

THE FUTURE OF EVERYTHING

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Essential Truths about the End Times

William Boekestein



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The Future of Everything

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To my brothers
Nate, Jeremy, John,
and the many other “Bible Study Men”
over the years—dear friends and
fellow anticipators of Jesus’s glorious return.

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Preface

The Anglican poet John Donne (1572–1631) was once ravished with a fever that he feared might kill him. From his sickbed he could hear the sounds of a funeral. In fact, his home was close enough to the church that he could hear the psalm sung by the congregation; as best he could, he joined in the singing. But the funeral bells affected him most. Later he wrote, “I hear this dead brother of ours, who is now carried out to his burial, to speak to me, and to preach my funeral sermon in the voice of these bells. In him, O God, thou hast accomplished to me even the request of [the rich man] to Abraham; thou hast sent one from the dead to speak unto me.” Confronted by thoughts of his own mortality, Donne prayed to God that if his fever were fatal he would die, “drowned...in the blood of thy Son; and if I live longer, yet I may now die the death of the righteous, die to sin; which death is a resurrection to a new life.”¹

Donne’s experience illustrates the benefit of reflecting on the end of life as we know it. Thinking about our end can help us live well—and die well. Especially in our day, with low infant mortality rates, long life spans, and a medical model that typically removes dying people from society, we need to seize—and sometimes create—opportunities to focus on our end. And if we

1. John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Death’s Duel* (New York: Random House, 1999), 100–101.

understand human death as a sign that even “the heavens will pass away,” the whole world will be laid bare, and “all these things will be dissolved” (2 Peter 3:10–11), then we also need to give thought to the end of everything.

We need eschatology. With God’s help, that snooty, foreign-sounding word can introduce to us a world of comfort, for this age and the age to come.

Thanks to Will Hesterberg and his ministry partners at ITEM (item.org) for inviting me to teach a modular course on eschatology at Mihael Starin Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. While preparing those lectures I also preached through the themes of the last things in my home congregation, Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I have been greatly helped both by the input from beloved congregants during several sermon discussion meetings and by the spirited questions and conversations over these themes with the students in Croatia. An earlier form of some of these chapters appeared in the *Outlook*, the bimonthly publication of Reformed Fellowship, and are published here with permission.

I am extremely grateful for John “Jack” Jeffery’s careful reading of the manuscript and his numerous grammatical, literary, and theological suggestions. Sue Verschoof also helped catch a number of typos. A special thanks to David, Jay, Joel, Steve, and the rest of the amazing team at Reformation Heritage Books. I am privileged to serve alongside excellent elders at Immanuel who have a vision for the church that extends beyond our congregation and who, therefore, generously encouraged me in this project.

Thank you Hazel, Mina, Evangelia, Asher, and especially Amy for helping to fill my life with love, joy, adventure, and anticipation as we journey together closer to that last day.

PART ONE

INTRODUCING ESCHATOLOGY

Why Should I Study the End Times?

Eschatology, the study of the last things, is a fancy word for something we all already do. All of us think about the end. Yes, our culture and our fears push to the periphery thoughts of our death and the life hereafter. But count on it: at some point in your life, you are going to agonize over what will happen to you after you breathe your last. You can't attend a funeral—whether of a religious or nonreligious person—without hearing somebody's eschatology or their concept of what happens after death. We are all eschatologists. But that doesn't mean we always engage the end times well. In at least three ways we could go wrong in this most basic theological discipline.

First, we are tempted to engage in speculative eschatology. When end-times study is not rooted in Scripture, it becomes vain dreaming, the dogmatization of our wishes. In a time of unfathomable suffering and pain, Job asked his mostly well-meaning friends, "How then will you comfort me with empty nothings? There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood" (Job 21:34 ESV). When it comes to matters of eternal life and death we need more than "empty nothings." We need more than traditional religious rituals and mantras that suggest, sometimes superficially, that the best is yet to come. The effervescent goal of living a decent life falls pitifully short of guaranteeing a blessed eternity. Vague wishes of a better afterlife are impotent to deliver solid hope. Speculative eschatology is a sign of biblical illiteracy and

spiritual immaturity. When it comes to the end times, we need to put childish ways behind us and listen to what God says.

Second, we should beware of argumentative eschatology. For some of us the very topic of the end times is off-putting because it can be such a contentious issue. Some of us have felt our Christianity questioned by those who have a different concept of the end. But surely God does not peel back the curtains of future history, giving us a glimpse into the staggering profundity of death and judgment or the glorious return of the King of Heaven that we might contend with other Christians over how things will work out. It is certainly possible—and necessary—to distinguish between two conflicting end-times views without needlessly blustering about the perceived superiority of one's own view.

Third, we must avoid *avoiding* eschatology. It sounds pious to say, "I don't think much about the last things. I know God is in control. I'll leave it up to Him."¹ Is eschatology even necessary? Isn't it enough to simply trust that God will work everything out in the end? Should we not approach this topic with the attitude of David, who said, "Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me" (Ps. 131:1)? In reality, Scripture teaches us to develop what some have called an "apocalyptic spirituality"² in which we so deeply sense the dawning of the age to come that we begin to realize its wonder in this present age. The apostle Peter captures in a single phrase Scripture's unified application of eschatology. In light of God's plan to dissolve and purify the cosmos he asks, "What manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11).

1. For a reflection on modern apathy on eschatological themes, see Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 317–19.

2. See, for example, Bernard McGinn, ed., *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-en-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spiritualists, Savonarola*, The Classics of Western Spirituality: A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979).

With Peter, Jesus (Mark 13:35–37) and Paul (1 Thess. 5:6) call God’s people to respond to the coming of the end with watchful sobriety. The same emphasis is found in Hebrews 10:25. Seeing “the Day approaching” ought to strengthen our hope, devote us to worship, and galvanize us in our expressions of love and good works. If Christ is returning, if His judgment will be eternal, and if hell is as terrible as heaven is delectable, then studying the end times is eminently practical. Those who lose sight of the end can become careless in their conduct and arrogant in their rejection of God (see 2 Peter 3:1–7). By contrast, a biblical eschatology provides a rationale for ethics that goes deeper than pragmatic concerns. With God’s help eschatology can chill our blood at the thought of sin and judgment, and it can warm our hearts with God’s gracious work of redemption.

God invites us to meditate on the future, not to speculate or altercate but to better share His perspective on this life and the life to come. And this is how we should study the topic. The way Scripture and the church’s historic confessions teach eschatology is much more like gazing upon a dazzling sunset than analyzing and describing the chemical properties of the sun.³ We need more than a skeletal, technical, clinical understanding of the end times. We need a robust eschatological vision that can invigorate us with the reality that God’s last work will change everything and that the change has begun.

So how can a believing understanding of eschatology promote “holy conduct and godliness”? Here are ten answers, not to prove the validity of the study of the end times but to help us begin to praise God for the beauty of His promise to be with His people till the end (Deut. 31:6).

3. See especially the Belgic Confession of Faith (henceforth BC), article 37.

1. Eschatology Personalizes and Universalizes Our Understanding of the Future

The study of the last things is usually divided into two parts. The Bible teaches that the history of this age will one day come to an end (1 Peter 4:7). Moreover, this present age will not quietly spin itself out of existence; it will end in an epic crisis and the start of a new age (2 Peter 3:10–11). When we think about this crisis—the return of Christ, the last judgment, the realization of the kingdom, and the population of heaven and hell—we are studying general eschatology. General eschatology draws us into thinking about more than simply what will happen to me when I die.

But before the coming of this great crisis, most people will have experienced the end of this age through death. When we consider death, the continued existence of the soul, and the intermediate state into which the dead enter, we are engaged in individual eschatology. This discipline can help people who are overly focused on this present age to meditate on their personal eternity.

2. Eschatology Elucidates Christian Theology

Eschatology is not an isolated doctrine. The last things *can* be studied as a doctrinal unit, one of the six heads of sacred theology. But the doctrine is also “a lens through which we come to understand the whole system of Christian faith and practice.”⁴ Studying the last things is like getting to the end of a novel; the entire story begins to make sense. Abraham Kuyper noted that every other division of theology “left some question unanswered, to which eschatology should supply the answer.”⁵ For the doctrine of God eschatology shows the completion of His work and providence. For the doctrine of man it punctuates both the natural end of sin and God’s work of restoration. For the doctrine

4. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 906.

5. Quoted in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 665.

of Christ it exposit the full meaning of Jesus's words from the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). For the doctrine of salvation it reveals how the Spirit will finally help bring about the deliverance that He has been sent to guarantee (Eph. 1:13–14). Finally, for the doctrine of the church it previews the glorious end of God's people who are presently embroiled in spiritual conflict. The doctrine of the end times is not a segregated article of faith but the consummation of the Bible's teaching on everything.

3. Eschatology Interprets Redemptive History

If we think of world history as a four-act drama—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—we see how eschatology helps us understand each act.⁶ First, the end times helps us understand the full trajectory of creation. In the early chapters of Genesis we learn that God is not only infinitely creative but also deeply relational. The garden is a picture of God's desire to dwell with His people in the beauty of a flawless friendship. But from the vantage point of Eden, it is not abundantly clear where God's world is heading. Eschatology shows us how God leads His people from a garden to a city that is built around a beautiful and safe relationship with Him.

Second, concerning the fall, everyone can sense the brokenness of this present age. Our conflicts and tears, bodily deterioration, and the certainty of death make us groan (2 Cor. 5:1–3). But our groaning expresses more than our desire to escape our terrors or the aches and pains of our body. We also yearn to be "further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor. 5:4). Eschatology helps shape our groaning according to God's promise of a better life (2 Cor. 5:1–4).

Third, in this present age, God is carrying out a work of redemption. Christ has come into our world declaring peace and

6. See Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 95–103.

pardon. He has offered His blessed body to satisfy the demands of the law's curse (Gal. 3:10). He invites us to believe in Him and share in the benefits of His saving work. He has been raised from the dead to assure us that death has been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54). Eschatology helps us to rejoice in God's already-present gift of salvation while reserving abundant hope for the life to come.

Fourth, one day God will restore His fallen people. So that we don't become either too comfortable or despondent in this present age, God confronts us with "the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Lest we dismiss this world as insignificant, Scripture insists that the coming, complete restoration will reflect a measure of continuity with this present age.

4. Eschatology Pinpoints Believers' Current Place in History

We daily experience the tension of living between two worlds or ages. The New Testament regularly speaks of two successive ages or systems: this age⁷ (cf. Matt. 12:32; Rom. 12:2) or the present age (Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 6:17), and "that age" (Luke 20:35) or "the age to come" (Matt. 12:32; see also Eph. 1:21). Vos writes, "Believers live in the 'last days,' upon them 'the ends of the ages are come,' but 'the last day,' 'the consummation of the age,' still lies in the future.... The contrast between these ages is (especially with Paul) that between the evil and transitory, and the perfect and abiding."⁸ Understanding our place on God's redemptive time line delivers us from false expectations of a utopian age divorced from Christ's second coming. It also helps banish nagging fears that "all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). We live in a time of labor, though we anticipate an eternal rest.

7. In many instances (e.g., Matt. 13:22; Rom. 12:2) the Greek *aion* is translated "world" but denotes less a place than an age or era and its spirit.

8. Vos, *Redemptive History*, 26, 28.

5. Eschatology Reinforces a Biblical View of Ecology

If this physical world is just a sinking ship or a vast wasteland waiting to be burned up with fire, with no correspondence to the coming age, then believers seem to have few compelling reasons to care for the environment.⁹ If not only humans but also every square inch of God's creation informs us of God's pattern for the new heavens and the new earth, however, then we can be encouraged to care for the earth since it should be as special to us as it is to God.

6. Eschatology Offers Hope in Suffering

For the believer, reflection on heaven provides an eternal context for our pain. This is what Paul has in mind when he says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present age are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Jesus makes the same point with an illustration: "A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you" (John 16:21–22). The joy of restoration enables believers to face trials with unearthly contentment (see Heb. 12:2). Astoundingly, the Bible teaches that the joy we anticipate in glory actually begins to impinge our hearts even now. In the Gospels, especially in John, "the realities of the future life are so vividly and intensely felt to be existent in heaven and from there

9. See Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1970); cf. Gale Z. Heide, "What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no.1 (March 1997): 37–56.

operative in the believer's life, that the distinction between what is now and what will be hereafter enjoyed becomes less sharp."¹⁰

7. Eschatology Moderates the Power of Politics

Every election cycle tempts us to either embrace the incoming leaders as messianic manifestations of God's salvation or cower before the new regime as a sure sign of the end of the world as we know it. A balanced eschatology assures us that our current leader is neither our savior nor one of the riders of the apocalypse, nor was the previous leader, nor will be the succeeding leader. Daniel's glimpse into the future contrasts the indestructible kingdom of the coming savior Jesus (Dan. 7:14) with the hosts of rulers whose kingdoms are now buried under ash and dust. Eschatology does not discourage us from political action, but it does keep our eyes fixed on the One whose kingdom will know no end (Luke 1:33).

8. Eschatology Urges Personal and Vocational Excellence

One of the main purposes of both of Paul's canonical letters to the Thessalonians was to correct the believers' faulty eschatology. Part of their error seems to have been a penchant for laziness since they reasoned, "Jesus is coming back; of what account is my work?" Paul invokes the returning Christ to urge these believers to "work in quietness and eat [your] own bread" (2 Thess. 3:12). Matthew Henry commented on Jacob's skill at the selective breeding of sheep in Genesis 30: "It becomes a man to be master of his trade, whatever it is, and to be not only industrious, but ingenious in it, and to be versed in all its lawful arts and mysteries."¹¹ The truth of this statement is magnified by the ongoing work of God in salvation and the consummation of His work promised in the doctrine of the last things.

10. Vos, *Redemptive History*, 28. Cf. BC 37.

11. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 1:183.

Peter says that when Christ returns we will be “found by Him” (2 Peter 3:14). Each of us will be doing something when we are found by God. No one should want to be found sinning either through laziness or any other vice. And we don’t know when Christ will return (2 Peter 3:10). So since we will all appear before Christ and His judgment seat, “we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him” (2 Cor. 5:9).

9. Eschatology Invigorates Missions and Evangelism

When Revelation shows us the redeemed in glory, we realize that they were saved through the witness of believers in this present age (Rev. 20:4). God is patient in sending Christ because He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). When we share God’s heart we will take up the Great Commission with new vigor. “The Church can be rightly understood only in an eschatological perspective.... The meaning of this ‘overlap of the ages’ in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and his coming again, is that it is a time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth.... The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.”¹²

10. Eschatology Grounds Us in Christ

The Old Testament emphasis on the end times is largely centered on the history of Israel. The big question is, What is the destiny of God’s people? But the later prophets’ increased focus on the individual masterfully prepares the way for the coming of Christ who, at the same time, fulfills the calling of Israel to “do justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) and

12. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 153–54.

opens by His blood a new and living way for individuals to enter into a restored life with God (Heb. 10:19–22). The last days began with the first coming of Christ. The starkness of the contrast between this present age and the age to come, between this world and the next, was never as obvious as at the coming of Christ. To think eschatologically is to think Christologically.

One final caution: we need to exercise biblical reserve when we study the end times. The Bible hasn't said nearly enough to satisfy the curiosity of the inquisitive. But it has said enough about the end times to encourage us to study it. And when studied and believed, the doctrines of the last things can inspire us with the joy, patience, and holiness of the One whose return we eagerly await.