

Part One

A Simple Story

Would you mind if I told you a story? It's a made-up story, and I should mention at the very beginning that it's likely not a very good one by typical story teller standards. However, it's a story all the same, and most people prefer a story, even a mediocre one, to a lecture, and that goes for the teacher of this course as well. After all, you were the reason the story was written in the first place. It came into being to help you understand different visions of the future.

This approach to eschatology might not be for everyone. For some it will be too _____. There won't be enough rigid discourse about the absolute truth of a given perspective. There won't be enough entertaining cheap shots, straw men, caricatures, or gloating over a vanquished enemy like some victorious gladiator. If this is the criticism, I wear it comfortably. The fact is church history, and my present day "vision of the world" includes many brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree with me on these matters. Among the mature and godly ones, it's never been a source of discord.

For others it will be too _____. The fact that we will unapologetically take a position and teach it as if we actually believe it to be true will seem both arrogant and unnecessary. There are some believers who pride themselves on what they don't know. They are like Harriet Tubman's father in the movie, blindfolding himself or looking away so he can say with integrity he never saw

her as she prepares to escape. Such an approach to important theological matters is not wise for a Christian who seeks to become mature. We can know what we believe and hold to it with strong conviction while still remaining kind and charitable toward those who don't agree. _____ and _____ are not mutually exclusive.

So, with those preliminary remarks behind us, let me try and paint a picture that will serve as an illustration for the remainder of the course. I trust it will help you remember the different visions. I also hope it will reinforce the most important truth, that if we are in Christ, we will all have a perfect understanding of the last things when those last things finally occur.

A Trip Worth Taking

Take a moment and imagine a long stretch of smooth black freeway. Travelling along it at approximately 70 miles per hour is a gleaming white luxury coach. Picture it filled with gospel believing brothers and sisters who all have the same convictions about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each one agrees on the grand themes of Holy Scripture like _____, the _____, _____, and a future _____. We all share the most important things in common, and cherish our common faith.

Each of us are on a journey to the _____ where we know we will see our Savior face to face. We've captured a vision of him, enthroned in glory, and ruling over a restored creation where everything that is wrong has been put right. Justice and mercy cover the earth.

The tears and shame of this present world are wiped away, and we see him through new eyes that take in the splendor of his majesty. We all share a common understanding that in the future there will be a _____, a _____, and a _____. In fact, all will be made new, and we hear the calling to go to that place, the _____. Every passenger has read about this amazing place and believes they will one day live in it themselves.

We joyfully pile onto the bus and find our seats by windows or isles, and sing our favorite hymns together as we drive along. Words to Amazing Grace, Blessed Assurance, and Before the Throne of God Above are sung in perfect harmony, never for a moment questioning the authenticity of our fellow pilgrims in the seats around us. We delight in the fellowship and rejoice in our common hope.

A few hours into the ride the driver explains that everyone will need to get off the bus at the next exit. We need to take a short hike through the wooded hills and trails that lead to the final bridge at the entrance of the city. The driver says he will meet us there to take the whole group the last few miles to the destination of our dreams.

That hike is an adventure through the passages of Scripture that speak of the end times. There are different opinions about how to get from one side of this park to the other, and a variety of views on what the signposts mean. This will become clear in the rest of the story.

As the bus pulls off the freeway and into the parking lot we disembark with a sense of gratitude for the small piece of heaven the ride had become. These friends will be with us forever, and we know for sure that one day we will sing together again around the throne of God. The driver leans out the window and waves, telling us he'll meet us on the bridge when we all get there.

Between us and the new Jerusalem there lies a rather long distance made up of fields and forests scarred by trails that lead up to the summit of a great hill from which we can glimpse the destination we long to enjoy.

Everyone moves as a group toward the trailhead but soon notices something that gives us reason to pause. There are, in fact, two main trails, both claiming to offer the most direct path, but sending us in different directions. Evidently some choices will need to be made.

One trail head is marked " ". It has a handmade sign at the entrance that reads "old trail" and certainly appears to be. The trail map shows several points of interest at the very beginning including the "infant baptism" gate, the "catechism and confirmation" valley, and a scenic overlook with some coin operated binoculars that help you see how the promises in the Bible made to Israel are actually fulfilled in the church. At the trail head you're greeted by a friendly man who gives you a stamp that shows you belong to the group in case you get lost along the way and wander onto the other trail. The path is well worn, and some famous initials are carved in the fence post.

Most of the people getting off the bus head immediately to this trail and prepare to start hiking.

The other trail is marked “_____”. This one appears to be newer and only recently opened to a large amount of traffic. It differs from the first because the map has no particular landmarks and requires no act of initiation. Everyone just walks onto the path and doesn't need to show any proof of being part of the group. Acceptance appears to be granted by offering nothing more than a testimony of your desire to be there. The path looks clear and well maintained, but you can see some forest rangers still modifying some of the narrow trails that branch off toward the hill leading to the summit.

As the two groups separate according to their desired path, everyone pauses for a moment to pray for God's blessing and safe passage. They acknowledge their love and appreciation for each other. There is no judgment or hard feelings toward the other people in the group for what path they choose. Each remains convinced that they will meet again on the steps of the new Jerusalem, and only then will they know which path was the straighter and more faithful of the two.

To be continued....