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Personal Eschatology

We're almost done with our Basics class which is a short systematic theology covering each point of our Doctrinal Statement. I wanted to do this for three reasons: first of all, for immature believers it's a good introduction to the fundamentals of the faith, secondly, for mature believers it's a good review of the fundamentals of the faith, and thirdly, it promotes unity among us, we are to be united in doctrine. Unity is important for any organization to be successful but especially for believers because it promotes deeper fellowship with the Lord and with one another.

Today we are going to look at eschatology, but not eschatology in the normal way you're accustomed to hearing it. Usually we are discussing the branch of eschatology known as general eschatology, issues like what is the rapture and when will the rapture occur, is it post-tribulational, mid-tribulational or pre-tribulational, what is the Tribulation, who is the Antichrist, is he a Jew or a Gentile, what about the kingdom, is the kingdom now in heaven or not yet on earth or now and not yet and the new heaven and new earth. Those are all issues of general eschatology. The subject today is the other branch of eschatology known as personal eschatology, and it deals with issues like what happens to my soul at death, where do we go after death, what am I doing between death and resurrection, what happens to unbelievers when they die, are they eventually annihilated or do they have an everlasting existence? So personal eschatology is just that, it's more personal and it's very important to have a solid personal eschatology because if you don't have answers to these kinds of questions then you can be very uncomfortable, very unstable, and very anxious and we aren't supposed to be anxious about anything. So God has given us answers regarding these things and those are what we want to look at today.

Let's just read our statement which briefly lays out personal eschatology and then we can delve into some of the passages.

17. We believe in the conscious and eternal punishment of the unbeliever after death (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:46). The spirits of the believers, at death, go to be with Christ in Heaven, their bodies being left behind until at the pre-tribulation rapture of the church, they are raised, incorruptible and reunited with their spirits to be forever with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15: 51-54). Similarly, the spirits of those who die out of Christ descend into Hell, their bodies being reunited with their spirits at the Great White throne, their eternal destiny from thence being the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11-15). In either case, the departed spirit, in the interval between death and resurrection is not asleep, but fully conscious, whether in bliss or in woe (Luke 16:22ff).

Notice right off the bat we are involved in a very controversial issue and that is the question of the eternal destiny of the unbeliever. Do unbelievers face eternal punishment or will they be annihilated? The difference being that eternal punishment means exactly what we state it to mean, that the unbeliever will face a conscious and eternal punishment after death and annihilationism means that the unbeliever will at some time be annihilated from existence. We state emphatically that "We believe in the conscious and eternal punishment of the unbeliever after death quoting Daniel 12:2 and Matt 25:46.

Before we look at these passages however, I want to look at the issue of death because the entire point revolves around your understanding of death. And by death we mean fundamentally a separation. Some kind of separation has occurred. So let me introduce something of a riddle. Who was the first human being to die? Well it depends doesn't it; it depends on what I mean by the word die in that sentence. If I mean physical death then the answer is Abel. If I mean spiritual death then the answer is Adam. And if I mean eternal death then the answer is no one yet, but the beast and the false prophet will be the first. So you see the word death can refer to several things, it can refer to physical death, the separation of body and spirit, it can refer to spiritual death, the separation of the person from God or it can refer to eternal death, the eternal separation of a person from God in the lake of fire.

Now I think it is crucial to understand that God did not create death, God created everything very good and death is not very good. Death was the penalty for human disobedience but I think in Gen 2:17 when God revealed the penalty for disobedience that he was talking about a specific kind of death because He said “in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” And if you look at Gen 3:7, the day that Adam ate, then you see described the kind of death that God meant. “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings,” verse 8, “...the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” Verse 10, Adam says, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” 11 And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” What kind of death is this describing? It’s describing from the consequences of the death a specific kind of death. What is it? Spiritual death. On the day that Adam ate, indeed when Adam ate, they died a spiritual death, meaning as people they were separated from God. And you see the primary consequences of spiritual death. First of all nakedness before God, exposed before Him, a sense that we are laid open and bare before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Second, fear of God, not in the positive sense of fear where we respect Him but in the negative sense where we expect punishment. Third, hiding from God so as not to have to confront Him, that is the most hideous thought, to have a face to face meeting with Him with whom we have to do. And fourth, covering ourselves up just in case there is a confrontation, so that we will not expose to Him our shameful condition.

Now I suspect if we took spiritual death more seriously, just how far dead we are in transgression and sin we would appreciate much more that God must be the initiator in our salvation. If He didn’t initiate this conversation with Adam then Adam never would have initiated it with God. The entire picture painted in our minds eye from this passage is that if man were left in the condition he was in when he rebelled against God he would remain naked before God, in fear of God and therefore hiding from Him so as not to confront Him and finally covering up with as many good works as possible to shield us from Him. So I see man’s condition of spiritual death as a very dire one indeed that requires God’s confrontation of us as God confronted Adam in verse 9. Basically what God is saying by “Where are you?” Confront your

condition. In verse 11, “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” You are a rebel. And He’s initiating with man to get a positive response, for man to walk into the light and face God. He doesn’t want to and he blame shifts, it was the woman. But nonetheless, God initiates with man. It is never the other way around. Now this is our condition as those born in spiritual death.

Let’s move to physical death. Physical death is the separation of the human body from the human spirit. I have heard it said that it is a consequence of spiritual death and I have taught that before. But I think more probably it is part of the curse of God as Gen 3:17 says, “Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. 18Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; 19By the sweat of your face You will eat bread Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.” There is a depiction of physical death and you can say that all the things mentioned in verses 18 and 19 are curses upon man and nature that were not present in the original creation. Originally man would not sweat or die, work was not toilsome, nature would not grow up thorns and thistles, but now that God has cursed man and nature then man sweats, toils and dies, and nature rebels against man to teach man that he rebels against God. So here we have physical death and if we come down to verse 22, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—and I take it from this we can infer that originally man was immortal and that now that he had been cursed and was mortal this tree could sustain mortal life and so God cut him off from the tree of life because that tree could only sustain mortal life, and there was another tree of life, the tree of the cross that God had planned to provide that would provide both spiritual life and physical life. But the thought of man living in a mortal body forever was such a terrible thought that the thought of this Hebrew sentence doesn’t even end, it just stops mid-way through the thought and the Hebrew translators have reflected this is a fragment by putting that dashed line at the end.

Finally, turn to Rev 20:10 to see eternal death or the second death. We saw last week that Satan is cast in the lake of fire which was prepared for the devil and the angels. Human beings only end up in the lake of fire because they followed the devil and his angels in rebellion against God. In verse 10 you see “the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” Satan and two men are cast in the same place, the two men have been there for 1,000 years at this point so you see that they are not annihilated. Verse 11, “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.” Judgment is always on the basis of deeds or works, same Greek word. Verse 13, “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” So the second death is the lake of fire and it is eternal separation from God as verse 10 said, in torment. People have always tried to avoid the doctrine of eternal punishment but the biblical revelation is clear that every person will end up in one of two eternal destinies, either with God or separated from God. Since the latter is a separation from God it is called the second death. Alright, having looked at three deaths; spiritual, physical and the second or eternal, I want to talk about the place mentioned in verse 13 and 14, “Hades.”

Hades as you see in verse 14 was cast into the lake of fire so Hades is not the lake of fire. They are to separate places. And a comment on the English word “hell,” that’s not Hades either, that’s the lake of fire. So Hades is another place and you notice in verse 13 that “death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them,” so Hades is a place where the dead reside. In this context there are only unbelievers in Hades but it has not always been that way.

So I want to look at the history of Hades. Sheol is the Hebrew name for this place; Hades is the Greek name but they both refer to the same place, where

the spirits of the dead went during Old Testament times. So I'll use Sheol when we're in the OT and Hades in the NT but understand I'm referring to the same place. Also you'll see Paradise and there's another term for Paradise called Abraham's bosom. They refer to the same thing and I'll be using both terms so don't get confused.

Now I should point out that there were a few people who didn't die in the OT; Enoch walked with God and was not, Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind. That's why some people suspect that those two men will be the two witnesses in the 70th week of Daniel, for they say it is appointed for man once to die and then the judgment; those two men didn't die, they just come back and die. But that's taking some liberties with that passage that are not warranted because there is one generation of Christians that will not taste death, it's explicitly stated that a whole generation of believers will not die in 1 Cor 15. So the appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment must not mean what people are making it out to mean. Elijah and Enoch did not die, they may or may not come back and be the two witnesses, we just don't know. Other people have said Moses will be one of the two witnesses because they do similar miracles, but they could just as easily be two new Jewish guys. But I do point out that there are at least two people who have not died, Enoch and Elijah. However, most people died and I take it that the first person to die and go to Sheol was Abel when his brother Cain slit his throat. So Abel was there and he may have been there awhile before anyone else showed up but then in Gen 5 we see person after person dying. They lived much longer before the Flood than us because of the environment and food and so forth, but they still died because they were under the curse and when they died their spirits were sent to Sheol.

To get a biblical picture of Sheol turn to Jesus' words in Luke 16. There seem to be three compartments to Sheol and a great gulf in between. It's these two compartments where the spirits of the OT dead went and whichever compartment you went to there was no crossover because of the great gulf in between. And this shows there is no opportunity to believe the gospel after you die - you die and your spirit goes to one of these two compartments and that's it. A few years ago I was listening to a young Christian girl give her views on capital punishment. It was a high school senior thesis defense and so you can't expect too much but she was opposing capital punishment, or trying to, from the Bible. Somehow or another she was saying that when a

person dies they get another chance to hear the gospel. And I said where is that in the Bible? Of course she didn't have an answer because that's not the picture the Bible presents. And if it did what would be the motive for missions? I'd rather just let Jesus present the gospel to them after they die. But that's false because Jesus teaches in John 11 that "he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die." So that passage puts limits on the time span in which you can believe the gospel, namely, whatever time you are in this earthly life from physical birth to physical death is the only period during which you can believe the gospel; once you die physically there are no second chances, you're done. So there is no use praying for the dead. The dead may pray for you, interestingly, as Rev 5 indicates, but you are not to pray for the dead or to the dead. What do they need prayer for? Nothing can be changed regarding them.

Now as I was saying during the OT when you died that was it, your spirit departed to one of two compartments; Abraham's bosom or the Unseen World and there was a Great Gulf in between, no crossing over. This is the Luke 16:19ff passage. I don't think the OT saints had much clarity on Sheol. The Hebrew word means, "Who knows where?" They didn't have a clue where it was they were going when they died so they just called it, "Who knows where?" And David prayed, "You will not abandon my soul to who knows where" in reference to the Messiah. The point is that they knew when you died your body would remain and your spirit would depart, but they didn't know anything about the place where your spirit departed except that it wasn't the final place, it was only a temporary place until the resurrection and judgment. So Jesus is giving new revelation regarding this temporary place in Luke 16.

Notice verse 19, "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. ²⁰"And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, ²¹and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. ²²"Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. ²³"In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom." Now it's actually a very strange picture. You see the rich man in Hades and the poor man in Abraham's bosom and the rich man was in torment and he could look across

and see the poor man in Abraham's bosom who was apparently not in torment and apparently it was only one way vision, the rich man could see the poor man but the poor man could not see the rich man. These are some of the characteristics of Hades and you can debate whether or not this is an accurate depiction of Hades but I think it is unquestionably an accurate depiction of where the dead were going during the OT period, one of these two compartments. Verse 24, "And he cried out [the rich man] and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'"²⁵"But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. "²⁶"And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us.'" So there's your great chasm and it's a fixed barrier. Verse 27, "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house— "²⁸for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'" And then we have one of the most interesting statements in the NT. Verse 29, "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' "³⁰"But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' "³¹"But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'" What you see there is that it's not empirical proof that convinces people to believe Christianity; it's hearing the word of God. Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. But by saying that don't make the other error and conclude that empirical evidence is irrelevant, that's not the point of the dialogue; Jesus' resurrection from the dead is an entirely relevant piece of empirical evidence. It's just that unbelief is so insidious that it will re-interpret the evidence within its own frame of reference. So unless it is interpreted within the frame of Moses and the Prophets it will be misinterpreted and discarded by unbelief. But the main point we want to see is this image of Hades that we are given, two compartments, one called Abraham's bosom and the other called Hades. Abraham's bosom is a place of comfort and Hades is a place of torment. As a final point observe that both the rich and poor man are conscious and this implies there is no such thing as soul sleep.

Now I want to take you to another event that sheds light on this picture. Luke 23:39, the cross of Christ. When Jesus was on the cross he wasn't the only one on a cross that day, He had two criminals hung beside Him, one on either side of Him. The Romans really knew how to teach people a lesson, they'd hang you on a cross, which was such a terrible way to die. So terrible they didn't even speak of it in polite Roman society, even when a criminal was condemned to death on a cross they used the euphemism *arbori infelici suspendito*, "hang him on the unlucky tree." It was a disgusting thought, not a pretty piece of jewelry, the most abhorrent thing. And the Romans hung people on crosses along the main thoroughfares so everyone who walked by learned the lesson, don't cross Rome. And so here we are along a major road and there were three crosses that day on Golgotha. Verse 39, "One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹"And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." That man recognized something true about Jesus. He was without sin! And I take it it was sufficient for God to save this man because of what is said next. Verse 42, "And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" ⁴³And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Now that's a very interesting statement, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Jesus didn't say tomorrow, He said today. In verse 46 Jesus breathed His last, it was 3pm, the end of the day in Jewish thought was 6pm so this man would be with Him in Paradise within three hours. So between 3 and 6pm the other man has to die and his spirit has to go to the same place Jesus' spirit is going to, which is a place called Paradise. Now this Paradise, I submit to you, is Abraham's bosom that was mentioned in Luke 16, it was the compartment where believers would go when they died. So all the spirits of the believing dead went to Paradise, the spirits of the unbelieving dead went to the unseen world, and between them was a great gulf fixed so there was no crossing over. So understand that the OT saints didn't go to heaven when they died, they went to Abraham's bosom, also called Paradise and they were fully conscious there.

Turn to another passage that sheds light on this, 2 Cor 12. This is the very strange passage where Paul talks about a man who was caught up to the third heaven. We know God created three heavens; the atmospheric heavens,

the starry heavens and the third heaven, the throne room of God. And this man was caught up to the third heaven. Notice verse 2, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven." But observe Paul's designation of the third heaven in verse 3-4, "And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." We see Paradise again and this Paradise is located by this time in the third heaven. It wasn't located there in Luke 16, it was a compartment in Hades then, but now it's located in heaven. So it's moved but what happened between Luke 16 and 2 Cor 12 to make it move? The cross. The cross was still future in Luke 16 but the cross was now past in 2 Cor 12. What happened on the cross that resulted in the movement of Paradise from a compartment in Hades to heaven? Something was generated in history for the first time. Christ, the Son of Man, had generated historic righteousness. This is the righteousness that is imputed to the believers' account. So those OT believers who were imputed righteousness in the OT like Abraham were imputed this righteousness on the basis of the certain plan of God that the Son of Man would develop the righteousness. As such they were placed in Sheol in the compartment of Abraham's bosom until it was historically generated. Once it was historically generated then that compartment could be removed to the third heaven, their salvation being historically secured. It's another one of those situations where it's certain in the mind of God but it hasn't occurred in history yet. And there's a difference between what is in God's mind and what has happened in history. History is important and real righteousness had to be generated in space and time, God doesn't just make that righteousness up out of thin air, Jesus Christ generated that.

The exact time we don't know, but I suspect it was in conjunction with Christ's ascension to heaven or on the day of Pentecost and I say that because of Israel-Church distinctions.

But now that the Paradise section of Hades has been removed there is nothing in Hades except the Unseen World and those spirits there are awaiting their resurrection and judgment at the Great White Throne. So when a believer dies today his spirit goes immediately to Paradise which is now in heaven where he is face to face with the Lord. His body remains

asleep in the ground awaiting the glorious day of resurrection. As for an unbeliever, when an unbeliever dies his spirit goes immediately to the unseen world compartment of Hades awaiting the day of his resurrection at the Great White Throne judgment. After his resurrection and judgment he will be cast in the lake of fire.

Now that both believers and unbelievers are resurrected turn to the OT passage Dan 12. This passage is speaking of the great time of distress that will come upon the nation Israel in the last half of the 70th week of Daniel. And verse 2 says, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. “ So there you see resurrection has two sides. Everyone whose name is written in the book of life will be resurrected to everlasting life and everyone whose name is not found written in the book of life will be resurrected to everlasting abhorrence.

If you turn to the NT, Matt 25:46, you see that it also teaches that believers and unbelievers will be resurrected. This is at the conclusion of the Sheep-Goats judgment which is a judgment on those Gentiles living at the end of the 70th week of Daniel when Christ returns. And it says of the Goats, “These will go away into eternal punishment, “but” of the Sheep, “the righteous into eternal life.” I point it out because it presupposes a resurrection, the unrighteous into eternal punishment, the righteous into eternal life. There are other passages to this effect.

I think this paragraph summarizes personal eschatology: When an OT person died his body returned to the earth awaiting the day of resurrection while his spirit went to Sheol. If he was a believer his spirit went to the compartment of Abraham’s bosom awaiting his day of resurrection, if he was an unbeliever his spirit went to the compartment of the Unseen World awaiting his day of resurrection. Between these two compartments was a Great Gulf Fixed so that no one could cross over. When Christ came and completed His mission of generating the historic righteousness that is credited to the believer’s account He paved the way for those spirits in Paradise to be removed to heaven. This probably occurred on the day of Christ’s ascension or on the day of Pentecost. Since that day when a believer dies his spirit goes straight to heaven where he is fully conscious and face to face with the Lord. When an unbeliever dies today his spirit still goes to the Unseen World in Hades awaiting the day of

resurrection. All unbelievers will be resurrected on the same day at the same judgment, except the beast and the false prophet who are to be raised and judged prior to the Millennial kingdom. The day all other unbelievers will be raised and judged is the day of the Great White Throne judgment after the Millennium. Saints who died up until the day of Pentecost will be raised and judged at the Second Coming of Christ to enter into the kingdom. Tribulation saints who died will be raised and judged in conjunction with the Second Coming of Christ to enter into the kingdom. Church saints who die will be raised and judged on the day of the Rapture.

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