

SESSION 21: History's Final Chapter

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 151-154

WCF	WLC	WSC
32-33	84-90	37-38

Introduction

In the ancient words of Psalm 90.2, Moses writes, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” In our studies in the confessional standards thus far, we have explored what Scripture teaches us about eternity past, the universe as it now stands, and our life therein. Now, in this final session, we turn to what the Bible and our standards teach about eternity future... history’s final chapter.

The Great Divorce

The greatest dividing line in the human race is not between those of different languages or skin color, but rather between the ‘righteous’ and the ‘wicked.’ In terms of their physical death, there may appear to be little difference: “the bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption.” Nevertheless, “their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.” It is at this point of *everlasting, personal consciousness after death*, that the great divorce between the righteous and wicked becomes clear – for it is then that “the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect of holiness, are received into the highest heavens... And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day,” (WCF 32.1).

We see this division illustrated for us dramatically in our Lord’s account²⁵⁰ of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16.19-31). Both men suffer physical death, and afterwards each man experiences continued personal consciousness – Lazarus at rest in heaven, the rich man in torment in hell. Note two things about this passage. Firstly, that a “great chasm has been fixed” (v. 26) between heaven and hell over which there is no bridge. Secondly, that there is no third place between the two: “Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none,” (WCF 32.1). The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory finds no support in the biblical text.

This terrifying doctrine of eternal punishment is one of the chief objections raised by skeptics. How can a loving God punish people forever? Isn’t that cruel? Reflecting on these things, Packer writes:

These things are, no doubt, unimaginably dreadful... but they are not arbitrary inflictions; they represent, rather, a conscious growing into the state in which one has chosen to be. The unbeliever has preferred to be by himself, without God, defying God, having God against him, and he shall have his preference. Nobody stands under the wrath of God except those who have chosen to do so. The essence of God’s action in wrath is to *give men what they choose*, in all its implications: nothing more, and equally nothing less. God’s readiness to respect human choice to this extent may appear disconcerting and even terrifying, but it is plain that his attitude here is supremely just – and is poles apart from the wanton and irresponsible inflicting of pain which is what we mean by cruelty.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ We would do well to note that this account is *not* referred to as a parable.

²⁵¹ Packer, *Knowing God*, 153. See also the excellent chapter on this objection in Keller, *Reason for God*.

Packer's point is crucial. The skeptical objection to hell is based upon two premises. The first is that *eternal felicity is possible apart from God*. Since Eden, man in his rebellion has wanted heaven without God. But there is no such place. Eternity presents man with only two options: God's presence or God's absence. As our confession notes: "then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the *presence of the Lord*; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the *presence of the Lord*," (WCF 33.2, emphasis added).

But why must hell be so... *hellish*? Hell must be literal because those who choose God's absence *must have it consistently* – and that means an eternity without life, light, or any restraint on God's wrath. Eternity apart from God cannot contain anything good. Why? Because "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights," (Jas 1.17; cf. Ps 16.2).

The distinction between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' is not a matter of our *moral performance* in this life, but rather a matter of our *legal standing* before God. Those who trust in Christ have been *categorized* among the righteous by definitive sanctification.²⁵² Likewise, the 'wicked' are those "who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ" – and thus manifest their desire for everlasting separation from God. Thus the difference between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked' is not a question of who has *done* evil (Eccl 7.20, Rom 3.23), but rather who is *defined* by it. It is the difference between grace *accepted* or *refused*.

This note of refusal answers the second premise of the skeptic's objection, which assumes that *nobody wants to be in hell*. But what do we see in the account in Luke? Does the rich man express any remorse for his life of selfish indifference to God and others? Even his appeals (vv. 24, 27) are essentially self-centered and amount to making Lazarus his servant. Note finally how he argues with Abraham – even if hell, the rich man is *still trying to play God* – he's still giving orders to heaven (v. 30). Tim Keller describes hell as "the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.... [it is] simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God onto a trajectory into infinity."²⁵³ C.S. Lewis notes: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desire joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened."²⁵⁴

The Public Tribunal

In addition to articulating the great divorce between the righteous and the wicked after death, our standards also speak of the public judgment that awaits all people at the end of history. A last day in the story of this world is coming, at which "such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies... which shall be united again to their souls forever," (WCF 32.2). On this day, God "judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ... not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil," (WCF 33.1).

²⁵² See previous discussion under "Sanctification is Identification" in session 14.

²⁵³ Keller, *Reason for God*, 77-78.

²⁵⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 69.

The purpose of the Day of Judgment is “for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient,” (WCF 33.2). Reflecting on this, Leon Morris writes:

The doctrine of final judgment... stresses man’s accountability and the certainty that justice will finally triumph over all the wrongs which are part and parcel of life here and now. The former gives a dignity to the humblest action, the latter brings calmness and assurance to those in the thick of the battle. This doctrine gives meaning to life.... the Christian view of judgment means that history moves to a goal.... Judgment protects the idea of the triumph of God and good. It is unthinkable that this present conflict between good and evil should last throughout eternity. Judgment means that evil will be disposed of authoritatively, decisively, finally. Judgment means that in the end God’s will will be perfectly done.²⁵⁵

Our standards reflect in detail upon what will befall both the righteous and the wicked at the tribunal of God (WLC 89-90, WSC 38). Regarding the former, a question is sometimes raised as to what is meant by “openly acknowledged and acquitted” (WLC 90, WSC 38). In what sense are the righteous ‘acquitted’, when they have already received pardon and acceptance at justification (WSC 33) – and when they arrive at the judgment as those considered ‘righteous’?

On this question, some theologians have strayed into an erroneous distinction between ‘initial’ and “final justification” of the righteous. Commenting on James 2.14-26, Douglas Moo writes:

James does not deny that Abraham was given a righteous standing with God on the basis of his faith, long before he offered Isaac in obedience to God. But he wants to emphasize that Abraham’s faith was a vital, active faith and that God’s verdict was reconfirmed on the basis of that activity. The initial declaration of righteousness on the basis of faith is given its ultimate meaning and validity through the final declaration of righteousness on the basis of a ‘faith that works.’²⁵⁶

This approach is significantly problematic. First, it mutates justification from a divine act (WSC 33) into a maintained state. Second, it stands in conflict with Scriptures that teach us that justification occurs at the moment of faith (Lk 15.10, 18.14) and that believers arrive at the final judgment in a justified state (Mt 25.33, Acts 24.15).

On the contrary, the language of “acknowledged and acquitted” refers not to final justification, but to *public vindication*. Theologian Francis Turretin explains it this:

The sentence to be pronounced by the supreme Judge will not be so much a new justification, as the solemn and public declaration of a sentence once passed and its execution by the assignment of the life promised with respect to an innocent person from the preceding justification. Thus it is nothing else than an adjudicatory sentence of the possession of the kingdom of heaven from the right given before through justification. And if works are then brought forward, they are not adduced as the foundation of a new justification to be obtained then, but as signs, marks, and effects of our true faith and of our justification solely by it.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 72.

²⁵⁶ Douglas Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 117-118.

²⁵⁷ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 16.10.8 (vol. 2, p. 687).

Pastoral Cautions & Comforts

Before concluding our study of the intermediate state and the final judgment, we should note both the caution and the comfort in our standards.

The caution respects the timing of the world's end. On this point, our standards are clear that God will "that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen," (WCF 33.3). The moment a person begins to think they can predict the date of the world's end, they have departed from the words of our Lord himself: "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," (Mk 13.32).

The comfort respects the believer's experience of death. In one of the most pastoral moments in our standards, WLC 85 explains why believers, whose sins are forgiven, still die: "The righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it; so that, although they die, yet it is out of God's love, to free them perfectly from sin and misery, and to make them capable of further communion with Christ, in glory, which they then enter upon."

When we or those under our pastoral care struggle with the justice of a believer's death, we would do well to remember what is in store for those who are in Christ. They go not to a world of darkness and loss, but to a world of love – a world without goodbyes. In one of the most poignant endings ever written in fiction, C.S. Lewis concludes the final volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia* with this description of "Aslan's country":

For us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.²⁵⁸

Who among us can really imagine a life in which we are unable to sin – even in our thoughts? Yet in Christ, it is it is thither that we go. "We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*."²⁵⁹ What shall we say to these things? "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22.20).

Important Questions

1. Given the enormity of eternal punishment, should a Christian ever engage in "hell jokes"?
2. In his essay "The Weight of Glory," Lewis reminds us, "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."²⁶⁰ How should the reality of final judgment inform how we treat both our brother and our neighbor?

Additional Resources:

Keller, *The Reason for God*, "How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?"

²⁵⁸ Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 184.

²⁵⁹ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949),

²⁶⁰ Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 15.