

Eschatology Overview Selected Scriptures

Introduction

This week and next week I will be preaching on the subject of eschatology, which simply means doctrine of last things. What the Bible reveals is going to happen in the future is a common subject of interest to people, but even more so when major events such as the current pandemic and social turmoil come upon us. People would like to know how all that is happening currently might fit into God's plans for the future. In addition, what people believe about future prophecy will have a direct effect on how they view current events.

Eschatology is one of the subjects that is included in the Systematic Theology course I teach every four to five years. It is also a subject I have taught a couple of times in great depth taking many months to cover the details with 70 pages of notes. Obviously I will not be covering the subject in that kind of detail in just a couple of sermons. However, I do want to give you a theological overview this week and discuss the three major interpretive grids that are used by professing Christians in trying to understand what God has said about the future, and then next week, I will explain what this church believes will happen in the future and why. While today's message will be more of a theological discourse than a sermon, it is very important to understand the theological foundations for a view in order to evaluate it properly and recognize its strengths and weaknesses.

Let me quickly add that worldview, including theological premises, are critical to what people believe, the arguments they will make in trying to understand a problem, and the solutions they come up with to try and solve a problem. A major reason that individuals, groups, states and nations have responded differently to the current pandemic is directly related to worldview. SARS-CoV-2 is not an unprecedented pandemic since there have been several pandemics in the past with flu like symptoms that have been worse, and we also already had SARS-CoV-1 in 2005 and found ways to combat it including use of hydroxychloroquine. However, government response and societal fear to COVID-19 has been unprecedented. What has changed? Primarily it is worldview.

In previous generations that were more religious, whatever known human mitigation would be applied to lessen the impact of a contagious disease, but greater trust was placed in God so there was less fear and panic. Even now, those who trust God are less fearful than those who do not. Those of us who know and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ can be at peace because we know that our lives are in God's hands and that heaven our assured destination.

In the past, it was largely accepted that God had created man with an incredible immune system to fight off bacterial and viral invaders. It was understood that once you had a virus and survived it, your body had produced antibodies that would isolate and kill that virus if you were infected with it again in the future. Vaccines were developed to stimulate your body to produce those antibodies without getting sick with it by giving you either a dead or weakened virus or one very similar to it. When you were sick, you were given medicines to relieve the symptoms and you were directed to food and activities (including sleep) to enable your body to better fight the infection. That is not the dominate understanding among government and societal leaders in the year 2020. They have been compromised by evolutionary ideas combined with cherry picked Christian moral stands while pursuing power and fortune for themselves.

Fear is generated by their belief that SARS-CoV-2 is evolving to become genetically stronger and more dangerous and therefore an existential threat to human life. That is contrary to the fact that

mutations are causing biological organisms to devolve and become genetically weaker, and that includes viruses, but that is what these folks believe. A true evolutionist would advocate letting evolution take its course reasoning that those humans that survive will have evolved a way to defeat the virus and thus be superior and strengthen the species. However, since there is still a left over Christian moral element of trying to keep people from dying, which can also be played well politically, efforts, in this case extreme ones, are made to that end including the quest to develop some kind of magical vaccine. I say magical because those who have already had COVID-19 are being told that if they do have immunity, then it may only be short lived. That would not only make this a truly unique virus, but it also means they believe that no normal vaccine can give you immunity, so they have to come up with a magical one that will be better than your already developed antibodies. Of course, there is a lot of money to be made in this and it allows governments to have unprecedented power while waiting for the magical cure, so normal medications that would help you fight the symptoms and supplements to boost your immune system are not being promoted, and Google, youtube, twitter, facebook as well as the liberal news media suppress the stories, doctors and studies that show what does work. All the hope is being directed at developing a new vaccine for which we will not know the effectiveness or side effects for a long time to come. That is not following science of what is already known. It is following the philosophy of a world view.

What does that have to do with eschatology? Nothing directly, but a lot indirectly since the last days will be marked by such human arrogance and pride in rebellion against God. However, their limited knowledge and ability is being cruelly displayed as their focused efforts on trying to suppress COVID-19 blinds them to the even greater number of people placed at risk and dying from their pestilential socialistic totalitarian policies that have resulted in medical neglect, improper nutrition and starvation, stress related diseases, and a significant rise in suicides. That is without mentioning the economic devastation and destruction of social relationships. It also shows how easy it will be for governments to control their people through fear including here in the United States, and how robust nations can be reduced to hollow shells quickly, and for a world dictator to arise.

A Christian's understanding of eschatology will effect his understanding and response to current crises. Is this in preparation for the tribulation period being like the days of Noah? Is this part of "birth pangs" before the end comes? Is this a set back to Christ's return or is it a means by which a new world order of peace will arise which will usher in Christ's return? Is this just another wave in the to and fro between good and evil in human existence? The answer to those questions all depend on your view of eschatology.

Issues in Eschatology

There are many issues when studying the topic of eschatology, but underlying them all is trying to understand prophetic passages that were of future events at the time they were given. Some have already been fulfilled as history has unfolded in the thousands of years since the prophecies were made. The many fulfilled prophecies concerning the first coming of Messiah are examples of that as would the prophecy in Joel 1 of a locust plague that occurred sometime around 860-850 B.C. Other prophecies describe things that do not fit any historical events and therefore at least appear to be still future. Some examples of this would be Joel 2 & 3 and its signs in the heavens, Amos 9:13-15 and the incredible productivity of a restored Israel which will not be rooted out of their land again, the many prophecies of a future reign of Messiah such as in Daniel 7:9-14, and the many events described in the book of Revelation. Revelation 20:1-10 is actually a key prophetic passage that must be explained for it defines the central issue that divides the three major views of eschatology.

¹ Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ² And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³ and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he

must be released for a short time. ⁴ Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. ⁷ When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, ⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. ⁹ And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Within this passage, the term “one thousand years” occurs six times, so it cannot be overlooked. The Latin term *mille*, referring to one thousand, gives the basis for the names used for each of the three major theological views in relationship to the thousand years mentioned in this passage. They are Pre-millennial, Post-millennial and Amillennial. I will explain more about each view as the sermon progresses, but each is briefly defined as follows: Pre-millennial - Jesus returns prior to this thousand year period. Post-millennial - Jesus returns after this thousand year period. Amillennial - there is no visible millennium with the thousand years referring to a spiritual period of an undetermined length of time usually equated with the church age and Jesus returning at the end of history.

It must be pointed out that there are many variations within each of these views, but it is the differences in how the thousand years in Revelation 20 and Jesus’ return in relationship to it that give the primary definition to each of the major views in Christian eschatology. It can be easily seen from even a cursory study of Revelation 20 that there must be something underlying such different interpretations of the passage, and there is. It is hermeneutics.

Hermeneutical Foundations

Hermeneutics is the technical term for the methods used to interpret the Bible. The methods used by each theological system are very different resulting in very different interpretations as demonstrated in the views on eschatology. Though there are many variations of interpretive methods, they can be divided into two major categories of either literal or allegorical.

The pre-millennial position is based on a literal method which is more precisely identified as grammatical - historical exegesis. In this method, the Scriptures are studied and interpreted according to the literary and historical context of the passage. The quest is to understand the author’s message to his intended audience using the meaning of the words and grammar at the time of his writing in its historical and cultural context. We seek to answer the question, how would this passage be understood by those to whom it was first written? Application to current times can only occur once the original meaning of the message is understood. Interpretation according to modern definitions, current political-social events and present cultures is contradictory to this method. Tragically, many supposedly “conservative” Bible colleges and seminaries are teaching the later methods instead of the grammatical-historical one.

A quick examination of Revelation 20 makes it easy to see why this method results in a pre-millennial position since the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” returns in Revelation 19 to put down the rebellion on earth and chapter 20 begins with Satan being bound for a thousand years and thrown into the abyss where he cannot deceive the nations for a thousand years. That is an understanding that easily comes from a literal reading of the texts.

The amillennial position is based on allegorical interpretation in which an author's message is understood to be an analogy to or allegory of a spiritual meaning. The literal meaning may be acknowledged, but it is subservient to alleged deeper meanings which, depending on the particular allegorical methods being followed, could include separate doctrinal, moral and heavenly meanings. Allegorical interpretation does not arise from the text itself but rather from a method that interprets words and phrases to have additional meanings that remain hidden without the theological system and its allegorical keys of understanding. That is why in many churches the people are taught that they cannot understand the Bible without the direction of the Bible teacher or church leaders. That is directly taught in Roman Catholicism which requires a priest who knows the teachings of the church fathers and the magisterium. In other churches it is taught indirectly by Pastors who present themselves to be the Biblical authority and give messages that cannot be understood according to any normal reading of the text. The people begin to believe that they cannot study and understand the Bible for themselves, so they become increasingly dependent on interpretations given by religious authorities. Theological systems govern what is taught instead of Biblical exegesis of what God has said. Frankly, that was the problem of both the scribes and Pharisees who had replaced the doctrines of God with the musings of men.

The post-millennial position is based on a mixture of interpretive methods and is most often found in churches following Reformed traditions. Interpretation of passages on doctrines such as soteriology - salvation, pneumatology - the Holy Spirit, or Christology - Jesus Christ, are done with literal methods and so are usually very Biblically solid. However, allegorical methods tend to dominate interpretation of prophecies and especially those concerning the future. Some hold that the thousand years is that length of time, while others view it as an unknown length of time and are very close to the amillennial position.

Prophecy and Israel

Another major issue in eschatology is what the Bible says about the future of the nation of Israel. The early church began within Judaism and then extended to the Gentiles as the gospel went to Samaria and throughout the Roman empire as recorded in Acts. The early church was also Chiliastic - the Greek term for 1,000 - and anticipated the return of Christ and the establishment of Jesus on David's throne in Jerusalem. In the early fourth century, the rise of Constantine to power ended the persecution of Christians in the Roman empire and gave them a favorable position which eventually led to a compromised church as non-believers came into the church in order to gain government and societal favor. With this change coupled with the popularity of Origen's emphasis on a spiritual manifestation of the kingdom of Christ in the soul of a believer rather than in the world, amillennialism began to rise and dominate with Augustine's allegorical interpretations becoming the official doctrine of the western church in the medieval period. Coinciding with this, Gentile influence became dominant in the church and prejudices against the Jews rose leading to what we now refer to as Replacement Theology. This is the idea that God has cursed the Jews and replaced them with the Church. Allegorical interpretation favored this because Old Testament passages could then be used as directly applying to the church. The promises of future restoration and blessing for the nation of Israel were now interpreted as blessings for the church. Interestingly enough, seldom are the curses on Israel applied to the church. But human nature desires to gain blessings and avoid curses.

The post-millennial position became strongest in the 19th and early 20th centuries as human progress arising from the gains made in the industrial age gave hope for era of peace and prosperity that would usher in Christ's return according to their theology. That theological position was dealt a strong blow with the coming of WWI and nearly fatally injured with WWII as it became obvious that humanity was not getting better. The establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 gave a great boost to the pre-millennial position as it became obvious prophecy was being fulfilled and hope for Jesus' return spiked. As Jesus has tarried, faulty preaching about the "generation" in Jesus' parable of the fig tree in Matthew 24 has led to a decline in the pre-millennial position and a rise in the other positions. Tragically, along with that change there has also been a rise in anti-Semitism since those positions also teach Replacement

Theology. Many protestant churches are now siding with and aiding the self proclaimed Palestinian Muslims against Israel. Why? Because they believe God has cursed Israel and that it has no future as a nation in God's plans.

I must quickly add here that there are amillennialists and post-millennialists that support Israel. In fact, it was post-millennialists in England that sought to reestablish the Jews in their homeland with the Balfour Declaration being a key factor. However, it must also be recognized that Replacement Theology feeds anti-semitism, so theological positions including eschatology do matter in daily life.

Does Israel have a future? That is a major issue in eschatology which again hinges directly on the method of interpretation. Again, the post-millennial and amillennial positions both say no because they believe the church has replaced the nation of Israel. The pre-millennial position is split between historical and dispensational views. The dispensational position is that the millennium is a specific period - a dispensation - in which Jesus Christ will rule from Jerusalem over a revived Israel that fulfills the promises to the nation, while the historic view sees it more in terms of a continuation of the Church which will include Jewish converts.

The problem with all of the positions except the dispensational pre-millennial one is that all the many prophecies given to the nation of Israel must be explained away as either being spiritually fulfilled or fulfilled in the church as Israel's replacement. That is actually very serious since it calls into question the veracity and faithfulness of God to keep His promises. The Lord made an "everlasting covenant" with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:7) that He confirmed that unilaterally (Genesis 15). The promise of salvation in Isaiah 55 is based on an "everlasting covenant" according to the faithful mercies God has shown to David. The new covenant in Jeremiah 32 is an "everlasting covenant."

Multiple times the Lord states that Israel will break the covenant, yet He would still keep it. After the Lord directly charges Israel with breaking the covenant, He states in Ezekiel 16:60 "*Nevertheless, I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you,*" and then continues on to verse 63 citing that He would forgive them. The Lord made promises of unconditional restoration of the nation despite their rebellion against Him. For example, Leviticus 26:44-45 states, ⁴⁴ "*Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God.*" ⁴⁵ "*But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD.*" This is a theme that runs through the prophets with promises of restoration of Israel after God has judged them. There has been and always will be a remnant that will receive His blessings. Paul points this out in Romans 9 that though Israel is currently judged, yet there is a remnant that will be saved and a posterity that will be left. He solidifies this in Romans 11:5 stating that at the present time there is still a remnant according to God's gracious choice and then explaining in Romans 11:25-29, ²⁵ "*For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;*" ²⁶ *and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB."* ²⁷ "*THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.*" ²⁸ *From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;* ²⁹ *for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."*

The whole point of Romans 9-11 is that we can trust God to keep His promises to save us by His grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because God is faithful to all His promises including those He has made to the nation of Israel. An eschatology that removes or explains away those promises is an attack on God's character. God is not a man that He should lie or change His mind (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29, Malachi 3:6; Titus 1:2). I am not saying that those who believe in a post-millennial or amillennial eschatology cannot be true Christians, but I am saying that allegorical approaches to

Scripture interpretation result in beliefs that will lead them astray from what God has revealed which in turn will result in faulty understanding of God, what He is doing and will do, weaker faith, and flawed pursuits.

Next Sunday I give a general presentation of what we believe will happen in the future according to a grammatical - historical interpretation of the Scriptures that believes God remains true to His word and will fulfill all His promises including those to Israel.

Purpose of Eschatology

I want to conclude this sermon by going back to the Scripture reading in 2 Peter 3:8-19. God has not revealed the future for us in order to satisfy our curiosity. While it satisfies the most important questions, it leaves many, many questions unanswered. Peter goes straight to the point in this passage by jumping from the start of the Day of the Lord to the ushering in of eternity in order to emphasize certain attributes of God and call us to live in holiness in the present. If we keep these points of emphasis in mind, we can avoid a lot of fruitless speculation as well as humbly getting along better with those that will disagree with our understanding of what God will do in the future. I will make some summary comments as I read through the passage.

Verse 8 - *“But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.”* God does not view time the same way that you do, so don't put Him in the time box with you.

Verse 9 - *“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”* God is incredible patient with sinful man because moral will is for man to repent and be saved instead of perishing.

Verse 10 - *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.”* The first phrase emphasizes the sudden and unexpected start of the day of the Lord. Jesus makes this same point in Matthew 24:42-44 and Paul does so in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. The rest of the passage jumps from the start of the day of the Lord to the events that occur at the end of it with the destruction of the present heavens and earth as we currently know it. This matches Revelation 21:1 and the coming of a new heaven and earth because the first ones passed away.

Verse 11 - *“Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness.”* This is the pragmatic purpose. If it is all going to be destroyed, then what is the purpose of your life and what should be its priorities?

Verses 12-13, *“looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!”*¹³ *But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.”* Further emphasis and detail of what was said in verse 10 along with encouragement to be looking forward to it. Why? Because what is to come will be so much better than the cursed and sinful world in which we currently live.

Verse 14 - *“Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.”* This is specific instruction about what it means to live in holy conduct and godliness with the added motivation of looking forward to a world in which righteousness dwells.

Verse 15a - *“and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation;”* I frequently cite the first part of this verse because though I long for the Lord's return to be sooner than later, I am grateful for every day the Lord delays His return for it is another opportunity for those still in their sins to repent and be saved.

Verse 15b-16, *“just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you,¹⁶ as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.”* The particular reference is to Romans 2:4 and Paul also writes on this in 1 Timothy

1:16. Peter's comment here is important since he is an apostle who is recognizing that what Paul wrote is also Scripture including those parts that are hard to understand. Those who are ignorant and who waver in their opinions will distort the Scriptures resulting in their own condemnation.

Verses 17-18, *"You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, 18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."* Peter concludes with an admonition for them to protect themselves from those who err in their teaching and to instead continue to increase in their knowledge and walk with Christ since the purpose of life is His glory. Those are still wise words for today.

There are a lot of self proclaimed teachers that claim to know a lot more than they actually do in addition to the false teachers that purposely proclaim false doctrine, so you need to be wise and careful. Those claiming to be prophecy experts are usually already prone to a lot of speculation, which could be interesting, but it too often sidetracks you from what God actually has called you to do. If your study of prophetic and apocalyptic literature does not lead you to increased holiness, then something is wrong and you better reexamine what you are doing and your motivations for it. To repeat Peter's admonition, *"Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless."*

May that be true of each of us.

Sermon Notes - August 9, 2020
Eschatology Overview - Selected Scriptures

Introduction

The importance of worldview

Fearful responses to SARS-CoV-2

Human arrogance & pride in rebellion against God

Issues in Eschatology

Filled and unfulfilled Prophecy

Revelation 20:1-10

Pre-millennial - Jesus returns prior to this thousand year period.

Post-millennial - Jesus returns after this thousand year period.

Amillennial - no visible millennium. The thousand years is a spiritual period of an undetermined length

Hermeneutical Foundations (Methods used to interpret the Bible)

Pre-millennial - the grammatical-historical method, a literal approach

Revelation 20 is easily understood from a literal reading of the text - Jesus returns & the 1,000 years begin

Amillennial - the message is an analogy to or allegory of a spiritual meaning. An allegorical approach

The hidden meanings

Interpretation must come from specially trained people

Post-millennial - a mixture of literal and allegorical methods

Prophecy and Israel

The early church was Chiliastic (pre-millennial) through the third century

Amillennialism arose in 4th century and became dominate - Origen, Constantine, Augustine,

As Gentile influence became dominate, anti-semitism arose aided by allegorical interpretation

Post-millennialism became strong in 19th & early 20th century, but waned after WWI & WWII

Pre-millennialism surged after Israel became a nation in 1948, but has been waning in the 21st century

Amillennial & post-millennial supporters of Israel exist, but Replacement Theology favors anti-semitism

Only dispensational pre-millennialism believes Israel has a place in God's future plans

The Lord's covenants with Abraham & his descendants are "everlasting"

The Lord is faithful to His covenants even when broken by His people (Ezek. 16:60; Lev. 26:44-45)

Romans 9-11. Paul argues God can be trusted because He keeps His promises to Israel

An eschatology that removes God's promises to Israel attacks His character

Purpose of Eschatology - 2 Peter 3:8-19.

Verse 8

Verse 9

Verse 10

Verse 11

Verses 12-13

Verse 14

Verse 15a

Verses 15b-16

Verses 17-18

If study of prophecy & eschatology does not result in increased holiness, something serious is wrong

KIDS KORNER – Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help. Young Children – draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. Older Children – Do one or more of the following: 1) Count how many times "millennial" is mentioned. 2) Talk with your parents about what 2 Peter 2:8-18 says will happen in the future.

THINK ABOUT IT – Questions to consider in understanding the sermon and its application. What effects has worldview had on how people and governments have responded to SARS-CoV-2? What role has evolutionary thought played in this? How do vaccines work? Why are medicines that alleviate the symptoms being suppressed instead of promoted? How do these reactions fit in with what is known will happen in the last days? Give examples of Biblical prophecies that will be fulfilled in the future? Why is Revelation 20:1-10 the dividing passage between the three major Christian eschatology positions. Briefly define each of the three millennial views: pre, post and a. What is the relationship between hermeneutics and eschatological views? What is the grammatical-historical method? Why does that result in the pre-millennial position. What hermeneutic is used by amillennial theologians? By post-millennial theologians? When did the Chiliastic view dominate and why? When did the amillennial view rise to dominate and why? When was the post-millennial view popular and why did it wane? When was the pre-millennial view popular? Why has it been waning? What is the relationship between Gentile dominance in the church, allegorical interpretation, eschatological position and anti-Semitism? Why does dispensational pre-millennialism believe God has a future plan for the nation of Israel? List some of the promises and prophecies God has made about Israel's future. What is Paul's point in Romans 9-11? Why is it an attack on God's character to explain away His promises to Israel? Read 2 Peter 3:8-9 and summarize his point in each verse? In light of 2 Peter 3, what effect should the study of eschatology have in your life?