

# Christian Ministry Unit 1

## Introduction to Theology

### Week 9 – Eschatology Part 1

#### Introduction

“Eschatology” means “study of the last things.” It refers to a complex of events in the biblical account of the end of the age, including the Rapture, the tribulation, Jesus’ second coming, the Millennial Kingdom, the final judgments for believers and non-believers, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Hundreds of biblical passages provide information about the last things. Over the next two weeks, we will survey this material, decide on an interpretive framework for this material, and consider some of the ways it should affect our Christian lives.

#### Why is eschatology so important?

Because it reveals the meaning of history. Unlike atheism (history is ultimately meaningless) or pantheism (history is cyclical and/or illusory), the Bible teaches that history is linear and ultimately redemptive—God will complete his plan to establish his kingdom on earth through his Son, Jesus Christ (Matt. 6:10; Eph. 1:9,10). Through Jesus, God will fully redeem all repentant humans and the earth, and he will justly judge all unrepentant humans and angels.

Because fulfilled prophecy provides unique and objective verification that the God of the Bible is the only true God.

- In Isaiah 40-48, God insists that he alone is sovereign over human history, and that he has proven this by predicting historical events before they take place (Isa. 41:21-24; 42:8,9; 43:9-13; 44:6-8,24-28; 45:11-13,20-22; 46:8-11; 48:1-5,12-16). The hundreds of fulfilled biblical predictions validate the existence of its divine Author. No other religion or scripture provides this kind of self-validation.
- Specifically, the fulfillment of dozens of Old Testament predictions of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection validate the gospel as *the* message of salvation. So Paul can say that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:1-3).
- Additionally, the Bible’s accuracy in predicting past events means that we can trust that God will fulfill the future events he has predicted.

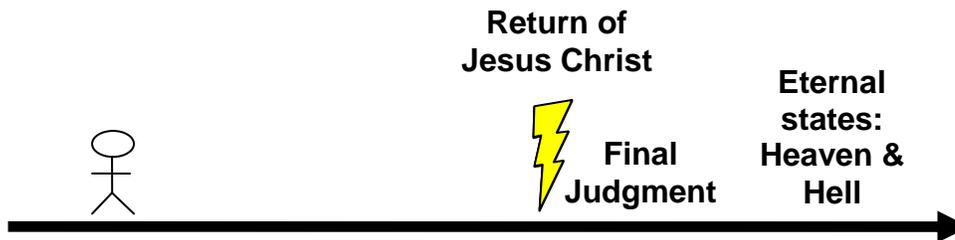
Because the assurance that God will establish his kingdom provides believers with a unique basis and motivation for serving Jesus in this life. This promise is a key aspect of the gospel which transforms our lives! Dozens of New Testament make this connection. For example:

- As we focus by faith on our guaranteed eternal life with God, his Spirit will renew us daily to serve him with confidence and urgency (2 Cor. 4:16-5:10).

- Because we know that we will be consciously and bodily with Christ, we can lay our lives down now to serve others in his name (Phil. 1:20-26), rather than waste our lives on temporal selfishness (Phil. 3:18-21; Rom. 13:11-14).
- Because we know that we will be eternally secure with Christ, we can endure great sufferings with hope and even joy (1 Pet. 1:3-8; Rom. 8:18).

### How do we organize and interpret the biblical material on the last things?

As noted above, there is a massive amount of biblical material on this subject. All orthodox Christians agree on these essentials:



Within these essentials, though, orthodox Christians disagree on how to organize and interpret many eschatological passages. Perhaps the most important disagreement is on *how to interpret Old Testament unfulfilled prophecies concerning the nation of Israel*. We will overview the two most prominent perspectives—Covenantalism and Dispensationalism. Let's begin by looking at some of the prophecies concerning the Messianic Kingdom— a future period of human history in which God intervenes in history, defeats his enemies, and reigns over the world through the Messiah.

- Ps. 2:1-12 – Note that God will install his King on Zion (Jerusalem).
- Isa. 11:1-12 – Note that the nations (Gentiles) will turn to the Messiah, and that he will regather the dispersed nation of Israel.
- Zech. 14:1-11,16-19 – Note that the Messiah will reign from Jerusalem.

With these passages in mind, let's briefly survey Covenantalism and Dispensationalism.

- Covenantalism teaches that God has permanently replaced Israel with the Church as his chosen people.



How then does Covenantalism interpret the Old Testament unfulfilled prophecies concerning the nation of Israel? For the most part, it interprets them non-literally as predictions about the Church or the new heavens and new earth. This is problematic for two reasons:

- God fulfilled the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah's first coming literally, so it is reasonable to expect that he will also fulfill the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah's kingdom literally.
- Many passages (both Old Testament and New Testament) insist that God will fulfill all of his promises to Israel, including:

Jer. 31:31-37\*\*, in which God says that his promises to Israel are more certain than his creation decrees and the immeasurable vastness of the earth. (Notice how in 31:38ff., he goes on to describe the permanent restoration of Jerusalem.) Although this promise receives a partial, unforeseen fulfillment in the Church Age (see Heb. 8), it will be completely fulfilled.

Rom. 11:29\*, in which Paul (speaking about God's promises to Israel) emphatically affirms that God's calling is irrevocable.

NOTE: Many Old Testament prophecies have a "double-reference"—"Two events, widely separated as to the time of their fulfillment, may be brought together into the scope of one prophecy."<sup>1</sup>

GAP: near and far event seen as one event by the prophet (Isa. 61:1-9; Lk. 4:17-21)

TYPE: event that foreshadows a much later event (Gen. 22)

TYPE-GAP: event that foreshadows a later event also predicted by the prophet (Joel 2:18-3:21)

UNFORESEEN PARTIAL: future event predicted that has a partial fulfillment in the Church unforeseen by the prophet (Jer. 31:31-37; Heb 8)

- Dispensationalism teaches that God has *temporarily* replaced Israel with the Church as his chosen people—but that he will fulfill all of the promises he has made to Israel. Therefore, the Church is in this sense a very important "parenthesis" in God's working through Israel.



<sup>1</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), pp. 46,47.

Thus, Dispensationalism preserves a literal interpretation of the Old Testament unfulfilled prophecies concerning Israel. The Church is an important part of God’s plan that was unforeseen by the Old Testament prophets—but God will ultimately fulfill his kingdom promises to Israel.

Although this is a non-essential doctrine, we believe that Dispensationalism is superior to Covenantalism in several key areas. We identify ourselves with progressive Dispensationalists<sup>2</sup>, who acknowledge the unity of God’s working through history and through Israel, but see significant differences in the way God has interacted with man during different periods of biblical history, especially under the Old and New Covenants.

- There are other important theological and practical implications of Covenantalism and Dispensationalism.

	<b>COVENANTALISM</b>	<b>DISPENSATIONALISM</b>
<b>GOD’S DEALINGS WITH HUMANITY</b>	Emphasizes <b>UNITY</b> in the way God has worked with humanity during the covenant of grace.	Emphasizes <b>DIFFERENCES</b> in the way God has worked with humanity during different dispensations.
<b>SOTERIOLOGY</b>	As a result of this emphasis on unity, Covenantalists correctly emphasize that people have always been saved by grace through faith.	Most dispensationalists, like Covenantalists, argue that people have always been saved by grace through faith.
<b>ECCLESIOLOGY</b>	Covenantalists define the church as all believers during all of history. Therefore, many feel free to bring Old Testament forms into the church, such as infant baptism, religious calendars, ritualism, etc. Sometimes, Covenantalists have advocated using the state to advance the church’s mission.	Because Dispensationalists see the Church Age as a distinct period in salvation history (beginning on Pentecost), they usually call for a more radical break with Old Testament worship and structures and uphold the separation of church and state.
<b>SANCTIFICATION</b>	Many Covenantalists place more emphasis on the Law in sanctification.	Dispensationalists tend to stress God’s grace as the key dynamic in sanctification.
<b>PNEUMATOLOGY</b>	Some Covenantalists believe the Holy Spirit indwelt believers in the Old Covenant.	Dispensationalists say the Holy Spirit began indwelling believers on the day of Pentecost.

## **What is the Millennial Kingdom and when does it occur relative to Jesus’ Second Coming?**

The “Millennial Kingdom” is a term that comes from Rev. 20:1-10. Let’s take a few minutes and read Rev. 19:11-21:8. Notice the sequence of events: Jesus returns, then he

<sup>2</sup> For a description of Progressive Dispensationalism, see Darell Bock, *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, p. 26-29.

binds Satan and reigns for 1000 years, then the Great White Throne Judgment takes place, and then God finishes his redemptive work by creating the New Heavens/Earth.

Christians differ over how they understand the Millennial Kingdom.

Covenantalists do not view the “Millennial Kingdom” as a 1000 year period or as the fulfillment of God’s kingdom promises to Israel.

Some Covenantalists understand the “Millennial Kingdom” to be synonymous with the New Heavens and Earth. Therefore, they are called “Amillennialists.”



Other Covenantalists understand the “Millennial Kingdom” to refer to a period of world peace ushered in by the church, and that Jesus returns at the end of this period. Therefore, they are called “Post-Millennialists.”



Dispensationalists equate this period with the Messianic Kingdom that God promised to Israel through the Old Testament prophets (see above passages). Since they believe that Jesus will return *before* it occurs, they are called “Premillennialists.” They also believe it will last for literally 1000 years, and be followed by the Great White Throne Judgment and the New Heavens and Earth.



For the reasons cited above, we believe that the Pre-Millennialist view does the best job of harmonizing these scriptural passages. Consider what Rev. 20-22 and many Old Testament passages teach about this period:

It begins with Satan’s binding (Rev. 20:1-3) and ends with Satan’s final rebellion and judgment (Rev. 20:7-10). The one who rebelled against God and lured the first

humans into rebellion will be banished by the One who paid for humanity's rebellion through his own death. Only when Satan is loosed at the end of this period (cf. 20:7-10) does rebellion begin again among the nations. God summarily crushes this rebellion and sentences him to the same fate as the beast and false prophet.

Jesus will reign over all the earth (Rev. 20:4). There will be true social justice (Isa. 29:19-21) and lasting world peace (Isa. 2:4). Imagine a world in which civil power will be wielded by One who has perfect wisdom, incorruptible character and full authority!

Jesus' resurrected followers reign with him (Rev. 20:4-6). John draws special attention to the tribulational martyrs. Because they were faithful to Jesus even unto death, they will be raised from the dead to reign with him during this portion of his kingdom.<sup>3</sup> But 20:4a implies ("they") what the rest of the Bible states explicitly—that true believers from other periods of history will be raised and reign with Jesus during this time (see Dan. 7:22,27; Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2). Over whom do they reign? Evidently, over the mortal believers who were rescued by Jesus at his return—and over their offspring who repopulate the earth during this time (Ezek. 47:22; Jer. 3:16).

There will be unprecedented worldwide spiritual enlightenment. Because the Messiah will be personally present, all peoples will have access to his instruction (Isa. 2:2,3). Understanding of who the true God is and what he has done for humankind will cover the earth (Isa. 11:9). The Holy Spirit will also be poured out on all people (Joel 2:28). Imagine being able to learn about God through Jesus' personal instruction and unimpeded by a world full of spiritual deception!

The curse over nature (Gen. 3:17-19) will be substantially removed. Because humanity is back under God's loving dominion, nature will be back under humanity's loving dominion. The earth will be abundantly productive (Isa. 4:2; 35:1a,2a), and the destructive hostility of animals will be removed (Isa. 11:6-9a). Imagine a world without natural disasters ("acts of God")! Nature will not be annihilated—it will be in harmony with humanity.

The earth's inhabitants (except for the resurrected believers) will remain mortal, but without sickness (Isa. 33:24) and calamity (Isa. 65:19b-23). As a result, they will live much longer lives. Imagine a world without hospitals and health insurance premiums!

As wonderful as the Millennial Kingdom is, it is not the final, perfect and eternal kingdom of God. The New Heavens and Earth (Rev. 21,22), which we will study next week, will be never-ending and ever-increasing joy for all who inherit it through faith in Jesus!

## Memory Verses

**Jer. 31:31-37\*\*** - God will never revoke his kingdom promises to Israel.

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<sup>3</sup> "This is the first resurrection" means the first resurrection after Jesus' return, not the first resurrection ever. Jesus has already been resurrected, and Christians will be raptured prior to this event.

**Rom. 11:29\*** - God's calling for Israel is irrevocable.

### **Assignment**

1. Read Rev. 21,22. What are the key features of the New Heavens and the New Earth?  
How does this fortify you to endure in your service to Christ?
2. Hand in *Church Visitation assignment next week*.