

Christian Ministry Unit 1

Introduction to Theology

Week 10 – Eschatology Part 2

Introduction

Last week, we settled on a Dispensationalist, Pre-Millennialist framework for integrating the hundreds of biblical passages about the last things. We explored what the Bible teaches about the Messianic/Millennial Kingdom.

This week, we will explore what the Bible teaches about the end of this age, and about the two eternal state—hell, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

The End of This Age

The most comprehensive passage on this subject comes from Jesus' answer to three questions his disciples asked shortly before his arrest. He and his disciples were in Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1). Herod's Temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world. If any building seemed permanent and immovable, it was this one. Yet Jesus responded by predicting the Temple's destruction (24:2). Later, when they were sitting across the valley from the Temple, the disciples asked three questions (24:3).

- When will these things happen?
- What will be the sign of your coming?
- What will be the sign of the end of the age?

They evidently thought that these three things (destruction of the Temple, Jesus' coming, and the end of the age) would occur at the same time. But Jesus revealed that they are separate events, each with its own "sign." Matthew, Mark and Luke record different parts of Jesus' answer—so we have to consult all of them to get the fullest account of his response.

- The sign of the Temple's destruction (Lk. 21:20-24)

"When will these things happen?" Luke recorded Jesus' answer to the first question in Lk. 21:20-24 (read). The sign that the destruction of the Temple was imminent would be the siege of Jerusalem by foreign armies. This siege would end in the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish people for a long period of time. This prediction was fulfilled in 70 AD, when after a four-year siege, the Roman army (led by later emperor Titus) breached the walls, destroyed the city and Temple, and carried the people away. (You can read about this in Josephus' *Wars of the Jews*.) Not until 1967, during the Six Day War, did Jerusalem come back under Jewish control.

- The sign of the end of the age (Matt. 24:4-22)

"What will be the sign of the end of the age?" Read 24:4-9. Jesus first answer to this question is: "See to it that you don't get fooled about this." Many traumatic things will happen that people will assume are signs of the end are *not* signs of the end—false messiahs, persecutions, wars (including the one that destroys the Temple), natural disasters, and the horrible consequences of these things (like famine). But

these traumatic events are *not* signs of the end. They are significant only in that they are like birth pangs—they are the painful prelude to a wonderful birth (Messiah’s kingdom). They will characterize the entire time between Jesus’ two comings—maybe (like birth pangs) increasing in intensity and frequency (*contra* Marxist & technological utopianism).

But why must humanity wait so long and endure so much suffering before the end of the age? Is it because God doesn’t care? No—it is because God cares that he waits so long—read 24:14. When Jesus returns, he will bring God’s judgment to a humanity that has rebelled against him. But because God loves humanity, he sent his Son first to die for our sins so we can be forgiven—and he is prolonging history so that the world can have the opportunity to hear the good news about the gift that Jesus has given to them.

This is an amazing prediction! What kind of person insists that his followers will take the good news about his execution to every people-group in the world, and that this mission is the determining factor in the duration of human history? Statements like this show why you can’t call Jesus merely a religious leader or moral teacher. He is either a deluded egomaniac, a lying cult-leader—or the Lord of human history!

Even more amazing is the fulfillment of this statement. By human odds, this pathetically weak movement should have evaporated like hundreds of other small religious sects. Yet 20 centuries later, the expansion of the world-wide Christian movement is a documented (though unfinished) fact.¹

Now we come to the “sign of the end of the age”—read 24:15-22. The specific event that marks the beginning of the final chapter of history as we know it is “the abomination of desolation” (24:15). Jesus reminds us that this event was predicted by the prophet Daniel, and that it involves someone “standing in the holy place.”

Jesus is referring to the emergence of a ruler who will succeed for a short time in actually gaining control over the whole world. He is known in Daniel’s visions as “the little horn” (Dan. 7), “the prince who is to come” (Dan. 9), and the “the king” (Dan. 11). He is known by the New Testament authors as “the antichrist” (1 Jn. 2), “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2), and “the beast” (Rev. 13). He will be a demonically inspired ruler, the fulfillment of other wicked rulers like Alexander, Nero, Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin—who will (for a brief time) accomplish what they wanted accomplish but were unable to accomplish (world domination).

At the pinnacle of his power and arrogance, he will go into the Temple of God in Jerusalem (not yet rebuilt) and claim to be God—the only object of allegiance for all humanity. Paul describes this same event in straightforward language in

¹ For details on this, see Patrick Johnstone, *The Church Is Bigger Than You Think!* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1998). There are Christians in every political nation. Christianity is growing fastest in the non-white, non-western world. The nation with the greatest population percentage of Christians is S. Korea. The nation with the greatest number of Christians is China. There are more Christian churches in India than in the U.S. And there are more Christians in sub-Saharan Africa than there are people in the U.S.

2 Thess. 2:3,4* (read). This act of monstrous arrogance and blasphemy (why it is called “the abomination of desolation”) will result in a short period of unparalleled suffering as he persecutes God’s people, others rebel against him, and God begins to judge him and all who follow him.

MORE ON THE TRIBULATION

- The Antichrist makes a covenant with Israel(?) at the beginning of a seven-year period (Dan. 9:27). During the first 3.5 years, he evidently consolidates his power and persecutes believers.
- He commits the Abomination of Desolation in the middle of the seven-year period (Dan. 9:27; 2 Thess. 2:3,4).
- God pours out his wrath on him during the second 3.5 years, ending with his destruction when Jesus returns. This is the period Jesus calls “the great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21). Rev. 6-16 probably describes this period as a time of intense judgment and evangelism:

God’s judging activity is described as 7 “Seal” Judgments (6:1-17; 8:1), 7 “Trumpet” Judgments (8:2-9:21; 11:15-19), and 7 “Bowl” Judgments (15:5-16:21). Most of these judgments are *indirect/passive*—God allowing His enemies to do as they wish to: (1) demonstrate the folly of rebellion, and (2) polarize humanity so that as many as possible will turn to Him. Some of these judgments are *direct/active*—God intervening to destroy his enemies (Rev. 19:19-21) in order to rescue His creation (Rev. 11:18) and His people (Matt. 24:21,22).

God’s evangelistic activity is extraordinary and reaps an extraordinary harvest: the Martyrs (6:9-11), the 144,000 (7:4-17), the Two Witnesses (11:3-12), and the Angel (14:6,7,14-16?).

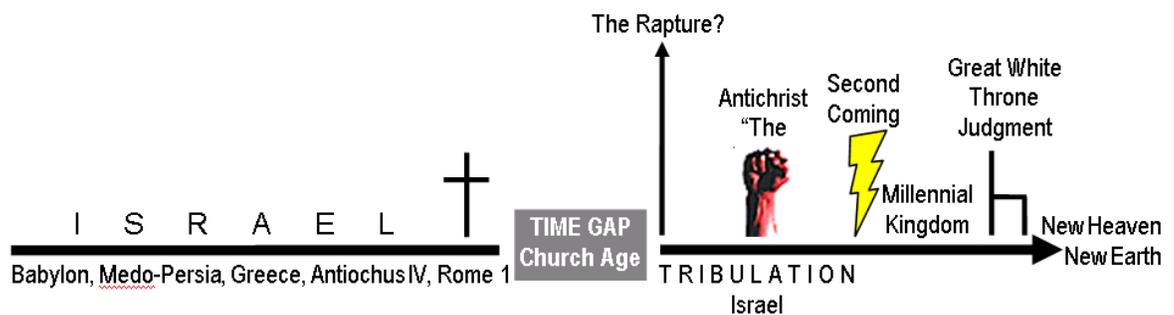
- The sign of Jesus’ coming (24:26-31)
 - “What will be the sign of your coming?” Read 24:26-31. Although the Antichrist comes to power by stealth and secrecy, Jesus’ second coming will be anything but secret.
 - It will be world-wide & unmistakable (Matt. 24:27,30). The “sign” of Jesus’ coming is that Jesus Himself comes in a way that all people see Him.
 - It will be bodily/physical. Jesus will return to the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:11; Zech 14:4).
 - It will be accompanied by unique and awesome cosmic events (Matt. 24:29,30).

Jesus makes three summary statements:

Read 24:32-34. Just as the leafing of the fig tree heralds the imminent coming of summer, so also the generation that witnesses “all these things” (in context, the horrible signs of the Abomination of Desolation and the great tribulation) will also witness the wonderful coming of Jesus to establish God’s kingdom.

Read 24:35. Jesus' prediction of these events is absolutely trustworthy, because he is the sovereign Lord of history. The historical fulfillment of the first part of this prediction provides additional validation of Jesus' predictions.

Read 24:36. We cannot know when this final chapter of this age ("that day or hour") will happen, because even Jesus doesn't know when it will happen! When you hear Christians or others claiming to know when the end will come, you know by definition that they are wrong! Rather (as Jesus emphasizes in 24:37-25:13), we should be alert and active in our witness and service for him.



The Second Coming and Millennial Kingdom (already covered)

The Rapture

Some time before Jesus' return to earth (Second Coming), he will remove Christians from the earth to meet him. The term "rapture" comes from the Latin verb *raptus*, used in the Latin Vulgate and translated "caught up" in 1 Thess. 4:17.

Why is the rapture important?

Read 1 Thess. 4:13-18. Jesus will gather dead and living Christians together to meet him and be with him forever. This is a great encouragement when our believing friends and family members die—because we will be re-united with them on this, never to be parted from one another again!

Read 1 Cor. 15:50-58. Dead and living Christians will receive their resurrected, immortal bodies at this event. Our bodies will be like Jesus' resurrected body (Phil. 3:20,21)—immortal and glorious (1 Cor. 15:42-44), suited for life in God's eternal kingdom (15:50). This promise should motivate us to stand firm during the sufferings of this life and to abound in serving Jesus, because it will all be more than worth it when we inherit our new bodies and enter his eternal kingdom!

When will the rapture occur?

None of the Rapture passages directly speaks about the timing of the Rapture in relation to the Second Advent. Its timing must therefore be inferred from other eschatological passages, and depends on your interpretive framework (e.g., Covenant; Dispensational).

- Because Covenantalists see the Church replacing Israel, they see the Rapture as the first event of the Second Coming. Because Dispensationalists see the Church as a parenthesis in God's working through Israel, they see the Rapture as a distinct event from the Second Coming—usually just before the beginning of the tribulational period, or just before the Abomination of Desolation.
- Because Dispensationalists believe the Church is a parenthesis in God's working through Israel, they see the Rapture as a distinct event from the Second Coming—usually just before the beginning of the tribulational period (PRE-TRIB), or just before the Abomination of Desolation (MID-TRIB). On balance, we believe the Dispensational pre- or mid-tribulational view makes more sense. But this is a non-essential doctrine, and many American Christians seem to prefer it because it promises deliverance from suffering! Ironically, the rapture (like other biblical eschatological promises) should fortify to persevere through suffering with loyalty to Jesus.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

Some time after the rapture, Jesus will evaluate the service of each Christian. Many New Testament passages speak of this evaluation, and draw important practical implications from it.

Why is this judgment important?

Read 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 4:1-5. This judgment has nothing to do with our salvation, which is earned by Jesus' work alone and received by faith alone. Therefore, true Christians who do little or nothing to serve Jesus will still be saved. But we are accountable to Jesus for our Christian lives. He will provide a searching and accurate assessment of our service, including everything we do in private and the motives by which we served. He will burn away all that did not glorify Jesus, but he will (grace upon grace!) reward us for everything we did to serve him. The heart of this reward appears to be the unfathomable prospect of being praised by God (4:5; see also Matt. 25:21,23). So we should focus on being faithful; in our service to Jesus (4:2), and not on how others view us (4:3,4).

Read 2 Cor. 5:9-11. All Christians will be evaluated concerning what we have done for Jesus during this life. Our "recompense" will be either reward or no reward (see 1 Cor. 3:10-15). This (along with the many other promises of eternal life) should motivate us to please the Lord. It should fill us with "the fear of the Lord"—sober respect for his will that we influence others (through word and deed) to believe in Jesus.

Read Rom. 14:1-12. God has accepted all true Christians regardless of their differing non-essential beliefs and practices (EXAMPLES). All true Christians will give an account of themselves concerning these matters, because we are each responsible to serve the Lord with a good conscience. Therefore, we have no business judging our brothers or regarding them with contempt because of our differing views on these matters. Rather, we should focus on serving him with a good conscience, and on demonstrating sacrificial, loving unity with other true Christians.

What else will result in Jesus' reward?

Helping people come to faith in Jesus (1 Thess. 2:19,20), helping Christians to mature (1 Pet. 5:2-4), enduring suffering as his servants (Mk. 10:29,20; Jas. 1:12), undergoing training and character development as his servants (1 Cor. 9:19-24; 2 Pet. 1:5-7,11), ministering to the poor and needy (Lk. 14:12-14), and being materially generous to advance his kingdom (1 Tim. 6:18,19).

The Great White Throne Judgment & Hell

Rev. 20:11-15 is one of *dozens* of passages that teach the final judgment and eternal punishment for all non-believers of all time. This sobering teaching is clearly taught by scripture, which we have no liberty to delete or dilute. From a biblical perspective, it is amazing *not* that God condemns sinful people, but that he gave his Son so that repentant sinners might escape the condemnation they deserve and spend eternity in God's kingdom (Jn. 5:24). God will justly punish all sin with death—either we receive his Son's punishment in our place, or we will face his punishment.

All those who are judged are condemned for two reasons: because their deeds (in “the books”) find them guilty before God, and because their names are not in “the book of life”—they have not placed their faith in Jesus to pay the penalty of their sins (Jn. 5:24).

All those who are judged will spend eternity (Rev. 20:10; 14:10,11) in conscious alienation from God (2 Thess. 1:9), experiencing God's wrath (Matt. 25:46) in just measure for their sins (Mk. 12:40).

The New Heavens & the New Earth

Rev. 21,22 is the most comprehensive description of the final destination of every true believer.² Christians differ over how much of this description is literal versus symbolic, but even symbolic language is used to describe a literal reality.

Read 21:1. It will be a “new heaven and a new earth” because “the first heaven and the first earth passed away.” Scripture seems to indicate that God will destroy this universe and create *ex nihilo* a completely new universe (see 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Heb. 12:26-28). Some think that God will completely cleanse this same universe from all stain of sin. Regardless, it is a new order of spiritual and material reality that is perfectly suited for the eternal life of God's people.

Read 21:2,3a. John describes life in God's eternal kingdom with three images—a holy city, a bride made ready for her husband, and a tabernacle. The rest of the passage elaborates on these three images—all of which emphasize *personal relationships*.

He sees a “holy city” (“new Jerusalem”). Cities are filled with people who interact with each other in various ways. Of course, heaven will be different (“holy”) from today's cities because it won't be filled with traffic jams, air/noise pollution, crime, etc. But it will be filled with redeemed, glorified people who interact with each other and enjoy one another.

² Rev. 21,22 contains many allusions to Isaiah's descriptions of the Messianic Kingdom. Some of Isaiah's descriptions appear to refer to the New Heavens and New Earth, while others seem to refer to the Millennial Kingdom, which (while different in key ways) is also in some ways a foreshadowing of the NH/NE.

But the holy city is not just people who relate to one another. They also relate to God in joyous intimacy. This is why God describes the holy city as “made ready as a bride for her husband” (21:2b). Both Old Testament and New Testament employ this metaphor of God as the husband and believers as his bride to emphasize God’s desire to have a deep love union with his people. Far from losing our individuality through this union (as with pantheism), we will retain and flourish as individuals as we relate to God in perfect, ever-deepening love. The God of the Bible is both infinite and personal, so he is able to relate in infinite intimacy with each one of us.

The third image ties together the first two images. After showing John the “holy city” and describing it as a “bride,” he now describes it as the “tabernacle” (21:3). The tabernacle (later the Temple) was an image of God’s desire to indwell *all* of his people and for all of them to experience his presence *together*. In God’s eternal kingdom, we will experience and enjoy God’s presence together so profoundly that our deepest experiences of closeness with God and others in this life will pale in comparison as “down-payments.” Because God is a Community of love relationships (the Trinity), heaven will be being included into this community (Jn. 17:20-24)! Most of the rest of this vision (21:9-22:5) simply elaborates on this truth.

This is why when the angel says he will show John the “bride” (21:9), what John actually sees is the “holy city” (21:10). They are simply two images conveying the same reality.

This is why the “holy city” is described as having 12 gates with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (21:12) and 12 foundation stones with the names of the 12 apostles (21:14). God’s eternal kingdom will be filled with believers from both Old Testament Israel and New Testament Church.

This is why the “holy city” is described as a mammoth cube (21:16b). D. A. Carson says: “The cube is symbolic: there is only one cube in the Old Testament, and that is the Most Holy Place of the temple, where only the (high) priest could enter once a year, bearing blood for his own sins and for the sins of the people. Now the entire city is the Most Holy Place: in the consummation all of God’s people are perennially in the unshielded splendor of his glorious presence.”³ This is why there is no need for a temple (21:22).

This is why John sees what he sees at the center of the city (22:1-2a). The “tree of life” is a reference to Gen. 2,3—eternal life with God. The “water of life” may be a reference to Jn. 7:37-39—being personally indwelt by God’s Spirit.

This is why 22:4 is the distillation of this whole vision. Together we will belong to God fully and know/be known by God fully (1 Cor. 13:12).

³ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), reading for December 30.

Because heaven will be the above, it will by definition be completely absent of sin and its results. Thus the negations of this passage:

There will be no more “curse and death” (21:4; 22:3). Death means separation as the consequence of rebellion against God. There will be no more alienation from God, ourselves, one another, or our environment.

There will be no more “tears or mourning or pain” (21:4). Somehow, all sorrow from death—even the sorrow of loved ones who rejected God’s love—will be swallowed up by his love.

There will be no more “closed gates” (21:25). This means that there will be no more enemies (demonic or human) to fear.

There will be no more “night” or “sea” (21:1; 21:25). This may mean that there will be no more spiritual deception. (“Sea” symbolizes nations being deceived in 13:1; 17:15.)

Many Christians are not fortified by the promise of eternal life because they have misconceptions concerning what it will be like. Consider:

We assume it will be non-earthly and disembodied, but it will be a new earth (e.g., nature; animals; etc.) and we will have resurrected bodies to enjoy this new earth.

We assume it will feel totally foreign to us and that we will be leaving favorite things behind, but it will be “home” (all the comforts of home with all the innovations of an infinitely creative God) and retain all that is best in this life (e.g. culture; music; art; food & drink; etc.).

We assume it will be static—with no time and space and nothing fun to (e.g. floating on the clouds & strumming a harp), but it will be dynamic—with time and space and many great things to do (e.g., a universe to rule, purposeful work to accomplish, friends to make and enjoy, and an infinite God to get to know).

We assume it will mean the loss of desire (as in Buddhism), but it will mean continuous fulfillment of desire—(never-ending and ever-increasing joy; forever satisfying our desire—and then stretching it again).

We assume that it will be merely the absence of the bad (no more suffering, tears, pain or death), but it will also be the presence of all that is good and wonderful.⁴

Do you see why Revelation would have fortified John’s readers to remain faithful to Jesus despite extreme suffering? How hopeful are you when you suffer as a Christian? How much do you focus on this? Is there a connection between your answers?

Memory Verses

2 Thess. 2:3,4* - the Antichrist will declare himself to be God in the Temple

Matt. 24:1-36** - Jesus describes the end of the age and his return

Rev. 21,22** - the New Heavens and the New Earth

Assignment – study for exam

⁴ Adapted from Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), p. 161.