

The End, and Life after Death (Eschatology)

Session Outline

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 - a. Jesus will accomplish the final victory over Satan, sin, and evil
 - b. God will establish a new, eternal heaven and earth
 - c. Believers will be united with God in His New Creation

Say Over the course of this series, we have explored the core doctrines or beliefs of Christianity. So far, we've taken a look at the Bible (bibliology), God (theology), man (anthropology), Jesus (Christology), the Gospel and salvation (soteriology), the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), angels (angelology) and the Church (ecclesiology). We culminate the series with a look at the what the Bible reveals about the end of life and the onset of life after death. *Eschatology* is the study of death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind. This final conversation will offer an overview of these topics and will distinguish between what is essential to understand and what is subject to debate and discussion.

Ask Briefly, what do you think happens to a person's spirit at death? From what do you draw your conclusions? What are some other views about life after death? (*discuss*)

Death – The Universal Experience

Say History and experience agrees, every person faces death. It's important to understand why death happens, as well as what happens at the time of death. To review, death is the consequence of sin, warned by God prior to the first disobedience, and then imputed upon humans:

And to Adam he said... "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:17, 19)

Ask What scares, concerns or intimidates you most about death? (*discuss*)

Say While the inevitability of death is a serious matter, it is vital to see that Jesus taught that death is necessary. Jesus connected death with the Gospel, sharing the good news that faith in Him is the only way to overcome death:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is

old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:1-5)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Say: Without death, humanity would remain perpetually separated from God because of sin. Death, then, is best seen as the necessary event that affords a person the opportunity to be reconciled back to God.

Ask Considering these verses together, what does it mean to you to be "born again?" (*discuss*)

After Death: Judgment

Say Death is the event that brings every person into the presence of God for judgment because while God's love is available to all people, it is not automatic (since, as John 3:16 explains, an individual belief in Jesus is required as a saving response to the atoning love of God offered universally to the world, without prejudice or favoritism). The Scriptures describe the judgment experience this way:

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27)

The Bible teaches that two categories of judgments await every person, following the event of death:

The Judgment of Faith

The Scriptures indicate that the immediate initial judgment administered by God will be a judgment of your faith. Ephesians 2:8-10 reminds us that it is by the grace of God alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, that a person is saved from the penalty of sin because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. The person who trusts in Jesus for this forgiveness of sin and the promise of heaven and life everlasting in the presence of Jesus receives the Holy Spirit as God's guarantee of inheritance of these divine promises (see Ephesians 1:13-14). When one of the two thieves being crucified along with Jesus proclaimed his desperate faith in Jesus, the Lord gave a solemn promise:

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

The thief's experience beautifully illustrates the Scriptural promise:

if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:9-13)

Every person will, at life's end, experience the following truth, regarding where their faith was placed while living:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Ask What are some other things in which people put their faith, in an attempt to have right standing with God? (*discuss – answers may include: good works, charity, church attendance, pious acts, avoidance of sin, and others*)

Say The person whose faith is in Jesus will, at the end of life, experience the heavenly reward of being included in the presence of God forever. Conversely, the person whose faith is in anything else will experience the eternally lamentable consequence of being separated from God forever.

Ask What questions do you have regarding the judgment of your faith (*discuss – don't feel obligated to answer questions at this time, as subsequent material may address questions or concerns voiced here*)

The Judgment of Works

Say Following God's judgment of a person's faith, God will also judge every person's deeds done while living. While there is not agreement about when this judgment occurs (either concurrently with the judgment on faith, or subsequent to it at a later point in history), the Scriptures are clear that such a judgment occurs for all people:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. (Revelation 20:11-13)

Though all people will experience a judgment of their works, the rationale and outcome of those are different for believers and nonbelievers, respectively.

Believers' Works are Rewarded

Those who, while living, trusted Christ and were filled by God's Holy Spirit to accomplish works ordained by God to fulfill His divine purpose:

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

Ask What are some works that you've done that you anticipate will be rewarded? (*Discuss. Help group members understand that **anything** done in response to the Holy Spirit's leading, in the Holy Spirit's power, will be rewarded. Any prayer, any worship, any service to others—anything—that the Spirit initiates and accomplishes through a Believer will be work that He rewards.*)

What are some works that you anticipate will not be rewarded? (*Discuss. Help group members understand that **anything** done apart or independent from the Holy Spirit will not be rewarded, because it will be tainted or corrupted by human sin.*)

Nonbelievers' Works are Condemned

Say While human nature inclines us to applaud other peoples' best efforts of selflessness and sacrifice, we cannot comprehend God's unique position of sinless holiness in His judgment of the works of unbelievers. To a holy God, even the best, most admirable actions cannot be separated from the sinful nature of the person who performed the otherwise-good deeds. The prophet Isaiah explained the problem this way:

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Isaiah 64:6)

Know What You Believe about the End, and life after death (Eschatology)
(All Scriptures ESV unless otherwise noted)

Unfortunately, when the unbeliever stands before God in judgment, they don't have faith that can be rewarded. The only thing that can be judged is their works, which are also unfortunately corrupted by their sin, the payment for which has not been satisfied by their deeds done in life:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12-15)

Ask What stands out to you about the judgment of works of the unbeliever, as explained in this passage? (*discuss*)

The Onset of Eternity

Say There are many events revealed in the Bible regarding "end times," or the end of the world as it currently exists. There is much discussion, debate, or disagreement about several of these details, regarding the timing, sequence, or even real or allegorical nature of these different aspects. While these details are all important and worthy of your individual (or community) investigation and understanding, the following details are essential to understand:

Jesus will Accomplish Final Victory over Satan, Sin, & Evil (*read*)

*And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever... 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.... But as for the cowardly, **the faithless**, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (Revelation 20:10, 14-15; 21:8, emphasis added)*

Say Because unbelievers reject God's gracious forgiveness for their sins, their faithlessness is itself identified as a condemnable rebellion, and they will be separated from God forever in the place of torment designed for Satan and all the demons (the rebellious fallen angels who were cast from heaven).

Ask What is your reaction to read that Satan and the demons will be tormented in hell, and will not be authorities or agents inflicting torment there? (*discuss*)

God will Establish a New, Eternal Heaven & Earth (*read*)

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.... Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, **I am making all things new.**" Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 20:11; 21:1-5, emphasis added)*

Say With the onset of eternity, God will restore everything back to its original design. Everything that was corrupted by sin will be done away with, including the cursed earth (see Genesis 3:17). He makes all things new, completely free from the stain of sin.

Ask What aspect of these passages stands out to you? (*discuss*)

Believers will be Eternally United with God in His New Creation (*read*)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5)

Say Heaven and eternal life are incredible promises from God to the believer. The best part of heaven is being with God Himself. Heaven without God would be no heaven at all. Yet, God in His goodness has determined to overcome all the dire consequences of sin, and reconcile fallen man back to Himself, to dwell with Him personally, forever. It is impossible to exaggerate His amazing grace and goodness!

Ask What feelings do you have, anticipating an everlasting experience of being in the physical presence of God, completely free of sin? (*discuss*)

What do you sense God's Spirit revealing to you about your life now and until your final judgment? (*discuss*)

Say: Over this series, we have surveyed the core doctrines and essential beliefs of Christianity. We hope you will consider this a point of beginning in your spiritual journey with God and not a "finish line." These conversations are intended to pique your interest in spiritual truth to lead you to explore more about the truths of God revealed in the Bible. May your journey continue, and your relationship thrive as you seek to walk by faith in Jesus, worshiping Him in spirit and in truth!

Close in prayer with and for one another, making sure to attend to the needs of your group, planning for serving together, or other details relevant to the group. Confirm with your group members your next time and location to meet.