

The Doctrine of Final Things

Credo: Truths That Shape a Christian Life Sermon 5

Psalm 82; Luke 16:19–30

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A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

1 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

2 “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah

3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.

4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

6 I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you;

7 nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.”

8 Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!

(Psalm 82, ESV)

19 “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. **20** And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, **21** who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. **22** The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, **23** and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. **24** And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ **25** But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. **26** And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ **27** And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— **28** for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ **29** But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ **30** And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’

(Luke 16:19-30, ESV)

Sometimes midway through a story or film, we ask, “How does this end?” We know from experience, you see, that it is the end of a story that shapes what it's really all about. A happy interlude may turn out meaningless if the story ends in tragedy; likewise, a tough middle may be understood in an entirely new way in light of an eventual happy ending.

This is the case with the story of life—the story of human history, our world, and our own personal lives. If all this culture and art, nations and states, families and vocations, ends up with a burnt-out star and frozen planet (an eternal nothingness), then it's hard to see our present strivings as part of something other than a tragedy. Or, what if in the end we all drift into a bodiless state of nirvana, and universal harmony of the cosmos; in that case, it's hard to make sense of our present strivings for justice and fair play in the present, if in the end all will be well. The end of the story determines what the story is all about.

In our series, *Credo: Truths That Shape a Christian Life*, we arrive at the Doctrine of Final Things. Here, we consider what Scripture teaches about the end of the story. We need to consider this because the Christian vision of our future not only tells us what kind of story we are part of, but shapes how we live in the present. When distilling the truths of Christianity into a succinct Creed, the early Christians knew Jesus' teaching about the end of history must be included. The Nicene Creed captures His teaching like this:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His Kingdom will have no end.

That's the Creed; let me give you Jesus' own teaching on the matter. During Jesus' three-year ministry, He taught His disciples that after His death and resurrection, He would ascend again into heaven to be with His Father (John 14). However, this departure was temporary. He would return one day, marking the end of history and the beginning of His New Kingdom. Here is how He explains it in Matthew: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31–32).

Jesus' teaching on the end is royal: He comes as a king, sits on His throne, and His first duty is to enact a righteous judgment of all nations and all peoples. In doing so, He will separate sheep from goats, or righteous from unrighteous—which will mean a purging of the world of all evil. This will lead to the consummation—or full realization—of God's kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Using this image of the returning king as our entry point, I want to consider with you the biblical Doctrine of Final things by considering three aspects of Jesus' Royal Return: Craving the King's Righteousness; Understanding the King's Judgements; Awaiting the King.

I. Craving the King's Righteousness

For people who slow down enough to ever ponder the end of things, if their vision were to include a scene with humanity before God, they probably wonder why it can't be "all love" in the end. Why this idea of judgment? *Why wouldn't a loving God simply accept everyone exactly as they are, magnifying his great mercy and grace?*

In order to understand Jesus' return and judgment, we need to first understand our own craving for righteousness—for we all desire something more than just squishy love. There are at least two reasons why an all-sweeping embrace of everyone at the end just won't satisfy.

1. Love and Justice

The first reason has to do with the very real presence of evil in our world and our very real desire for someone to do something about it. Take as an example the cruel and dishonest man who lived rich and happy. He built his empire through fraud, abused employees, and even, while driving home intoxicated one evening, struck and killed a little boy but sped home before the police came. Not only was he never confronted or caught for his misdeeds, but they worked to his advantage as he became wealthier and happier. He grew to laugh at the idea of justice and saw moral or religious types as weak and pathetic.

Now fast forward to the end of time. Are you still okay with a blanket embrace of all people by God? Do you want to spend eternity with this man, who is still unrepentant of his wrongs and still reveling in his pride? How about the parents of the little boy? Should they celebrate your god who simply accepts everyone? No, something in you screams for justice—you want the wrath of God to put this evil man in his place.

The example is extreme but makes the point: the human heart craves love, yes, but also justice. And justice in the face of an evil and broken world requires a type of reckoning, a type of judgment. G. K. Chesterton captures this so well when in his book *Orthodoxy* he writes, "We want both things at the top of their energy: love and wrath."¹ Paul McCarthy may sing, "All we need is love," but in world filled with real evil, and people who really go down that evil road, we also need the justice and judgement of a Righteous God. Chesterton would go on to explain: "Anyone might discover mercy. In fact, everyone did. But to discover a plan for being merciful and also severe—that was to anticipate a strange need of

human nature.”² We crave righteousness, which, in a world with evil, means holding together a glorious vision of love with a fierce vision of justice.

2. Heart’s Need for Evaluation

A second reason why a blanket embrace of divine sentimentality won’t work lies, not in our need for others to be judged, but in our own need for evaluation. Each human heart craves being evaluated, which means being judged by some real standard of right and wrong, good and not-so-good.

You see this with children. It seems a paradox, but children really do crave discipline. They crave parents who make real to them that, amidst a chaotic world, there is a real standard of right and wrong; and they crave knowing that their parents love them enough to forcefully ensure that their little hearts will go right, not wrong. In the end, if there is no judgment from God, no real reckoning of right and wrong, what do we make of our cravings and strivings in the present?

In the 2002 film, *Catch Me If You Can*, Leonardo DiCaprio plays the ingenious young con man, Frank Abagnale, who cons his way into being both a pilot and medical doctor. Several times in the movie Frank returns home to see his father, always seeking his dad’s love. Although aware, his father disregards, even indulges in his son’s devious lifestyle, telling him in one scene, “the rest of us are all suckers, Frank.” However, this endorsement leaves Frank somehow uneasy. Towards the end of the film Frank sits at a restaurant with his aging Father, both men aware that the FBI is now tracking Frank. Frank is upset with his father’s seeming indifference and gets up to leave. “Sit down with me, have a drink, I’m your father,” his dad asks. Frank leans across the table and intensely pleads, “Then ask me to stop. Ask me to stop.” His father only replies, “You can’t stop.”

This is a profound window into the human psyche. Even if we could get away with doing all the wrong in the world, we wouldn’t truly be happy. Our hearts are made for righteousness, which requires being evaluated by a Righteous Father. We will never be comfortable with a Father who looks indifferently at the moral rot that is eating away our soul. Rather, we want a Father who is jealous for our true well-being, and therefore judges lovingly but forcefully that evil that seeks to spoil our lives. This is the first thing we need to be clear on when considering Jesus’ return: we all crave a Righteous King; one who will both judge the evil around us, but also one who is determined to deal with the evil within us. A blind sentimentality just won’t do: we want love and justice, and both at the top of their energy. Let’s now ask more specifically about the judgments the returning king will make.

II. Understanding the King's Judgments

Returning to the passage from Matthew 25, Jesus's judgments are described this way: "Before him [Jesus, The Son of Man] will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25: 31–32). The biblical teaching is clear on this: upon Christ's return there will be a resurrection of all people. Jesus will then judge everyone according to God's righteousness. There will be at this time a separation of those who have turned to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and those who have turned away from God and Jesus Christ. The former are embraced and invited into the Kingdom of God. The latter who have already turned away, are turned away, toward what the Bible calls Hell. Now in a sermon on "final things," it would be helpful to take a deep dive into both these future realities, heaven and hell. However, we lack time to cover both in depth. Due to the fact that one rarely reflects on the biblical teaching on hell, and the many objections to it, I want to take more time to address this aspect today.

1. Hell Defined

If the biblical teaching of a final judgment is hard to grasp, so too is the biblical teaching on Hell. C. S. Lewis captures many a Christian's feelings at this teaching:

Some will not be redeemed. There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.³

If being a Christian means most fundamentally believing in and following Jesus, then we must take seriously His teachings about hell, for he teaches about it quite seriously and clearly. Jesus speaks about hell under three images: first, **punishment** (Matthew 25.46); secondly, **destruction** ("fear Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in Hell", Matthew 10.28); and thirdly, exclusion, or **banishment**.⁴ Banishment is depicted in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, wherefrom heaven Lazarus speaks to the rich man in Hades and says, "Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us" (Luke 16:26).

The Bible says far more about heaven than it does hell, and it is not wise to over-speculate about details in regards to the latter. However, it is important to note that at the very heart of the biblical idea of eternal damnation is separation from the presence of God.⁵ Hell is to be cut off from God, permanently.

2. Objections to Hell

In the previous quote from C.S. Lewis, he not only stated that the doctrine of final judgment was biblical, but also that “it has the support of reason.” I want to dwell on this for a moment, because I think a common objection to Jesus’ teaching on hell is that it’s unreasonable—why would God do this to anyone? Here we need to peer a little deeper into the heart of the matter.

(A) Not Wrath Flying Off the Handle

Hell is not the wrath of a capricious God acting out of spite. We are mistaken when we imagine God standing over hell as though he were an angry man who’s lost his temper. John Stott explains,

God’s wrath against sin does not mean ... that he is likely to fly off the handle at the most trivial provocation, still less that he loses his temper for no apparent reason at all. For there is nothing capricious or arbitrary about the holy God. Nor is he ever irascible, malicious, spiteful or vindictive. His anger is neither mysterious nor irrational. It is never unpredictable but always predictable, because it is provoked by evil and by evil alone.⁶

God’s wrath is the outworking of God’s Holy Love in the presence of unrepentant evil. If God’s love were likened to the light of the Sun, His Wrath would be the effect the rays of light have upon the darkness and mists of the night—they banish them.

(B) Choice of the Heart

Hell is also not God delighting in human misery, but rather the choice of the human heart that has rejected God. Hell is when a human being, who has rejected God and demanded independence from their Maker, is finally granted by God their wish. **It is God letting go of the leash.** This is how Paul explains things in Romans 1: **“God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator....” (Romans 1:24–25).

Reflecting on this theme: Anglican theologian J. I. Packer writes: “Scripture sees hell as self-chosen ... [H]ell appears as God’s gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves.”⁷

In a very real sense, hell is getting what we want when we want something other than God and God’s ways.

Dante's poem, *Inferno*, is a vivid portrait of souls who have been banished from the presence of God. As one writer has put it, the work shows "sinners who have turned away from the outstretched arms of a loving Father; it doesn't reveal to us the punishment for sin as much as it reveals sin itself."⁸ The punishment for sin is really letting sin get what it always wanted. Dante captures what this means in a scene where he encounters Francesca and Paola, the adulterous couple living in a part of hell called the Circle of Lust. In this circle of hell, the "Lustful blow around within a tempest forever, tossed and turned on the howling winds, just as they were at the mercy of their ungovernable passions in their mortal lives." This couple (who were real people Dante knew), "are bound together unhappily for eternity—and they are miserable in their dark bliss."⁹

The biblical vision of hell emphasizes these two things: First, a Holy God will not abide rebellious evil. Second, hell is not some irrational and barbaric outworking of a capricious God. Rather, hell is the outworking of a human heart when, colored by evil, it is finally allowed the utter independence it wants—and rejects its Creator once and for all.

This is a hard teaching, and one the modern church doesn't deal with very often. But our Lord teaches it clearly to His first followers, and He teaches it to us as well. Jesus' deeper desire, however, is to not create a religion of fear. Rather, this teaching on hell is meant to wake us up to the reality of what sin will do to us; and it is also meant to help us see ever more clearly the Good News of the Gospel. Let me conclude by briefly noting three ways the teaching of Final Things shapes our life in the present—or how we "await the King."

III. Awaiting the King:

1. Nature of Sin

This should wake us up to the real nature and character of sin. Even the smallest sin, when fully grown, would lead us down a path away from our Maker and toward hell. In his allegory, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis portrays this hellish trajectory of sin when he writes of the man who grumbles:

He begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others ... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a

machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

2. Weep and Repent

When Jesus teaches about the final judgment, it usually aims at waking people up. As one pastor put it, this teaching is meant like “smelling salts,” to make us more alert. This means we should feel more deeply the state of those who have rejected Christ. Jesus weeps over an “unrepentant Jerusalem” (Matthew 23:37), and Paul expresses “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” over his brethren who reject Jesus (Romans 9:2). Our hearts should be moved deeply by rejection of Jesus. And this should fuel a spirit of evangelism among us—may it be so Lord Jesus. This should also make you jump a bit if you’ve kept Jesus at a distance. He loves you and has come not to judge you, but to save you—to offer you forgiveness and full embrace from God. You need only to turn to him and humbly seek his help.

3. Hopeful Confidence for the Faithful

I offer you another image Jesus gives us for his return. For those who believe in him, his return is not as the judge, but as the bridegroom. For those who turn to him now, He is coming back to bring us into His wedding feast—and this glorious end is open to anyone and everyone, here and now, who would, standing in the present, acknowledge that your future contains a happy ending, only in Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 98.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 120.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 126–27.
5. Exclusion: “This state of definite self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell.’ The Chief punishment of hell is separation from God (Gen 3). “Shows sinners who have turned away from the outstretched arms of a loving Father, it doesn’t reveal to us the punishment from sin as much as it reveals sin itself.”
6. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 173.

7. J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 262–63. See also: Tim Keller writes similarly, “What is hell, then? It is God actively giving us up to what we have freely chosen—to go our own way, be our own ‘the master of our fate, the captain of our soul,’ to get away from him and his control. It is God banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get into all our lives....”
8. Rod Dreher, “Introduction,” *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, published by Trinity Forum, pg. 7ff.
9. See Rod Dreher, “Introduction,” *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, published by Trinity Forum, pg. 7ff.