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NOW IS THE TIME! THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Facing the imminent turn of the millennium, we live at a time when eschatology is on many, if not most, people's minds. Further, many expect something dramatic to happen in the year 2000—or 2001. Many Christians are wondering whether or not we should expect Christ to come about the year 2000. Some are already preaching it. We have people within our own community who have taken their children out of school because they sincerely expect Christ to come in the year 2000 and believe it is a waste of time and money for their children to be in school at this point in history. They believe we should be fully engaged in nothing but evangelism now, in view of the imminence of Christ's return. How shall we relate ourselves to these ideas and events? What is the teaching of the NT with regard to such eschatological views? Can we know what God expects of us at such a time as this? We believe in the imminence of the Second Advent. What should be our attitude toward estimating its nearness and preparing for a specific time in the near future? We turn to the NT for answers.

The NT writers stood between two decisive events in the history of this world: the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. The first was recent past history, the second was yet future history. No one knew for certain how far in the future the second coming of Jesus would take place. Some seemed convinced that it was immediately imminent, while others seemed to suggest that some time must pass first, during which certain events must take place. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica about this very thing:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come,

until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. (2 Thess 2:1-3)¹

The question which most concerned the NT writers, however, was how to live in the interim between these two momentous events, so that when Christ should appear, His people would be found ready and waiting for Him.

The Teaching of Jesus

This was the concern of Jesus Himself, according to Matt 24:32-51. After presenting a series of signs which would precede His second coming, He told His disciples to learn a lesson from the fig tree: just as the approach of summer could be recognized by the tender new shoots and leaves which appeared on the fig trees, so when they should see all the signs He had given them taking place, they would know that His coming was near, "right at the door" (v. 33). At the same time, however, He warned them, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, but only the Father" (v. 36). Therefore, the task of the true disciple would be to watch and be ready at all times, recognizing, on the one hand, that he or she is to keep busy doing the Master's business while He is away, not knowing when He will return, and, on the other hand, not behaving in a manner that suggests that the servant does not expect the Master to return for a long time (vv. 42-51).

The parable of the Ten Virgins, which directly follows in Matt 25, reinforces this concept of watching and being ready at all times. Those who fail to make adequate preparation for the surprise arrival of the Bridegroom end up being excluding from the marriage feast. The parable of the Talents, which comes next, was given for the purpose of admonishing the believer to be active and productive rather than idle while awaiting the Master's return.² Finally, the parable of the Separation of the Sheep from the Goats closes Jesus' discourse with a reminder that there will be a judgment to face at His coming, and all will be judged by what they have done or left undone in demonstrating Christlike love for those less fortunate than themselves. In the words of Jesus, "It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns" (24:46). It is the evil servant who says in his or her heart, "My master is staying away a long time" (v. 48), and begins to behave as though he or she were not going to be called to account any time soon.

It was never the intent of Jesus that His followers should think in terms of a delay in judgment. Observing this, not a few scholars speak of a modified 'realized eschatology' in the NT, especially in the Fourth Gospel, in which judgment is understood to have already come with the radical call of Jesus to belief and our

¹All Scripture quotations in this paper are from the New International Version.

²In Luke's account of this parable, Jesus told it because His hearers 'thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once' (Luke 19:11).

individual response to that call.¹ For example, Jesus told Nicodemus concerning His own coming into the world for salvation, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18). Later He said something very similar to the Jews who were persecuting Him: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (5:24).

Although Jesus clearly proclaimed this kind of individualized judgment at the moment of decision, this was in no sense considered to be a final judgment, and we should not see it as a substitute for His return to judge the world at the eschaton. Jesus repeated four times in John 6 that He would raise up "at the last day" those who believe on Him (6:39,40,44,54). He also spoke several times about a future day of judgment (Matt 10:15; 11:22,24; 12:36; par.). Further, He seemed to know that His physical return would not be for quite some time, as evidenced by several statements in His Matt 24 discourse concerning the signs of His return. In v. 6 He spoke of wars and rumors of wars, but He added, "But see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come."² In v. 8, after speaking of international strife, famines, and earthquakes, He noted that "all these are the beginning of birth pains." Again, in vv. 12-13, Jesus observed, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." He was very clear in pointing out in v. 14 that the end could not come until the gospel of the kingdom had been proclaimed to the whole world. Finally, He pointed to a future time of intense distress for God's people, and He spoke of that period being shortened in order to assure the survival of at least a remnant of the elect who were enduring tribulation (vv. 21-22). Yet even in regard to that time, Jesus counseled, "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time" (vv. 23-25).

Resolving the Tension

The only way to properly understand this tension between the call for imminent expectation and watchfulness and a series of prophesied historical events which must yet take place before the parousia, is in terms of Jesus' stress on the judgment that takes place at the moment of individual decision, in view of the

¹See, for example, George Eldon Ladd, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 301-2; C. F. D. Moule, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 5 (1962): 174.

²With reference to the parallel statements in Mark 13, Ladd remarks, "Far from being signs by which the coming of the end can be calculated, these are signs that *the end is delayed*." Ladd, 201, emphasis his.

biblical emphasis on the transience of human life. 1 Pet 1:24-25 quotes from Isa 40:6-8, which stresses that all human life is like grass and like the flowers of the field which quickly wither and fall. James 4:13-15 admonishes against making plans for the future, since we do not know what will happen tomorrow. "What is your life?" he argues in vv. 14-15. "You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" Thus, it is not the parousia itself which is imminently expected, but the close of our personal probation, which can take place at any time through death. Since we can never know when our personal probation will close in death, leaving us to face the judgment without further notice or preparation, we must be prepared at all times. When we die, the next thing we will experience will be the coming of Jesus Christ. So, the return of Christ for every person is as imminent as his or her death, making it imperative that we make the necessary decision for Christ immediately and hold to it faithfully, in light of our transience. This is undoubtedly the sense of imminent expectation which Jesus intended we should have.

After His resurrection, the disciples came to Jesus and asked Him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (vv. 7-8). Jesus was saying that we are not to concern ourselves with the time of His return; rather, we are to concern ourselves with the work which He has given us to do in the interim.

Our focus should not be on the length of time until the physical return of Christ, but on our daily and hourly state of personal preparedness. With this understanding, we need to be very careful in speaking of a delay in Christ's return. This is the message of Heb 10:23-39. There we are admonished to "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (v. 23). Meanwhile, we are to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (v. 24). And, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (v. 25). We are instructed further not to abandon our confidence (v. 35), for we need endurance, "so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (v. 36). Verse 37 is paraphrased from Hab 2:3: "For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay.'" What Habakkuk actually said was, "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." Clearly this does not mean that there is no time lapse until the fulfillment of the promise, for it explicitly declares that there will be a time interval before the end, but the point is that when the predetermined time arrives, the promised event will take place. While there may seem to be a delay beyond what we expect or hope for, there is no real delay in the purpose of God.

In this context, still paraphrasing Habakkuk, the passage in Heb 10 continues, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him" (v. 38). Heb 11 goes on to provide examples of such faith. Verse 13 summarizes,

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.

Verses 39-40 explain why they did not receive the things promised: "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better, so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." The sleep of the death of the faithful is only a temporary state, awaiting the call of the Lifegiver, when all believers, both those who have fallen asleep in Jesus and those who are alive until the parousia, are taken together to receive the promised inheritance (1 Thess 4:15-17; Rev 6:10-11; cf. John 14:2-3). Those who have fallen asleep have no consciousness of any delay in their Lord's return.

The Testimony of Peter

The testimony of Peter in 2 Pet 3 is very similar to that of the author of Hebrews. There Peter notes that in the last days scoffers will come, following their own evil desires, and saying, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (vv. 3-4). Then he assures the believers that just as surely as the old world was destroyed by a flood of water, "the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (v. 7). He reminds them further that the Lord does not reckon time as man does (v. 8), so we should not accuse the Lord of delay, for, "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (v. 9). Finally, he assures us that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire; and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."

A series of ethical imperatives follows this announcement. Verses 11-12 read, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." Verse 14 adds, "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace." Finally, vv. 17-18 admonish, "Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

The Teaching of Paul

Paul taught a similar message concerning Christian responsibility in the face of a time interval before the second coming of Christ. That there would be a time interval he made clear in 2 Thess 2:1-6, as already noted. He urged the believers not to be shaken in mind or troubled by any message to the effect that the day of Christ had arrived. "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way," he wrote, "for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction" (v. 3). This lawless one was being restrained, but he would be revealed in his own time, Paul declared in v. 6, though the mystery of lawlessness was already at work (v. 7).

While he taught an interval of time before the end, Paul did not encourage carelessness or inactivity during the interim. In 1 Thess 5:1-6, he wrote,

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.

He added in v. 8, "But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." Verses 12-22 contain various exhortations for practical godliness, while v. 23 concludes, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Witness of John

We have observed already the importance given to personal preparedness for judgment in the Gospel of John, particularly in his record of the words of Jesus. The first Johannine epistle promotes a strong sense of imminent expectation. 1 John 2:18 declares, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour." In light of this expectation, John encouraged the believers, "And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when he appears, we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (v. 26). What did he mean by "continue in him"? Is this a passive state of comfortable inactivity? No. John defines continuing in Jesus in terms of walking in the same way in which He walked (2:6), letting what we heard from the beginning continue in us (2:24), not sinning (3:6), keeping His commandments (3:24), receiving His Spirit (4:13),

confessing that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15), and continuing in love (4:16), which means not only loving God but also loving one another (4:12,20-21).

John, however, does not hold out the hope of eternal life as only a future possibility to be received at the parousia. Rather, as in his Gospel, it is to be a present reality for the believer. He writes in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." This present reality, nonetheless, does not detract from the future hope of being personally with the Lord and seeing Him face to face. In 1 John 3:2 he holds out before the believer a living hope: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." This hope transforms our present with an ethical imperative: "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (v. 3).

The book of Revelation presents a similar perspective on the balance between imminent expectation and continuance in the practice of patient endurance and faith. Rev 1:3 declares that the time for the fulfillment of the prophecies of the book is near. The same assertion is made in 22:6,10, while three times in chap. 22 Jesus announces, "I am coming soon" (vv. 7,12,20). At the same time, however, the reminders of imminence elsewhere in the book are confined to the later portions of the various septenaries. For example, the declaration, "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown" (3:11), is given to the church at Philadelphia, the sixth of the seven churches. It is under the opening of the fifth seal that the martyrs are portrayed as asking how long it will be until God will judge and avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth (6:9-10), to which they are told to rest a little while longer until their fellow servants and their brethren, who were to be killed as they had been, should be made complete (6:11). It is in the excursus between the sixth and seventh trumpets recorded in chap. 10 that there is an announcement that there should be no more measured time (*χρόνος*), "but in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets" (10:6-7). It is under the sixth bowl plague that the proclamation is made, "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed" (16:15).

The messages to the seven churches of Revelation focus on the attitudes and behavior of the people of God as they live in the interim before the parousia. "I know your deeds," Christ says to each of the seven churches, after which He describes their distinctive characteristics, both good and bad. He praises works of love, service, faith, and patience, while He urges repentance for attitudes of carelessness and indifference and for practices leading to apostasy, idolatry, and immorality. Later, in 13:10 and 14:12, the saints are described as characterized by patience, faith, and the keeping of the commandments. Throughout the book of Revelation, the return of Christ to judge the world is kept before the reader as a

future expectation, but the emphasis is on decision making in the present. "How shall we then live?" would seem to be a major concern of the book. It begins and ends with a blessing pronounced upon the one who keeps the words that are written in it (1:3; 22:7), and its epilogue contains the reminder, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will give to every one according to what he has done" (22:12).

Conclusion

Whether one is dead or alive at the return of Christ is considered essentially irrelevant in the NT. Jesus declared, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). According to Paul, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, so it is necessary that, though we shall not all sleep, we shall all be changed, whether dead or alive, from corruptible to incorruptible and from mortal to immortal (1 Cor 15:50-53). In 2 Cor 5:1, he states that we know that if our earthly house, our physical body, is destroyed, we still have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. He assures the believers further in 1 Thess 4:13-18 that those who are alive at the coming of the Lord will have no priority over those who are dead, for the dead will be brought to life first. "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (v. 17). Thus there is no theological reason to concern ourselves over whether or not we live until the coming of the Lord. The important thing is to live each day so that death will not catch us unprepared to face our Maker at the judgment.

Death is nothing to be feared if we have made the necessary spiritual preparation. Ps 116:15 declares, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Rev 14:13 adds a special blessing to all those who die in the Lord after the time of the proclamation of the messages of the three angels. It may be that they have a part in the special resurrection mentioned in Dan 12:2, in which some of the righteous, as well as some of the wicked (cf. Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; Rev 1:7) will apparently be raised beforehand to see Christ come.

In the Bible, the time of personal salvation is not a future time which is extrinsically determined, but it is the time of decision, which is determined within each individual heart, and that time is the present. As Paul stated succinctly in 2 Cor 6:2, "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Jesus Himself, we recall, had made clear in John 5:24 that the time of decision is the moment of salvation: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

In light of the NT evidence, then, Christians should not be time setters. Nor should they be clock and sign watchers to the extent that their focus is always on what God is going to do at some future point, while they may be guilty of neglecting present duty and personal preparedness. It is just as true today as it was when Jesus warned against it, that the one who is inclined to think in terms of a delay in Christ's return is likely to make poor use of the interim, thinking that there

is no real urgency in preparing for the Master's return, while the one who expects the Master to return at any time is far more likely to be found ready. When the Master returns for most people in the history of this earth is effectively at their death, the time of which few have the privilege of foreknowing. The NT therefore keeps the advent hope before the Christian, but does not encourage any consideration of calculating or estimating the time for the parousia. Rather, one is challenged to be always ready, for we know not what hour our Lord is coming for us.

The point of this paper is to refocus attention away from a clock-watching or sign-watching approach to eschatology that tends toward time setting or at least focusing on the future to the possible neglect of present duty. A careful study of NT eschatology reveals that the emphasis is on personal preparedness in the present, in light of the transitory nature of human life, and that death rather than the Parousia is the time of judgment we should be preparing for. "Now is the time!" refers to the present time of decision as the most important time we should be focusing on, according to this understanding of NT eschatology. The time of the Parousia is unknown and unknowable. While there appears to be a tension between expressions of its imminence and descriptions of all that must first transpire, careful exegesis reveals that the expressions of imminence have little to do with historical time measurements; rather, they should be understood in light of the brevity of time individuals are allotted for making the necessary decisions that will affect their destiny in the judgment. Death closes a person's probationary time. The next event which that person will experience is the judgment, either at the Parousia or at the Great White Throne judgment of Rev 20:11-15. Since we cannot know the time our probation will close, "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).