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## READING ASSIGNMENT FOR STUDENTS TO BE READ BEFORE MEETING FOR LESSON 9

### Handbook of Doctrine: Chapter 11 Kingdom of the risen Lord: The doctrine of last things

**Doctrine 11:** We believe in the immortality of the soul; in the resurrection of the body; in the general judgment at the end of the world; in the eternal happiness of the righteous; and in the endless punishment of the wicked.

#### A. The Christian hope

The Christian hope in life after death depends upon belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Belief in the Resurrection asserts that death does not have the last word over human destiny; God does. Jesus conquered death, and so death does not finally separate us from God. He was raised from death to a new order of life, an eternal life given by God. The Christian hope is that as God raised Jesus Christ from death, so God will raise us from death to eternal life with him.

For the Christian, belief in the Resurrection is radical trust in the one eternal God. The God of the beginning is also the God of the end. At the beginning there was God, who called the world into being out of nothing and created us in his own image. At the end there is God, not nothing; a God who calls us into new Resurrection life with him. God, our Creator and Perfecter, completely fulfills his purpose for us. As Jesus did not die into nothing, neither do we. We die into the life of God.

#### 1. The triumph of the Kingdom of God

The completion of God's purposes for the whole universe can be illustrated in the biblical language of the Kingdom of God. This language is a way of describing the rule of God in human affairs, and is demonstrated when lives and human communities are transformed by Christ. The Bible looks forward to that transformation being made complete and visible in a new world order under God. This hope is clothed in vivid pictures which attempt to describe the ultimately indescribable, the entire cosmos in mutual harmony and at peace with its Creator (Isaiah 11:6-9; Isaiah 65:17-25). There are descriptions of a new creation where all live in love, share an abundance of good things and know great joy.

Images of banquets and wedding feasts, of water that never runs dry, of life-giving trees and an ever-welcoming eternal city, express hope in concrete terms (Revelation 21:1-7; 22:1-5). They remind us that God plans for us a whole, fully personal, eternal life together. Jesus came preaching the coming of God's Kingdom and in his ministry of teaching, preaching and healing revealed a foretaste of the coming joy (Luke 4:18, 19; 7:22; 11:14-20). In Christ's Resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the Spirit, the life of the Kingdom of God was released into the world (Acts 2:32-36). Therefore the good news of the Kingdom became the central theme of the message of the Early Church (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 28:23-31). All who accept Christ through faith can live in its reality and look forward to its completion at the end of time, when Christ returns (1 Peter 1:3-5).

#### 2. Eternal life

The life beyond death which beckons the Christian is eternal life. This is a quality of life in the presence of God, not simply unending time. It begins now as we follow Christ (Mark 10:17-22; John 3:16; 10:27-30; 11:25; 17:1-3). It is the life everlasting of which the Bible speaks, life with no end and love with no end. It is abundant life beyond our imagination (1 Corinthians 2:9). All we can say is that God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). Eternal life focuses on unending adoration and enjoyment of God. We find our destiny and experience that for which we were created: to see God, to be like him, to love him and to enjoy him for ever (1 John 3:2).

## **B. Death and Resurrection**

To have a hope for Heaven is not to disguise the reality of death. Death is part of our human condition as biological beings. Death is God-given, a limitation on fallen human existence. But the reality of death should not deprive us of hope in the reality of death's defeat. Death does not separate us from God (Psalm 116:15; Romans 8:38, 39). Jesus has conquered death (1 Corinthians 15: 20-26). We will still die physically, yet because of Jesus Christ we need not be dead to God. When Paul writes about death being the 'wages of sin', he is not referring to physical death but to the spiritual death that threatens those who reject God (Romans 6:23).

### **1. The immortality of the soul**

Christians have often expressed belief in life after death in the phrase, 'the immortality of the soul'. This phrase needs to be clearly understood. It is usually employed by Christians to mean that death is not the end, and this usual understanding is certainly essential to the gospel. It is important to recognize, however, that apart from God's action there is no part of us that naturally survives beyond death. Our eternal existence is totally dependent on God. That is true for the righteous and the unrighteous. The Christian doctrine of immortality affirms that we are whole persons, originally brought to life by God (Genesis 2:7), and because of God's action there will be no loss of integrated, embodied personality in the life beyond present existence. God brings us all into eternity to participate in the general resurrection and submit to the final judgment of Christ (Matthew 25: 31-46; Romans 2:5-11; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; 1 Timothy 6:13-16)

### **2. The resurrection of the body**

The phrase, 'the resurrection of the body' is the biblical way to express Christian belief in life after death. In the Bible the word 'body' means the whole person. The phrase safeguards the integrity of the human person (Job 19:25-27). We do not look forward to becoming mere disembodied spirits, but whole persons, fully alive with Christ in God. We all die, but death is not the end for either the believer or the non-believer (Psalm 73:24; Daniel 12:2). For all will be raised to judgment (John 5:25-29; Revelation 20:11-15). Our life beyond the grave is entirely dependent upon the mercy and judgment of God, who has planned for those who trust in Jesus a re-creation into a new humanity, perfectly fulfilling his will (John 14:1-14; 1 Corinthians 15:49).

Our resurrection depends upon the Resurrection of Christ and follows a similar pattern. Jesus died a real death on the Cross. His Resurrection was a re-creation, not a resuscitation. He was not raised like Lazarus, only to die again (John 11:17-44). He had a Resurrection body that was different from his human body, yet recognizable. Our resurrection, too, through Christ, will be a total re-creation. Belief in a personal resurrection affirms our faith in God, Creator and re-creator, who has made us, and will re-make us, out of love and for love (1 Corinthians 15).

## **C. Ultimate accountability**

As Christians we believe that world history is not purposeless but is moving towards an ultimate crisis, which biblical writers sometimes describe as 'the Day of the Lord' (Isaiah 2:12-21; Joel 2:30-32). In the Old Testament the prophets used the term to look forward to the time when God's righteousness would be ultimately realized on earth, the day of triumph and transformation. The God of Israel would be revealed to all nations, for blessing and for judgment (Amos 5:18-27). The revelation of Jesus Christ changed the shape of this hope, though not its content, so that we now look forward to the time when Christ will be exalted and universally acknowledged as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

### **1. Judgment**

It is in this context that we can speak of judgment. Judgment is the fulfillment of God's promises. It is the fullest affirmation of God's righteousness, of the liberating message of the New Testament, of the trusting faith of those who believe in a loving God. Judgment manifests the triumph of good over evil, the righting of wrongs, the validation of the truth, the victory of love over fear, the new Heaven and the new earth. Judgment is also the fullest affirmation of universal accountability. All are accountable to God, during life and beyond death. This is the clear message of the New Testament. We have personal responsibility for our lives, for the choices we make, for our attitude and actions towards our fellows, for the stewardship of what we have received, for our ultimate destiny (Matthew 25:31-46). This accountability is essential to our dignity as bearers of the divine image: God takes us seriously.

God alone is the judge. Because our judge is also our Savior, we can face judgment with confidence. His judgment will validate our faith-response (1 John 4:17). We can rest with assurance in the mercy and grace of God, as well as in his absolute justice (Psalm 9:8; 1 Corinthians 3:13-15). We cannot dictate to God who will be saved and who not. But we can trust to the judgment of God the lives of all those whose life and experience, personal creed and spiritual opportunities are different from our own because he is the loving Creator of all (Romans 2:12-16; Chapter 5).

### **2. Hell and Heaven**

To believe in judgment is to accept the reality of Hell and Heaven. Biblical pictures of Hell are terrifying and

vivid and remind us that to choose to reject the grace of God must issue in a separation from him that reaches into eternity (Matthew 13:24-30). Ultimately, our God-given freedom includes the freedom to make choices with eternal consequences (Matthew 25:1-13; 31-46). As Hell refers to the anguish of those who face eternity without God, so Heaven describes the bliss of those who enjoy the full experience of his presence. Biblical references to Heaven and Hell are only faint glimpses of the greater realities, of the final abode of the saved and the lost (Mark 9: 42-48; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; 2 Peter 3:8-13).

### **A hope to be shared**

Christian life is marked by a hope that reaches beyond this life to life with God in his eternity. It is a life of joy in the presence of Christ, anticipating the life to come. It is a life of trust, full of confidence in the ultimate purposes of God in Christ. For us, the future hope is already part of the present, as the Holy Spirit brings to us the living Christ who makes his Kingdom a present reality. As we live out this future today we invite others to share in our hope.

**Doctrine 11 summarizes the final consequences of the choices we make in relation to God and the atonement offered by Jesus Christ.** The beliefs we hold concerning last things are based on God's power, on his justice and on his love, as these have been revealed through Jesus Christ and through the biblical message. This includes Christ's return in glory, the completion of God's Kingdom, the resurrection of the body, the final accountability of all persons to God, the endless despair of those who reject salvation and the eternal happiness of those who are righteous through faith.