The Rapture and the Afterlife

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 10 of 10

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

The final session of the course, and of the whole theology program, takes up the two questions people ask most and Scripture answers most sparingly: when exactly does Christ come for his church, and what are hell and heaven actually like? The teachers close the way they began, distinguishing what God made clear from what he deliberately left cloudy. Listen for the exegetical argument that moved Patton's own rapture position, and for the picture of heaven that overturns almost every cloud and harp assumption you were handed.

STUDY SHEET

1. What God left unclear

The last class opens with Luther's doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture: the core is unmistakably clear, the cross, the resurrection, the return of Christ, and that clarity forms the heart of the faith. The end times timetable is not among the clear things, and the teachers refuse both wrong responses: pretending it is clearer than God made it, and throwing up our hands. God wrote these things down and means for his church to search them diligently, holding conclusions with the confidence the evidence allows and no more.

2. The passages on the table

Three texts anchor the session. 1 Thessalonians 4: the Lord himself descending with a shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God, the dead in Christ rising first, and the living caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Daniel 9: seventy weeks decreed for Daniel's people and city, sixty nine of them running from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to an anointed one who is cut off, the city and sanctuary destroyed by the people of a coming prince, and a final week in which he confirms a covenant with the many and breaks it in the middle, halting sacrifice, with abominations until the decreed end. And Mark 13: the sun darkened, the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory, and the angels gathering his elect from the four winds. How these three fit together is the whole debate.

3. Whose debate is this?

The rapture question only exists inside one camp, so the teachers first map the tribulation across all of them. Postmillennial preterists locate the tribulation in AD 70; other postmillennialists and many amillennialists read it as the church's ongoing struggle through history, though some amillennialists allow a future judgment just before the second coming, and virtually none holds a rapture. Historic premillennialists expect a future tribulation through which the church passes. Only dispensational premillennialism, a minority among scholars though strong in the pews, debates when the rapture falls, and the teachers observe the academic tide receding even as popular interest grows. Every orthodox position confesses the second coming; the only question is whether there is a coming before the second coming.

4. What secret coming means and does not

The proposed earlier coming is often called secret, and the teachers define the word carefully. It is not secret to the church, and it is not a coming in glory: Christ does not reveal himself to the world, believers are simply gone, and the unbelieving world wakes to the disappearance without having seen him. The visible coming is the opposite: when he comes in glory, no one anywhere will miss it, for every knee will bow and every tongue confess. The three positions on the timing: pretribulational, midtribulational, and posttribulational, though the last hardly belongs on the list by its own account, since for the posttribulationist there is no separate rapture at all, only the one second coming.

5. The pretribulational scheme

The pretribulational picture rests on Daniel's seventieth week. The weeks are weeks of years, on which everyone agrees; the first sixty nine, four hundred eighty three years, run from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to the triumphal entry, a chronology worked out in detail in Harold Hoehner's study of the life of Christ; one week remains, the seven year tribulation, in which God deals with the Jews. The teachers give the classic train track illustration: Israel ran on the track until Christ; the church, Jews included, was placed on the track and has run full steam since; at the tribulation the church is taken off and ethnic Israel placed back on, so that everything decreed can be completed and, as Romans 11 promises, all Israel will be saved. Christ comes for his church before the week begins, returns with his church at its end, and the Jews who survive the tribulation and turn to the Lord enter the millennium in natural bodies. That last detail is load bearing: someone must populate the millennium and someone must be able to rebel at its end, and glorified saints can do neither, so glorified and unglorified people intermingle in the kingdom, with Isaiah 65 hinting at long lives in which one who dies at a hundred is thought young. The old classical scheme that kept the church in heaven while Israel reigned on earth has, so far as the teachers know, no living defenders; the second coming is instead read as one broad event that takes time to unfold, like the day of the Lord itself, with its several resurrections inside it.

6. The pretribulational arguments

Seven arguments, honestly graded. It is characteristic of God to rescue his own before judgment: Noah before the flood, Lot before Sodom. Believers are not destined for wrath, per 1 Thessalonians 5:9, where wrath in context, they argue, means the tribulation itself. The church goes unmentioned in Revelation after chapter 3, an argument from silence the teachers flag as the weakest of the set. Revelation 3:10 promises the faithful church, I will keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come upon the whole world, read as exemption from the very tribulation the book then narrates. The restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2, who now holds back the man of lawlessness until he is taken out of the way, is the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit leaves the world only if his temple, the church, is removed first. Christ's return is imminent, coming like a thief in the night in both Peter and Paul, which no scheme requiring visible preceding events can preserve, though the other side answers that the day of the Lord names the whole judgment complex, which could itself arrive unannounced. And the millennium must be populated: if the only coming transforms every believer, no one in a natural body remains to fill the kingdom or to rebel at its end.

7. The midtribulational view

The midtribulationist agrees on the seven years but divides them: the first three and a half are the wrath of man, the antichrist establishing himself, havoc of the kind history already knows; the wrath of God, the bowl judgments, occupies only the second half. Since the promises exempt the church from the wrath of God, not from tribulation in general, Christ comes for his church at the midpoint. The arguments: Scripture itself keeps emphasizing the half week, Daniel's covenant broken in the middle of the seventieth week, Revelation 11 counting its days in three and a half year spans, the beast rising at the midpoint. Paul flatly names signs that must precede the day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 2: it will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, seating himself in the temple as God, which is Daniel's mid week abomination, so an any moment rapture cannot be right. The seventh trumpet, sounding at the midpoint to inaugurate the bowls, is identified with the trumpet of God in 1 Thessalonians 4 and the last trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15, a victory blast as God moves. And the repopulation argument works as well at the midpoint as before the week begins.

8. The posttribulational view

The posttribulationist sees the tribulation as God's judgment on the earth in general rather than a program for Israel alone, the natural reading for covenant and replacement theology, and knows one coming only: the church passes through the tribulation, is caught up to meet the Lord in the air as a welcoming party, and accompanies him down to reign. The arguments: it is the view of the early church, the same chain as before, Irenaeus from Papias, Papias from John, John from Jesus; Scripture knows one second coming, and only a preconceived theology finds a separate secret event in 1 Thessalonians 4; Revelation 3:10 promises protection through the hour, as Israel was protected in Egypt while the plagues fell around her, and as Christ prayed in John 17, not that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one; Matthew 24 talks to believers as people who will be present, do not turn back for your coat, woe to those nursing in those days, the days cut short for the sake of the elect; and the wheat and the tares grow together until the end of the age, separated only at the last day. The standing weakness is the millennium's population, and Patton is candid that he has not yet heard a representative posttribulational answer he would put on the board, though he adds the historical caveat that the early church holding this view was not yet asking that developed question. Its modern holders are weighty: Millard Erickson and Wayne Grudem among them, and in the scholarly world most who hold a future tribulation at all are posttribulational.

9. A two out of ten, and the mystery of the Thessalonians

Patton then shows his hand at the course's usual confidence level: pretribulational, at about a two. What holds him there is an exegesis of 1 Thessalonians he heard from a scholar he deeply respects. The Thessalonians were shaken by a report that the day of the Lord had already come; Paul answers about the dead in Christ, and prefaces it, we say this to you by the word of the Lord, the language of fresh revelation, of mystery. But the resurrection itself was no news; it stands already in the book of Daniel, and Paul had taught them before. If what he tells them is genuinely new, it is arguably a coming not previously revealed. The hermeneutical key is progressive revelation: the apostles grew in understanding as the prophets had, who saw one coming of Christ where there were two, so Peter speaking of one coming was not wrong but spoke what was so far revealed, and Revelation, last of all, reveals the most, which is why Patton sees a millennium there and an allowance, weakly held, for a rapture. He hears the same note in 1 Corinthians 15: behold, I tell you a mystery, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, either a newly revealed coming, or a mystery consisting only in the fact that some will still be alive, which he finds too thin to carry the word. Rhome, for his part, confesses himself much compelled by Augustine's writings, given what was revealed and known in Augustine's day, and leaves open how much weight to give the centuries of progress since. Two teachers, two leanings, one classroom: the course's method to the end.

10. Hell: the descriptions and the metaphors

The teachers give hell deliberately brief treatment, Patton admitting the subject disturbs him too much to linger. The Bible's descriptions: darkness; weeping and gnashing of teeth; a furnace of fire; unquenchable fire; a bottomless pit; everlasting torment; separation from God; degrees of punishment; eternal destruction; a lake of fire. Set the images side by side and something shows: fire and darkness cannot both be literal in the same room. The descriptions are metaphors, the most fearful realities available to the original hearers, unquenchable fire, and the true darkness of a world without artificial light, straining to describe something perhaps indescribable. The metaphorical view, which Patton holds, denies nothing about hell's reality: it is a real place of conscious suffering beyond our imagination; what it denies is that the metaphors are the physics.

11. The views of hell

A survey the teachers wish they had two sessions for. Universalism: all reach heaven eventually. Annihilationism: the punishment of the wicked is everlasting in consequence, not duration, the lost finally destroyed, a view held by John Stott and Clark Pinnock and visibly growing in the recent literature. The second chance view, which Patton says he has only recently met in an evangelical: many punished in hell are eventually redeemed, argued from the word that blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come, implying other sins might be, with hell eternal because Satan and his angels, for whom no atonement was made, never turn; Patton confesses that nothing would thrill him more than to find this true, and that he cannot substantiate it from Scripture, purgatory without hell, as a student summarizes. The purgatorial view proper: retribution for venial sins before heaven, defended from the prayer for the dead in Maccabees, against which the teachers note that the men prayed for there died in idolatry, a mortal sin that would bar purgatory on Rome's own terms, and Patton adds his parable of the unlocked door, told on his own daughter: proving the door was unlocked proves nothing about who ran through it, and proving Maccabees canonical would still not build purgatory. The literal view: actual eternal fire that consumes neither resurrected body nor soul, from the warning to fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell, a verse annihilationists also claim. Against every softer reading stands the hard parallel of Matthew 25: eternal punishment set beside eternal life in a single sentence, so that whatever eternal means for the one it means for the other, a symmetry the teachers judge very difficult to escape without forcing.

12. Heaven as the restoration of all things

Then the subject the teachers save their joy for. Peter preaches in Acts 3 that heaven must receive Christ until the time of the restoration of all things, and the Greek word behind restoration, in the papyri outside the Bible, is used for repairing a road: putting a thing back the way it was. That is heaven's definition, and it overturns the folk theology of clouds and harps: God did not move to plan B when man fell. The plan was a garden, an earth to tend and subdue, and God dwelling with his people, and the plan has not changed. The framework of the heavens the ancients used, and Paul borrowed when caught up to the third heaven: the atmosphere, the universe, and the residence of God; and the end of Revelation announces that residence relocated: behold, the dwelling of God is with man. God makes a new heavens and a new earth, atmosphere, stars, and ground, but he himself comes down to live among his people. The tree of life, barred in Eden by the cherub precisely so that fallen man would not eat and live forever, stands again by the river in Revelation 22 for the healing and life of the redeemed. Everything the same, as one friend put it to Patton, and then much more, for Christ remains incarnate with us forever. And a guard rail: this restoration, apokatastasis, is not the universalism that has sometimes borrowed the word.

13. Life in the new earth

The restoration principle answers the practical questions. Bodies: Paul's contrast of earthly and spiritual bodies is relational, not ontological, a body wholly alive to the Spirit, not a body of different stuff than Eden's. Work: the parable of the talents promises responsibilities proportioned to faithfulness, so heaven has jobs, tending, ruling, running a universe, some perhaps gloriously mundane, and no reason to exclude technology, or airplanes, from a restored earth under similar physical laws; be neither too esoteric about heaven nor too dull. Relationships: the special closeness of family and friends carries over rather than dissolving into an undifferentiated unity; Christ himself had close friends, those we helped on earth will meet us there, and eternity is time enough to make more friends without losing any. Knowledge: we will learn forever; Gregory of Nyssa taught that even in perfection there is growth, and Irenaeus that God will always have more to teach and man more to learn, which the teachers celebrate by announcing the heavenly theology program, first course one eternity long. Animals: of course, on restoration logic, and perhaps the very same ones. Memory: probably kept, since to lose the memory of sin is to lose most of memory and with it yourself, and to forget the past would be to forget redemption. How old will we be? Thirty two, Patton deadpans. And the final question of the final class, will we be conscious of those in hell, receives the course's most honest answer: I do not know. That is all.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Genesis 3 · Daniel 9 · Isaiah 65 · Matthew 24 · Matthew 25 · Mark 13 · John 17 · Acts 3 · Romans 11 · 1 Corinthians 15 · 2 Corinthians 12 · Philippians 2 · 1 Thessalonians 4 · 1 Thessalonians 5 · 2 Thessalonians 2 · Revelation 3 · Revelation 21 · Revelation 22

KEY TERMS

The rapture

: The catching up of 1 Thessalonians 4: the dead in Christ rising and the living caught up together to meet the Lord in the air. The debate is whether this is a separate coming before the second coming, a question that exists only within dispensational premillennialism.

Pretribulationism

: The view that Christ comes for his church before Daniel's seventieth week, the seven year tribulation in which God deals with Israel, returning with the church at its end. Argued from God's pattern of rescue, exemption from wrath, Revelation 3:10, the restrainer, imminence, and the millennium's population.

Midtribulationism

: The view that the church is raptured at the tribulation's midpoint, before the wrath of God begins in the bowl judgments, argued from Scripture's emphasis on the half week, the signs Paul names in 2 Thessalonians 2, and the identification of the seventh trumpet with the last trumpet.

Posttribulationism

: The view, held by the early church and by scholars like Erickson and Grudem, that there is no separate rapture: the church passes through the tribulation under God's protection and meets the descending Lord in the air at the one second coming.

The seventy weeks of Daniel

: Daniel 9's decree: seventy weeks of years for Daniel's people and city, sixty nine running from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to the anointed one cut off, with a final week in which a covenant is made and broken in the middle, the frame on which the tribulation schemes are built.

The restrainer

The one who now holds back the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2 until he is taken out of the way: identified by pretribulationists as the Holy Spirit, whose removal implies the prior removal of his temple, the church.

Imminence

The teaching that Christ may return at any moment, as a thief in the night. Pretribulationism claims it as its own; midtribulationists answer that Paul names signs that must come first, and others that the day of the Lord is the whole judgment complex.

Annihilationism

The view, held by John Stott and Clark Pinnock, that the punishment of the wicked is everlasting in consequence rather than duration, the lost finally destroyed. It must contend with the parallel of Matthew 25, where eternal punishment stands beside eternal life.

The metaphorical view of hell

Patton's position: the fire and the darkness, which cannot both be literal, are the era's most fearful images straining to describe the indescribable. Hell remains a real place of conscious suffering beyond imagination; the metaphors are not the physics.

Apokatastasis

The restoration of all things in Acts 3, a word used in the papyri for repairing a road: putting a thing back as it was. Heaven is not plan B but Eden restored and more, God dwelling with man on a new earth, and the word does not mean the universalism that sometimes borrows it.

The third heaven

The ancient framework Paul borrowed: the atmosphere, the universe, and the residence of God. At the end, that residence relocates: the dwelling of God is with man, on the new earth, forever.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. How do the teachers frame the clarity of end times doctrine?

A. Everything about the end is perfectly clear

B. Nothing about the future can be known at all

C. The core of the faith is clear, per Luther's perspicuity of Scripture, but the end times timetable is not, so we search diligently and hold conclusions at the confidence the evidence allows

D. Only scholars may study prophecy

2. In which camp does the rapture debate actually live?

A. Amillennialism

B. Dispensational premillennialism: every other position either locates the tribulation elsewhere or expects the church to pass through it, with no separate rapture

C. Postmillennial preterism

D. All camps equally

3. In what sense would the earlier coming be secret?

   A. Christ would come invisibly to judge the nations

   B. Only the apostles would know of it

   C. The church would not recognize it

   D. Secret to the unbelieving world: Christ does not reveal his glory, believers are simply gone, whereas at the visible coming every knee will bow and no one will miss it

4. What are the seventy weeks of Daniel, on the pretribulational reading?

   A. Weeks of years: sixty nine from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to the triumphal entry, and a final outstanding week, the seven year tribulation in which God deals with Israel

   B. Seventy literal weeks in the life of Daniel

   C. A symbol of the church age

   D. The years between the exile and the return

5. Why must someone enter the millennium in a natural body, on this scheme?

   A. Because glorified bodies cannot enter the kingdom

   B. Because resurrection happens only after the millennium

   C. Because someone must populate the kingdom and someone must be able to rebel at its end, and glorified saints can do neither

   D. Because Isaiah forbids resurrection before the end

6. Which pretribulational argument do the teachers grade weakest?

   A. The pattern of Noah and Lot

   B. The restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2

   C. Revelation 3:10

   D. The church's absence from Revelation after chapter 3, an argument from silence

7. How does the pretribulationist read the restrainer?

   A. As the Holy Spirit, who leaves the world only if his temple, the church, is removed first, after which the man of lawlessness is revealed

   B. As the Roman empire

   C. As the archangel Michael

   D. As human government in general

8. What division of the seven years grounds the midtribulational view?

   A. The whole week is the wrath of God

   B. The first half is the wrath of man under the antichrist and only the second half the wrath of God, so the church, exempt from God's wrath, is taken at the midpoint

   C. The week is divided into seventy days

   D. The halves are separated by the millennium

9. How does 2 Thessalonians 2 cut against an any moment rapture?

   A. It names no events at all

   B. It dates the coming precisely

   C. Paul says the day will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed in the temple, Daniel's mid week abomination: signs must precede

   D. It places the coming in the past

10. How does the posttribulationist read Revelation 3:10?

    A. As proof the church is absent from the tribulation

    B. As protection through the hour rather than removal from it, as Israel was kept in Egypt while the plagues fell, and as Christ prayed: not that you take them out of the world

    C. As a promise made only to Philadelphia

    D. As a reference to AD 70 alone

11. What standing weakness does Patton concede in posttribulationism?

    A. It denies the second coming

    B. It has no early church support

    C. It contradicts the creeds

    D. The millennium's population: he has not heard a representative answer he would put on the board, though the early church holding the view was not yet asking that developed question

12. What exegetical observation holds Patton at only a two on the pretribulational rapture?

    A. Paul prefaces the Thessalonians teaching with the language of fresh revelation, yet the resurrection was no news, taught already in Daniel, so what is new is arguably a coming not previously revealed, under the hermeneutic of progressive revelation

    B. The word rapture appears nowhere in Scripture

    C. The church fathers unanimously taught it

    D. Revelation names the rapture explicitly

13. What do fire and darkness together suggest about the descriptions of hell?

    A. That hell is not a real place

    B. That the biblical writers contradicted each other

    C. That the descriptions are metaphors, the era's most fearful images straining at the indescribable, while hell remains a real place of conscious suffering beyond imagination

    D. That hell has separate regions of each

14. What is annihilationism, and who holds it?

    A. That all are saved eventually; held by the universalists alone

    B. That the punishment of the wicked is everlasting in consequence, not duration, the lost finally destroyed; held by John Stott and Clark Pinnock among a growing number

    C. That hell purifies before heaven; held by Rome

    D. That hell is literal fire forever; held by all evangelicals

15. What does the parallel of Matthew 25 press on every softer view of hell?

    A. That punishment is limited to this age

    B. That the sheep and goats are nations only

    C. That the passage is a later addition

    D. Eternal punishment stands beside eternal life in one sentence, so whatever eternal means for the one it means for the other, a symmetry very difficult to escape without forcing

16. What does the word behind restoration in Acts 3 mean in the papyri?

A. Repairing a road: putting a thing back the way it was, so heaven is not plan B but Eden restored, God dwelling with man on a new earth

B. Building something entirely new

C. Ascending to a higher realm

D. Dissolving the material world

17. What happens to the residence of God at the end of Revelation?

A. It remains beyond the created order

B. It is replaced by the temple

C. It relocates: behold, the dwelling of God is with man, on the new earth, with the tree of life restored

D. It is entered only by the martyrs

18. Which best summarizes the teachers' picture of life in the new earth?

A. Disembodied souls at rest on clouds

B. An existence without memory, work, or particular relationships

C. A purely symbolic state beyond description

D. Restoration and more: real work proportioned to faithfulness, family closeness kept, learning forever as Gregory of Nyssa and Irenaeus taught, animals restored, memory retained so redemption is remembered

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 C · 2 B · 3 D · 4 A · 5 C · 6 D · 7 A · 8 B · 9 C · 10 B · 11 D · 12 A · 13 C · 14 B · 15 D · 16 A · 17 C · 18 D

TALK IT OVER

1. Patton holds his rapture position at a two, moved there by an argument he heard from someone he respects. When did an argument last move one of your positions, and what does it say about a community of study that its teachers can change their minds out loud?

2. The teachers treated hell briefly because it disturbs them, without softening what Scripture says. How do you hold the reality of hell with both honesty and sorrow, and how should it shape the way you speak of it to people you love?

3. If heaven is restoration, Eden and more, rather than clouds and harps, what changes in how you anticipate it? Which part of the picture, the work, the relationships kept, the learning forever, most rearranges your hope, and how does it change what you do this week?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Acts 3 names the hope the whole course ends on: heaven must receive Christ until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.