

Storms, S. *Individual Eschatology: Death, The Intermediate State, Resurrection, and Judgment*. *Sam Storms: Oklahoma City, OK*. Retrieved 10 October 2017, from <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/individual-eschatology:-death--the-intermediate-state--resurrection--and-judgment>

Thiessen, H., & Doerksen, V. (2006). *Lectures in systematic theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.