



## Core Seminar Systematic Theology II Session 25: Eschatology (pt. 1)

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### PRAYER

#### I. INTRODUCTION

We are living in the last days. (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Eschatology matters for how we live. Sometimes it can be a scary endeavor especially when we read or try to study the Book of Revelation. If you are someone who thinks that studying the end times is a fruitless endeavor because of the difficulty in interpreting some of the biblical passages or for any other reason, let me read to you the introduction to the book of Revelation. It says, **“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near”** (Rev. 1:3). God has promised his blessing to those who endeavor to know more about him through his Word. May we be such a people this morning.

**Illus: John Newton:** “We are sure that the Lord reigns. The storm is guided by the hands which were nailed to the cross. He loves His own and He will take care of them.... Blessed be God for the prospect of a land of peace where sin and every sorrow will be excluded. There we shall have a day without cloud and without night. The sun shall go down no more, the voice of war shall be heard no more. The inhabitants shall feel pain no more, shall weep no more, shall go out no more. Then no more unsanctified, and therefore no more unsatisfied desires. Oh what a state of love, life, and joy when we see Jesus as He is! And by beholding Him we are changed into His image and made like Him. This day shall come. This day will come. This day approaches nearer every hour. Your sincere friend and brother, servant and fellow pilgrim, John Newton, Hoxton, July 26, 1781”<sup>1</sup>

#### I. THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

So to begin the end, we need to know that the Bible promises a literal return of Christ. Jesus came once to make atonement for sin, and he will come again to consummate his rule.

**Hebrews 9:27** And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

This truth is mentioned and assumed throughout the New Testament and was taught by the apostles. Paul says in I Thessalonians 4:16, **“For the Lord himself *will* come down from heaven....”** The Lord’s brother James refers to the future expectation of this coming when he writes, **“Be patient, then, brothers, *until* the Lord’s coming”** (James 5:7).

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<sup>1</sup> John Newton, “Letter LV” in *Letters of the Rev. John Newton* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1847), 124-125.

Where did these men get this understanding that Jesus would return again? Well, it appears from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. When sitting with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells them, **“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to another”** (Matthew 24:30-31).

This Second coming of Christ is often referred to as “the Day of the Lord” or some other similar phrase in the Scriptures. It’s a phrase that connotes both calamity and judgment, as well as salvation. When the Lord Jesus returns, we are told in Zephaniah that, **“That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...because they have sinned against the LORD...In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth”** (Zephaniah 1:15-18).

At the same time the whole world will be consumed by the fire of God’s jealous anger (v. 3:8), God says that he will **“purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder”** (Zephaniah 3:9). That day of judgment for the ungodly will be a day of rejoicing for the righteous.

Well, now that we understand that Christ will come back, what is the nature of this second coming? What will it be like? What can we say about it from Scripture?

#### **A. There will be a personal, visible, bodily return of Christ**

Jesus will come back Himself, in His person. While this seems self-evident in an evangelical church, it was once popular in liberal protestant circles to believe that Jesus Himself would not come back. Instead, the air, or aroma, of Christ would come back, and an acceptance of His teaching and an imitation of His lifestyle of love would increasingly return to earth. Then the ethical norms from the Sermon on the Mount would be established, and utopia would be enjoyed by all.

Well, this is not the message that Scripture gives us. The Bible teaches that the incarnation of the Son of God was not his last manifestation in the flesh to men on earth. In John 14:3, Jesus says that, **“[he] will come back.”**

When Jesus ascended into heaven in Acts 1, without delay two angels came and said to the disciples, **“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven”** (v. 11).

So the Lord’s eschatological return won’t be a spiritual coming to dwell in people’s hearts and make them happier and more ethical, but a visible, bodily and personal return. And it will be a glorious return. Matthew 16:27 tells us that Jesus will return **“in his Father’s glory.”**

It appears this glory will be visible to all. In Revelation 1:7, John writes, **“Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him....”** Likewise, in the 1 Thessalonians passage we read earlier, Paul says that, **“the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud**

**command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...**" (I Thessalonians 4:16). Christ's return will not be done secretly or stealthily. No, it will be loud and clear and announced and everyone will know that the Son of God has come. It will be a fitting return for the King of Kings.

## **B. The time of Christ's coming is unknown**

Scripture does not disclose the time of Christ's second coming. Jesus says in Matthew 24:36, **"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."**

**Question:** Why does God not reveal to us the exact time when Christ will return? How does not knowing when Christ will return affect our Christian life?

If we continue reading in Matthew 24, Jesus makes it clear why it is not for us to know when he will return. He says, **"keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him"** (v. 42-44).

Jesus then illustrates this teaching again with the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25. He is driving home this message to **"keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour"** of his return.

Despite this clear teaching, people seem to have an insatiable desire to try to answer the "when" question of the second coming. You see this not only on the tabloids at the check-out counter in Safeway, but also in the teachings of many religious sects (some claiming the name of Christ).

It's not a sign of godliness to predict something with certainty that God says we will not know. Jesus commands us to watch and be prepared for his return. We are to be ready – as for an event that could happen at any time. This seems to indicate that it's possible that Jesus could come back at any time – even today.

"Now, wait a second," you say. "Scripture does present the notion that certain signs will precede the return of Christ." This is true. Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 all contain Christ's teaching on signs of the end of the age. In Luke 21:11, for example, Jesus says, **"There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilence in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven."**

The signs can be roughly summarized as follows:

Signs evidencing the grace of God

- A. Proclamation of the gospel to all nations
- B. Salvation of the fullness of Israel

Signs evidencing opposition to God

- A. Tribulation
- B. Apostasy

## C. Antichrist

### Signs evidencing the judgment of God

- A. Wars
- B. Earthquakes
- C. Famines

Question: How do we reconcile passages that warn us to be ready because Christ could suddenly return at any moment with passages that indicate that several important events must take place before Christ can return?

Answer? There are some evangelicals who believe that by charting some of the “signs” that are thought to precede the return of Christ, they can make the statement that “since A, B and C have happened, now Christ can return” and name the exact moment when the parousia will occur.<sup>2</sup>

## C. Christians should long eagerly for Christ’s return

Christ’s second coming is our blessed hope. Regardless of the specific details of Christ’s return, our response should be the same. We should eagerly desire and long for Christ’s return in glory. It’s the overriding hope of the Christian life that this will take place. Scripture is very clear about this.

### **We don’t know when He will return. So strive for holiness and stand firm in the Lord!**

**Titus 2:11-14** For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

**1 John 3:2-3** Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

**Phil. 3:20-4:1** 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Phil. 4:1 Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

John’s response in Revelation to Jesus’ claim that He will return is simple and gloriously appropriate: **“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”** (Rev. 22:20)

**Illus: Richard Sibbes:** “God reserves the best for the last...A Christian’s last is his best. God will have it so, for the comfort of Christians, that every day they live, they may think, my best is to come, that every day they rise, they may think, I am nearer to heaven one day than I was before, I am nearer death, and therefore nearer to Christ. What a solace is this to a gracious heart!

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<sup>2</sup> *Parousia* is a Greek word for “coming” and is used to refer to Christ’s second coming in Scripture.

A Christian is a happy man in his life, but happier in his death, because then he goes *to Christ*, to be with Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ return is the event that gives us hope as Christians. It confirms that history is not a despairing cycle, but the story of God redeeming a people to the glory of His name. The doctrine of the second coming proclaims that God is in control and that Christ will come again for His chosen ones. Jesus said, **“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”** (John 14:3).

**App:** Ask yourself, “How many times a day do my thoughts turn to this hope?” A lot? Often? Occasionally? Rarely? Never? If we’re not turning to this hope more often, then perhaps we love this world more than we should. Let us take delight in this most assured promise.

**Questions or Comments?**

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Sibbes, “Christ is Best,” in *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 1 (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1634/1973), 341.

### III. THE MILLENNIUM

For those of you who have been here throughout the Systematic Theology Core Seminar, you will know that we have talked about a lot of difficult topics; the incarnation, the problem of evil, and the Trinity all come to mind. Well, this next section on the millennium has its own set of difficulties so not to disappoint you.

The discussion of the millennium, which means “a thousand years”, originates from the book of Revelation in the first part chapter 20. The question often asked from this passage is, “What are the thousand years and when will Christ return with respect to them?”

To give you a flavor for this passage, Revelation 20:2-5 says, “[An angel] seized the dragon...who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God...They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years (the rest of the dead did not come back to life until the thousand years were ended). This is the first resurrection.”

There are four basic views of the millennium that have had prominence throughout the history of the church, though some have a much longer ancestry than others. Let me briefly explain all four and then give some summary reflection.

#### ***Postmillennialism***

Looking at your handouts, the first view we will look at is that of postmillennialism. This view says that through the binding of Satan, there will be a gradual increase in the growth of the church and spread of the gospel where more and more people will become Christians. The influence of more believers will change society so that it will function as God intended gradually resulting into an age of peace and righteousness, in other words – the millennium, which is not necessarily a literal one thousand years. Christ will then come back “post”, or after, the millennium.

#### ***Amillennialism***

The second view is that of amillennialism. This view is the simplest and says that Satan’s binding will reduce his influence over the nations so that the gospel is preached to the whole world, yet there is a general view that times will worsen. Christ’s reign is a heavenly one and the millennium is equivalent to the church age currently going on, without reference to a literal thousand years. Christ will then return and judge believers and unbelievers at once.

#### ***Classic or Historic Premillennialism***

The third view is that of classic or historic premillennialism. Although there are slight variations to this view, it basically states that Christ will come back “pre”, or before, the millennium. The church age will go through the tribulation period. At the end of the tribulation, Satan will be bound, and Christ will come back to establish his kingdom on earth for the millennium, which is not necessarily a literal thousand years. The resurrected believers will reign with the resurrected Christ physically on earth during this time. Unbelievers will also be on earth at this time and most will become believers and be saved. At the end of the millennium, Satan is loosed and Christ decisively defeats him and his remaining followers. Then the unbelievers from all times will be judged, and the believers will enter into the eternal state.

### ***Dispensational Premillennialism***

Finally, we have dispensational premillennialism. This is a rather recent view that is premillennial in that Christ will secretly return for believers before the suffering of the tribulation period. During the tribulation, the Jewish people will be left to go through it and will be ultimately converted. He will then return for a third time after the tribulation with his saints to rule the earth for one thousand years. The rest of it then follows the same as the classic premillennial view.<sup>4</sup>

So are we here at Capitol Hill Baptist Church postmill, amill, or premill? Well, let's just say we are promill! Article XVIII of CHBC's Statement of Faith states,

**We believe that the end of the world is approaching; that at the last day Christ will descend from heaven, and raise the dead from the grave to final retribution; that a solemn separation will then take place; that the wicked will be adjudged to endless punishment, and the righteous to endless joy; and that this judgment will fix forever the final state of men in heaven or hell, on principles of righteousness.**

Notice that a believer can sign CHBC's Statement of Faith and become a member of CHBC without making a declaration about what they believe about the millennium. This is a controversial issue among many evangelicals, but it's only secondary in nature. Our Statement of Faith declares only that which is a matter of fact from Scripture and is necessary for our unity as a church.

There are many great theologians over the years who have differed on these various views. Augustine, B.B. Warfield, and many others during the great revivals of the past have held to the postmillennial view. Louis Berkhof, John Calvin and other Reformers have held to the amillennial view. Don Carson, Al Mohler, and Wayne Grudem hold to the classic premillennial view while John MacArthur is a dispensational premillennialist. I think it would be safe to say that our church leaders fall somewhere on or between amillennialism and classic premillennialism.

The end comment to make about all of these views is that they have all been held by what we would consider genuine Christians and great theologians. This is not an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. Your salvation doesn't hang on how you come down on this issue. The important thing is that all of these views have the similar belief that Christ is returning and that judgment is coming. [NOTE: Mark's 2009 Sermon Series on Revelation, see below] We must be prepared.

### **CONCLUSION**

Next week, we will conclude the class with an examination of the final judgment, The New Heavens and the New earth, and it will be a time for you all to bring your toughest theological questions still remaining from this whole course, and lay them at the feet of Charles.

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<sup>4</sup> This view is found almost exclusively among dispensationalists who seek to maintain a clear distinction between Israel and the church. They see the blessings prophesied for Israel, such as to Abraham in Genesis 12, as to find final fulfillment in the Jewish people and is not to be spiritualized by finding their fulfillment in the church. Subscribers of this view tend to take prophetic Scripture more literal than others.

## APPENDIX

### **Marks Comments, July 12, 2009 Sermon on Millennial Views**

“I think that millennial views need not be among those doctrines that divide us. . . . I am suggesting that what you believe about the millennium--how you interpret these thousand years--is not something that it is necessary for us to agree upon in order to have a congregation together. The Lord Jesus Christ prayed in John 17:21 that we Christians might be one. Of course all true Christians are one in that we have his Spirit, we share his Spirit, we desire to live out that unity. But that unity is supposed to be evident as a testimony to the world around us. Therefore, I conclude that we should end our cooperations together with other Christians (whether nearly in a congregation, or more at length in working together in missions and church planting and evangelism and building up the ministry) only with the greatest of care, lest we rend the body of Christ for whose unity he's prayed and given himself. *Therefore, I conclude that it is sin to divide the body of Christ--to divide the body that he prayed would be united.* Therefore for us to conclude that we must agree upon a certain view of alcohol, or a certain view of schooling, or a certain view of meat sacrificed to idols, or a certain view of the millennium in order to have fellowship together is, I think, not only unnecessary for the body of Christ, but *it is therefore both unwarranted and therefore condemned by scripture.* So if you're a pastor and you're listening to me, *you understand me correctly if you think I'm saying you are in sin if you lead your congregation to have a statement of faith that requires a particular millennial view.* I do not understand why that has to be a matter of uniformity in order to have Christian unity in a local congregation.”

### **The Millennium and Its Debates - Michael Horton**

“In his Olivet Discourse (Mt 24-25), Jesus laid out a clear sequence of events between his two advents. This was in answer to his disciples' query, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mr 24:3). This question itself was provoked by Jesus' remark that the temple will be destroyed (vv. 1- 2). First, Jesus said, there will be false messiahs, "but the end is not yet" (v. 6); wars, earthquakes, and famine, but "all these are but the beginning of the birth pains" (v. 8). Enemies of his followers will "deliver [them] up," as they did Jesus, with many falling away. "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (vv. 9, 13). None of this counts against Christ's promise that he has inaugurated his kingdom and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it, for even through such persecution he will build his kingdom by his gospel. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (v. 14).

Here Jesus gives us a wide-angle view of the time between his two comings: the first, when he came in grace, and the second, when he comes in glory. First, "the abomination of desolation": the temple will be destroyed, and some of his hearers will live to see this (v. 15, 34). Disciples will be scattered from Jerusalem in the wake of this momentous event, and should be warned against false claims that Christ has returned (vv. 16-27). "Immediately after the tribulation of those days," Jesus tells us, "all the tribes of the earth... will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (vv. 29-31). We do not know how long "the tribulation of those days" (v. 29) is going to last. No one knows when Jesus will return even Jesus himself but only the Father; it will come



when no one is expecting it (w. 36-44). Then the Son of Man will sit on his throne, judging the world, welcoming his sheep into everlasting glory and sending the goats "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (25:31-46).

It is easy to summarize Jesus' sequence of events: (1) destruction of the temple in Jerusalem ("the abomination of desolation" [Mt 24:15], which occurred in AD 70); (2) "the tribulation of those days" (v. 29), involving a long period of persecution, apostasy, general calamities, and yet the progress of the gospel throughout the world; (3) the coming of the Son of Man from heaven; (4) the gathering of the elect; and (5) the last judgment.

The immediate recipients of the book of Revelation would certainly have recognized themselves in our Lord's description of the great tribulation, as would believers today who are enduring fierce persecution for the name of Christ. In a series of snapshots, Revelation moves back and forth between heavenly and earthly scenes of persecution and ultimate victory. In vivid apocalyptic imagery, Revelation reprises the history that Jesus summarized in his Olivet Discourse. In both of these accounts, the next event we are awaiting is the return of Christ to judge the living and the dead and to consummate his everlasting kingdom.

On the basis of such summaries, most Christians through the ages have held that the present age is marked simultaneously by suffering and the triumph of the gospel. Christians confess that Jesus Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end." This hope includes "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Given our propensity for disagreement over end-times scenarios, this represents a remarkable Christian consensus. We cling to the angel's promise at Christ's ascension: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Ac 1:11). He came first in humility and grace, but will return in glory and power.

Where paths diverge among Christians today is on the question of a literal \*millennium\*--that is, a thousand-year reign of Christ. The only biblical passage that speaks directly of such an era is Revelation 20. In a vision John beholds an angel descending from heaven to bind "that dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan... so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended" (vv. 2-3). "After that he must be released for a little while" (v. 3).

> Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God... They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. (vv. 4-6)

After the thousand years, Satan is released for a final time (the "little while" mentioned in verse 3), before the last battle, which concludes with the final banishment of Satan and the false prophet to the flames where "they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (vv. 7-10). These events are followed by the last judgment, with Death and Hades thrown into the lake of fire along with all whose names are "not found written in the book of life" (vv. 11-15), and the arrival of the new heavens and earth (chs. 21-22).

Interpreting the "thousand years" in Revelation 20 symbolically (along with other numbers in this highly symbolic book), the church has traditionally held that the kingdom of Christ is present on earth now, but will be consummated only when Christ returns. This perspective is usually called amillennialism (no-millennium). However, this is a bit of a misnomer. Far from denying the reality expressed symbolically by "a thousand years," with Satan chained so that the gospel may have free sway, amillennialists embrace the present rather than the future as this golden age of harvesting the nations.

Obviously missing from Jesus' summary as well as from Revelation 20 are events that many other Christians today are expecting before the return of Christ, especially the following: (1) the rapture of believers before a seven-year tribulation period, (2) the beginning of the tribulation, with the rise of something like the United Nations or European Union, (3) the emergence of the Antichrist, a false messiah who will lead this empire, (4) a war that Antichrist will wage against Israel (perhaps with the aid of Russia or, more recently, Islamic nations), and (5) the return of Christ with his saints (including those raptured) to establish his millennial kingdom, a literal one-thousand-year reign, with the renewal of the Sinai theocracy, including sacrifices in a rebuilt temple. After this, there will be (6) another fall or rebellion in the millennial kingdom itself, after which Christ will (7) return with all of the saints, including those who had been raptured, to (8) judge the nations and then (9) judge the saints for rewards in heaven. Then finally arrives (10) the eternal state. This view is associated with \*dispensational premillennialism\*, formulated by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). This view of the end times was popularized by the C. I. Scofield Reference Bible, prophecy conferences, Bible colleges, and a vast network of Christian pastors and radio and television ministries. Revived especially by the popular Left Behind novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, dispensationalism is taught by John MacArthur, Charles Ryrie, and many others; it is popular also among evangelicals and Pentecostals in the Global South. Dispensationalists believe that Israel and the church are two completely different groups and that God has a distinct program for each.

Besides amillennialism and dispensational premillennialism, there are other major end-time views among evangelical Christians: especially, \*historic premillennialism\*. This view differs from dispensationalism in various ways. It does not necessarily distinguish so sharply between Israel and the church and either rejects or questions many of the details in the dispensationalist scheme. Nevertheless, historic premillennialists agree that Christ will return before a literal thousand-year millennium. As its name suggests, \*postmillennialism\* holds that Christ will return after a literal thousand-year reign. Where premillennialism tends to think of history in terms of decline and catastrophe (especially in the dispensationalist version), postmillennialism expects the gradual improvement of the church and, as a result of its influence, the world at large.

In contrast with all these views, amillennialism cannot be characterized as optimistic or pessimistic. Rather, it is a paradoxical view of these last days: optimistic about the success of the gospel throughout the world, while expecting this triumph to proceed through an era marked by common ills (natural disasters, wars, injustice) and the persecution of the church from without and the continuing struggle with sin, false teaching, and schism from within. Only when Christ returns to establish his everlasting reign will this tension between the "already" and the "not yet," this present age and the age to come, be finally resolved. In the meantime, God's common grace keeps this present evil age from total entropy--especially for the purpose of keeping open that hole in history that Jesus' ascension created for the planting and growth of a vast field that he will harvest on the last day.

According to an amillennial interpretation, we should not assume that biblical prophecy is weighted toward the past or the future. Rather, it is part of the "already"/"not yet" dialectic of redemptive history. Since Christ's ascension and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, we have been living in "the/these last days" (Ac 2:17; 2Ti 3:1; Heb 1:2; Jas 5:3; 2Pe 3:3; Jude 18; 1Pe 1:20; 1Jn 2:18), before the "last day" (Jn 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:28). Paul says that "the end of the ages has come" (1Co 10:11). Nevertheless, there is more ahead. Christ appeared "at the end of the ages" (Heb 9:26), yet spoke of "the coming age." That "age to come" is even now breaking in upon us through preaching and sacrament (Heb 6:5). It is a period in which the kingdom has been inaugurated by Christ's earthly ministry, empowered by the Spirit, advanced through witness to the gospel, consistently opposed by the world even to the point of great tribulation for the saints. Christ is reigning in grace from heaven by his Word and Spirit. Yet he will return in power and glory on the earth. With his second coming will arrive the resurrection of all the dead and the last judgment as one single and sweeping event. In this perspective, believers are not awaiting a series of intervening events and regimes, but Christ's return in judgment and resurrection-power. Although he favors the premillennial view, Wayne Grudem observes, "This [amillennial] scheme is quite simple because all of the end time events happen at once, immediately after Christ's return."

Paul understood Christ's reign as "already" and "not yet": "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1Co 15:25-26). Even those who receive the signs and seals of the covenant without embracing the reality itself are nevertheless "enlightened have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb 6:4-5). If this is true of those who eventually fall away, how much greater is the reality that believers embrace (v. 9)? The presence of the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge (arrab6n) of the consummation ensures that what he has begun in us he will complete. The Spirit brings the blessings of the age to come into the present, which fills us not only with unspeakable joy but also with unutterable longing for the "more" still up ahead. The strong man is bound (Mt 12:28-29; Lk 10:18), so that the veil of unbelief may be torn from the eyes of Satan's prisoners. Christ has triumphed over Satan at the cross, and in his resurrection and ascension he has led captivity captive. According to the epistles, Christ is now reigning (Ac 2:24-25; 3:20-21; 1Co 15:25; Heb 1:3, 8, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13). For this reason, Jesus can assure his persecuted saints, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:17-18).

In this interim period, the kingdom advances alongside the suffering and even martyrdom of its witnesses. Yet Christ "will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb 9:28; cf. 10:37). As we have seen, the regeneration of all things works in concentric circles, beginning with the inner person and then, at the consummation, including the resurrection of the body and the complete renewal of creation. Wherever the New Testament treats the complex of Christ's return, the resurrection, and the last judgment, no intervening raptures, resurrections, or judgments are mentioned. Grudem believes that in John 5:28-29 Jesus refers to two resurrections, with "those who have done good [coming out] to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." However, Jesus' reference here is not to two separate events but to two separate destinies.

If Revelation 20 were straightforward historical narrative--or even prophecymwe would follow the dictum of dispensationalism to interpret it "literally wherever possible." However, the

apocalyptic genre of the entire book is to be taken seriously on its own terms. To take symbols literally is not to take them in their natural sense. Dispensationalists certainly recognize that there is much in Revelation that is symbolic. In fact, symbolic interpretations sometimes border on the fanciful. So both positions allow for symbolic interpretation of what are obviously symbols.

The question, then, is whether we should interpret Revelation in the light of biblical apocalyptic (especially in Ezekiel and Daniel) or as secret codes to be cracked by daily news headlines. The prophets used numbers not as a secret language but as another way of conveying truth. For example, "Ten thousand times ten thousand" is an idiom referring to a great multitude (Da 7:10). Also in Daniel, the saints will suffer tribulation at the hand of a blaspheming king for "a time, times, and half a time" (7:25): three and a half times, that is, half of the total time of seven judgments (4:16; 9:27). Seven is the number of God, enthroned in his Sabbath rest, and six is the number of the sinful empire that sets itself against Yahweh and his Anointed. Every seventh day is a Sabbath, and in the old covenant there were also annual and jubilee-year Sabbaths: the "sevens" multiply, layer upon layer, to lead Israel to hope in a greater Sabbath rest. The detailed measurements of the heavenly city in Revelation 21 (vv. 10-17) are based especially on Ezekiel's prophecies. If we were to take these as literal measurements of an edifice, it would contradict the point that the rich symbolism supports: namely, that in the age to come there is no local temple at all, since the whole cosmos is the sanctuary, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (v. 22). These prophetic symbols direct us to Christ, not to the nation of Israel or political intrigues in the daily news. Especially in the light of the straightforward statements of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament, it makes better sense to interpret the thousand years of Revelation 20 as symbolizing the present reign of Christ. In this perspective, the part of John's vision that we find in Revelation 20 happens in heaven, not on earth, and in the present day, not simply in a future event. The whole book is meant to be read not chronologically but as snapshots of the current age of the church from a heavenly point of view and to provide comfort and assurance to the suffering church by testifying to the final triumph of the Lamb.

With good reason, premillennialists wonder how we could interpret Revelation 20 as occurring now, when it seems obvious to them that Satan is not bound and that he is in fact deceiving the nations. Yet if Satan were not currently bound--if he were free to rule and reign over the earth--there could be no church, much less one that endures through the centuries despite heresy and schism. Christ clearly promised that he would build his church and that not even the gates of Hades would be able to withstand its assaults (Mt 16:18). In addition, premillennialism must somehow explain how Christ's glorious reign in power for a thousand years following his return can conclude with yet another falling away."

It is true, as Grudem observes, that Revelation 20 speaks not only of Satan being bound but of his being thrown into the bottomless pit. 9 Yet here again it is quite consistent with prophecy, especially apocalyptic, to understand this as a telescoping of this action, encompassing both the period of his being bound (now) and the consummation of his judgment (destruction in the future). He still "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1Pe 5:8), but this is consistent with an amillennial interpretation of Revelation 12, where Satan is cast out of the heavenly sanctuary, unable to affect the outcome of redemption, and yet persecutes the church on earth. This interpretation underscores the point that it is the ministry in the heavenly courtroom that is decisive and that whatever Satan is allowed to do on earth is finally nothing more than the desperate and futile struggle of a defeated foe.

Grudem refers also to 2 Corinthians 4:4, where it is said that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the glory of Christ." Yet it is precisely Satan's being bound that finally thwarts this effort. To the ends of the earth, the blind see. Grudem also refers to 1 John 5:19, where it is said that "the whole world is in the power of the evil one." However, when read together with the many passages indicating that the kingdom has been inaugurated, is progressing through the gospel, and that all authority now belongs to Christ in heaven and on earth, such passages reveal that the imprisonment of the world is precisely the condition that Christ's kingdom of grace is overturning. At present, he is looting Satan's kingdom, liberating captive hosts in his train. The world lies in darkness, but a growing remnant in every nation has seen a great Light.

For amillennialists, the already/not yet tension will not be resolved until Christ returns. Just as Christ's life was both humiliation and exaltation, the church suffers even as it fulfills its mission to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. Neither a kingdom for which we are still waiting nor a kingdom that we must bring about, Christ's reign in grace is a kingdom that we are even now receiving from heaven.

Moreover, in response to Grudem's argument that the Old Testament prophecies (such as the wolf dwelling with the lamb) anticipate "a momentous renewal of nature that takes us far beyond the present age," we may again appeal to principles of prophetic interpretation. Apocalyptic language draws on natural images to express the force of major turning points in redemptive history. Even in secular literature of the ancient Near East, wolves and lambs, serpents and doves, routinely describe the violent and peaceful condition of nations. Furthermore, the telescoping pattern of prophecy anticipates penultimate (semirealized) and ultimate (fully realized) fulfillments.

We have to recall the context and purpose of the Apocalypse. John's strange and wonderful visions were given by Christ first of all for the comfort of early Christians who were suffering extreme persecution under the Roman Empire. The book begins, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave [John] to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near" (Rev 1:1, 3, emphasis added). A greeting is then offered to the seven churches in Asia Minor. These are actual churches in John's day. They are to be comforted by the fact that Christ is now already "the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth," who "has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen" (1:5-7). Jesus is preparing his flock for imminent slaughter, assuring them that he is now already king over all powers and authorities and that he will, in due time, return to set everything right (1:17-18). Great persecution did come upon the church and has continued uninterrupted in various parts of the world ever since. The events interpreted in Revelation lie neither entirely in the past nor entirely in the future, but encompass "these last days" that begin with Pentecost and end with the full arrival of the age to come at Christ's appearing.

According to an amillennial interpretation, then, we are presently living in the "thousand years" of Revelation 20, longing not for a literal millennium with yet another fall into sin but for the everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace that will dawn with Christ's return in judgment and restoration. Borrowing imagery from the natural world, we can say that God promises a state of affairs in which erstwhile enemies (wolves, lambs, and lions) will be at peace."

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