
Last Days Overview

Building a Biblical Schema

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The study of future things – what is called, Eschatology – has always fueled the interest and the imagination of God’s people. The Bible is full of passages and books dedicated to predicting what will happen in the future. Thinking about what may come to pass continues to grab people’s attention. I grew up in the age of the great prophecy conferences. My father was a dedicated student of eschatology, albeit from a very conservative and dispensational framework.

We are entering a section of the book of Matthew in which Jesus speaks much about what was going to come to pass. Jesus gave these talks before any of them had been fulfilled. Some of what Jesus prophesied has already come to pass, much has not.

The purpose of this sermon is to help make the next chapters in Matthew more accessible. Many in this room will hold to very different views. You will hear these texts and sermons through those frameworks. For those who are new, part of my aim here is to open up how we think about this subject and then to work through the texts. Today, I am not going to take up Matthew, but rather give you an overview of the subject.

One caveat: this is a very important text for thinking about a timeline, what I often refer to as a schema. What Jesus says is primarily based on the book of Daniel. Some of it is clear. Some of it is not clear until you have the 1 – 2 Thessalonians. As we have done with much of this book, we must remember the two audiences. There is the audience of Jesus’ day including His disciples who struggled with what Jesus was saying. Then there is the audience of Matthew’s day who would have had 15-18 years of apostolic teaching as a foundation to understand the complexity of what Matthew wrote.

And finally, this is not, nor could it be exhaustive. I am not even preaching from a full manuscript today. For many of you this may actually raise more questions than it answers. But then, sometimes, preaching in the moment with massive, complex subjects is like that. So take in what you can. Learn what you can. Believe what is in and from the texts. Adjust your schemas to align with the texts.

Let’s get started...

Approaching a Biblical Eschatology

What guides us as we approach this subject?

A Canonical Study

This subject, more than any other, requires that it be developed across the whole range of Scripture. Several years ago, we did a long study on eschatology that expounded Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Zechariah and then moved into the New Testament passages and books. Even then, we had to assume some teaching from early in the Old Testament.

It is important in our Bible to have some sense of the order in which the books were written. In our New Testament, the books are grouped by categories. Even within those categories, they are grouped by size, not by date of writing. I have already noted the importance of understanding that Matthew, while it was the first of gospels, is not the oldest book in the New Testament. Matthew was written in the late 50's or early 60's. For our study, 1-2 Thessalonians were written around 50 - 51. When Matthew wrote his gospel, Paul would have already written extensively on the Lord's coming. What Jesus had said during His ministry would have been widely known. What Matthew wrote *would not have been a surprise* to his audience.

New Testament Interprets the Old Testament

Second, we are committed to the principle that the New Testament interprets the Old. Sometimes, the New Testament simply takes an Old Testament text at face value. It means now what it meant at its first writing. In prophetic texts, that is rarely true. The New Testament, because of the resurrection of Jesus and the mysteries related to the Gentiles, explains, expands and enriches those texts.

Just the fact that the apostles understand that Last Days as beginning at the resurrection is very significant. Peter's preaching in the book of Acts is fascinating in how he handles the texts he alludes and quotes. The New Testament is clear that sometimes, even the writers of the Old Testament texts did not understand all that they wrote.

With this in mind, we eject the notion that a prophetic text can only mean what the original author meant or understood it or that the original audience would have understood. It usually does not mean less than that but often means so much more.

Three-Horizons of Prophetic Fulfillment

We can observe from the Scriptures that most prophecies and Covenants have three related fulfillments.

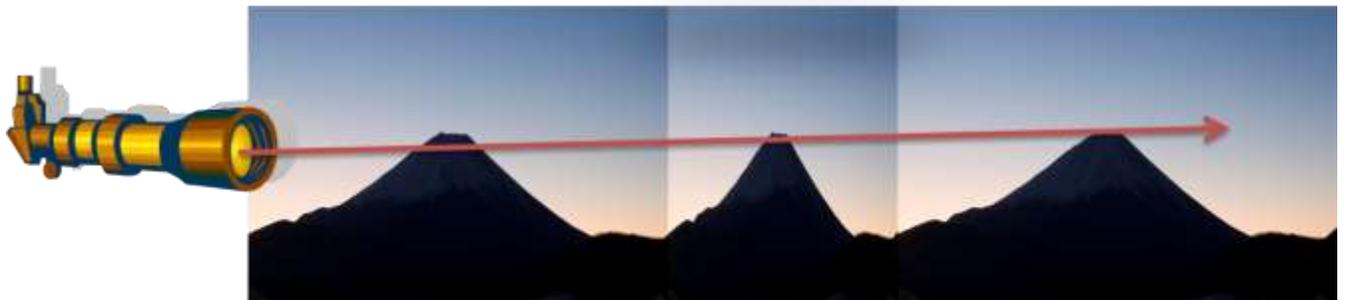


**Near Future
to the Prophet**
Foreshadowing

**Coming of Christ
Birth to Ascension**
Birth and Cross

**Second Coming
Kingdom**
Resurrection
to the Crowning

This is not universal, but often holds true. So when a prophetic text is being explained or is even being fulfilled, it is good to ask, "What horizon are we in?"



**Near Future
to the Prophet**
Foreshadowing

**Coming of Christ
Birth to Ascension**
Birth and Cross

**Second Coming
Kingdom**
Resurrection to the Crowning

This is often the view of the prophet. He can see the events at the top of the mountains, but sometimes does not see the valleys of time between them.

The Last Days began at the Resurrection

We have mentioned this already. If we are not careful, we will think of the New Testament as always using the “Last Days” to refer to an undefined period of time just before the Lord’s return. While that is sometimes true, it often is not. As an example, consider the following Scriptures:

Hebrews 1:1-4

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Acts 2:16-17

¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “ ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

Again, there are some texts that indicate a forward look, even from our perspective. But the “last days” are not limited to that idea.

Allow the Scriptures to speak and interpret themselves.

This is the conclusion we draw from all of the above.

The Old Testament Prophecy

We cannot go into these Old Testament books in depth. My aim here is just to show how Jesus' teaching and Matthew's writing is deeply grounded, not only the Old Testament texts but in a timeline they detect in them.

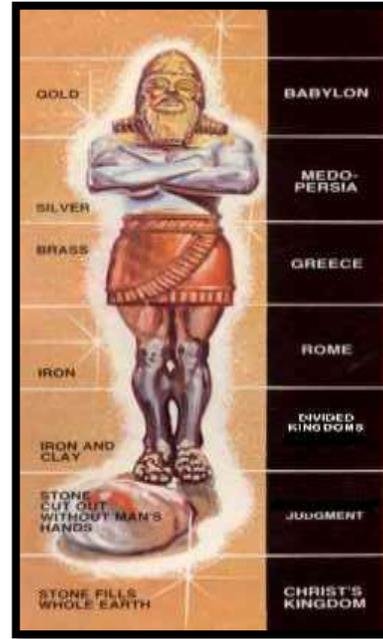
The Book of Daniel

Daniel's prophecies established a very general framework for understanding what is going to take place. Daniel's prophecies have the three phase views. However. Most of them are in the near and far. Daniel is particularly prone, through the telescope of his prophecies, to only see certain mountain peaks.

The prophecies begin in Daniel 2 with Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation of the dream.

In this dream, God reveals through this image the succession of Gentile world powers up until the establishment of God's Kingdom. This includes the Roman empire which has probably been extended in principle through Western democracies and civilization.

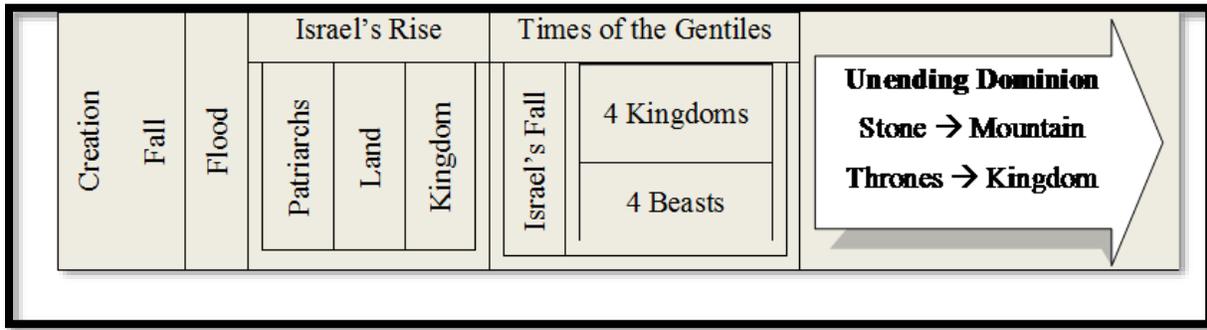
This graphic represents that image and what it meant. Much of what it prophesied has actually already come to pass.



Daniel 7 has the vision of the beasts. It is an initial presentation of the rulers of the Gentile world.

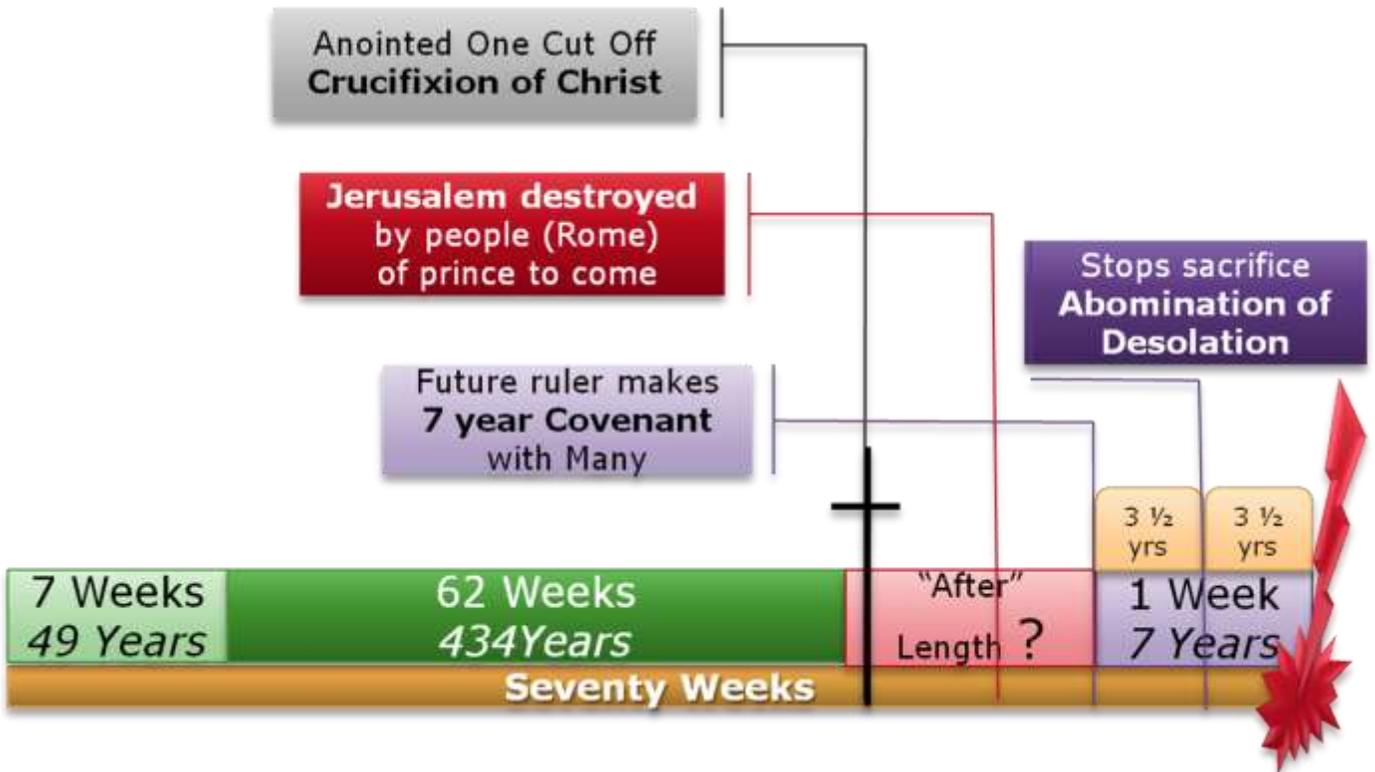
What was Seen		What is Signified
Image of Daniel 2	Beasts of Daniel 7	
Head	Winged Lion→Man	Babylon
Chest	Bone-crunching Bear	Medes and Persians
Thighs	Four headed, winged Leopard	Greece
Legs and Feet	Iron jawed, horned Beast	Rome
Stone →Mountain	Thrones	God's Eternal Kingdom

Daniel has a very important phrase called the “Times of the Gentiles” It can be represented like this:

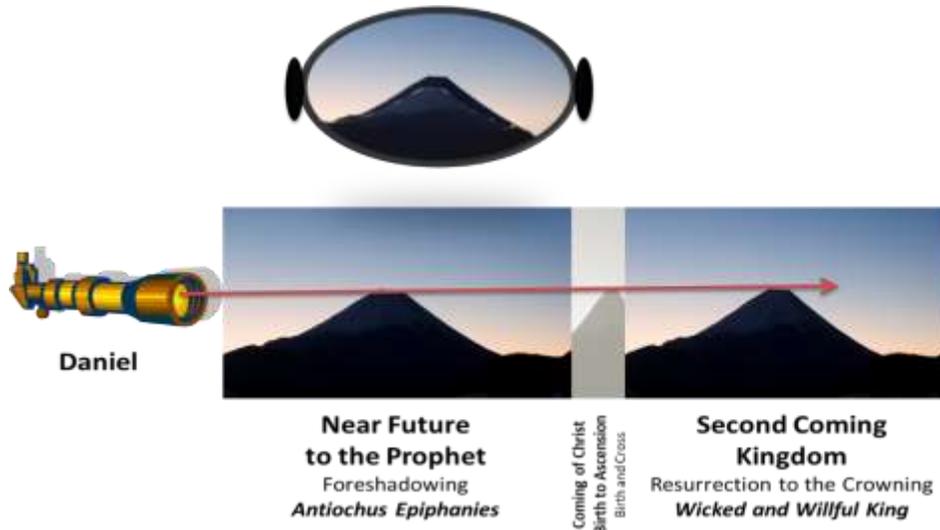


Daniel 9 lays out a timeline keyed around 70 weeks, representing 70 weeks of years. This is important, difficult and has many interpretations.

Notice the important elements of this prophecy.



Even in this, there are multiple fulfillments in view.



The Book of Joel

The book of Joel warns Israel and the nations about the coming Day of the Lord. The Day is a Day of wrath and a day of deliverance. God will pour out His wrath on the unbelieving world on that day. God will also deliver His people from that wrath. This is also important for our understanding of Matthew. References to the Day of the Lord and the Day of Wrath generally are pointing back to that dreadful day prophesied in Joel and alluded to in Daniel.

Other Prophetic Books

Other prophetic books such as Ezekiel and Zechariah add to the prophetic painting with much detail and with rich imagery that is used in the book of Revelation.

The New Testament Texts

We have two Pauline epistles that would have been written before Matthew. These two books both have important end times information in them. Again, it will be impossible to go into detail. So here is a quick overview as context for Matthew.

1 Thessalonians

Concerning the Lord's return, the church was uninformed about certain details that led to unchristian grief.

From 1st Thessalonians we learn that Paul taught much about the coming of the Lord. If he followed the pattern in other churches, then by the writing of this epistle, Paul's teaching in these two letters should have been widely known. In these two letters, Paul addresses both misunderstanding and misapplication of the eschatological teaching they had received.

How people respond and live in the light of the teaching about the Lord's return is a testimony against those who do not believe and actively reject the truth (1:9-10). Faithful living in the light of the Parousia (the appearing of the Lord) and in the context of persecution is evidence of our salvation.

At the Lord's appearing, we will rejoice, yes, even boast in Jesus, about what He was able to do through us. People will be our joy and crown at His appearing (2:19-20). Relationships will be our reward when Jesus comes.

One of our aims for ourselves and for others is to be blameless before the Lord at His return. (3:11-13). This motivates us to give grace to one another and to grow together. But this is not an aspiration – we are striving for spiritual perfection. This is an assurance – we will be presented blameless before the Lord when He comes.

Paul addresses the question of what happens with the dead and the living believers at the Lord's return (4:13-18). Paul gives us great detail about what will happen. This much loved and comforting text teaches us how we will be transformed and receive our glorified bodies. We will all, dead and alive, rise to meet the Lord in the air. Some of the details tie us to Matthew 24-25.

We do not know the day nor hour, but we can, from the Scriptures know the times and seasons. There is general framework in the Bible that gives us indications of when the Lord will return (5:1-11). This is keyed around two prophetic events: what the Bible calls the *Abomination of Desolation* and the *Day of the Lord*. Knowing that the Lord will return and will judge the unbelievers in a time of great trouble, collapse and chaos should motivate us to sober watchfulness. This truth should give us confidence and assurance even in very difficult and dangerous times and seasons.

2 Thessalonians

Concerning the Lord's return, the church had been misinformed and so was led into unchristian fear. Therefore, Paul comes back once again to encourage and to correct more misunderstanding and misuse of the truth of Jesus' return.

We are reminded that the Lord's return is great time of blessing for us. But it is the time of the final outpouring of the wrath of God unbelievers who are alive. It leads to the final judgement where the Lord and His people will be vindicated in the final judgment (1:1-12).

Chapter 2 of 2 Thessalonians is the text that clarified the schema I hold to. After years of thinking and wrestling with texts, there was a moment that a simple call to simply let the text speak for itself opened so much more.

What had disturbed some people in the church? They had either been told or had been falsely taught that the catching away of the saints (what Paul had discussed in his first letter to them), had already happened. Since that had happened, then they were in the period of the Day of the Lord. Paul addresses that. Here is the key for me and those who hold to the schema you have seen today.

2 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵ *Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you these things?*

Paul insists that what he writes here is what he taught them. It is clearly rooted in Daniel and Joel. Jesus' teaching harmonizes with it and Matthew is reinforcing it. With this before, we can begin to explore the next major section of Matthew.

Reflect and Respond

Let us not take these truths which are meant to draw us together in our anticipation of the Lord's return and turn them into debates and divisions. We teach what we believe the Scriptures say. But we understand that many of you will come from different perspectives. We respect that. In these things, let us together affirm and acclaim together, the Lord is coming!!

Remember that all of us must submit to the authority of the Scriptures. This is not just a theory or doctrine about the Scriptures. It means, in all of what we believe, we must submit to the text. This is sometimes very hard, yet is what true faith is.

The truth of Jesus' return is given to us:

To comfort us in loss and grief.

To assure us when faced with persecution, difficulty and hardship.

To motivate us to greater holiness, not to gain what we are not, but rather to express who we truly are.

To rest our hope in the Lord who will come and will vindicate Himself and His people.

To draw us together as His people to celebrate Christ by honoring one another.

May these truths draw out our hearts to greater worship of our Lord, who will surely return one day.