

WE AFFIRM A BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE END TIMES, PART 1

GBC DISTINCTIVE SERIES | VARIOUS TEXTS | AUG. 12, 2018

As we continue our study on our distinctives, we unsurprisingly arrive at *another* debated topic of Christian theology. The subject of the end-times is, of course, the source of much interest, speculation, and contention. Some seek to know every detail and theory about this subject. Sometimes, this is an unexpected dedication, for some of these Christians sadly remain undecided on basic questions of the Christian faith – confident on the timing of the rapture but not on whether their salvation is secure in Christ!

Other Christians seem to find piety in *not knowing*. How many have joked: I'm not a premillennialist, a post-millennialist, or an amillennialist; I'm a pan-millennialist, because it'll all pan out in the end! (Cue awkward laughter.) Again, more pressing doctrines exist concerning the state of one's soul, but there's nothing holy in remaining purposefully ignorant concerning part of the counsel of God – especially such a large portion of it. We should want to study what Scripture says about the end-times, though it mustn't ever eclipse other light the Lord gives us in His Word.

If we are going to engage in the process, though, we can't avoid picking up some theological terminology. The first term to know is **eschatology**, the study of the end-times or *eschaton*. Eschatology includes two categories – personal and universal. If you've been a Christian for five minutes, then the odds are that you've already begun learning the first of these. Your soul has a destination when you die, your "end-times," and personal eschatology introduces you to the questions of judgment, hell, and heaven. We just don't use big words like "eschatology" during gospel presentations – we want folks focused on their hope of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Even so, mankind's fascinated with the second category of eschatology – what'll happen to the whole world in the end. Believers and unbelievers alike watch movies exploring scenarios of global destruction from atomic holocausts, viruses, meteor impacts, killer robots, solar flares, super-volcanic eruptions, and a host of other causes. Unfortunately, folks seem more open to hearing what the Bible says about universal than personal eschatology – one seems entertaining while the other deals with sin. That shouldn't be an invitation to sensationalize what Scripture says and produce numerous B-movies on the subject as sadly, some Christians do.

I say that as a dispensationalist, someone belonging to the category of believers who do this, and that brings us to another important vocabulary word. The term **dispensation** is from the Greek term *oikonomia*, used four times in the New Testament (Eph 1:9-10; 3:2-3, 9; Col 1:25) and meaning economy, administration, stewardship, or simply the way God rules His household. **Dispensationalism**, then, is an eschatological framework as well as an ecclesiastical one, explaining how God works in the end-times as well as in the church. Of course, different categories of dispensational thought exist, but we won't explore that. Sadly, because of sensationalism and some misinformation, be warned that it's a popular view to mock by those who would agree with us on every other distinctive.

With those introductory terms in mind, it's been a struggle for me to decide how to handle this topic. I don't merely want to explain dispensationalism; like with other sermons in this series, I'm hoping to demonstrate the consistent biblical teaching on the topic. We can't do that in one week, so this week, let's focus on *how* we study the Bible and the unified testimony of Scripture found in the Old Testament. Next week, we will look at that testimony in the New and see what to expect on the prophetic calendar. Let's begin with the question of Bible interpretation.

WE AFFIRM A CONSISTENT HERMENEUTIC

The question of hermeneutics is vital in this discussion. It's simply the science (and sometimes the art) of interpreting the Bible, and it must be consistent. Our hermeneutical approach is historical-grammatical; the meaning of the text arises from the context of the words used, the context of the historical events behind their message, and the context of the rest of Scripture. In other words, this hermeneutic follows the three rules for proper Bible interpretation—context, context, and context! It's a literal approach, which means that we read the words as God intended in a literary sense—if they are history, then without subtext; if they are poetic, then within the confines of the figurative language used. When a Bible teacher changes his hermeneutics to make his theology work with a challenging biblical passage—taking a historical text but reading it poetically, for example—then he's mishandling Scripture. To avoid doing this inadvertently, we should strive to be as consistent as possible (2 Tm 2:15).

That means this: don't presume that a text has a hidden allegorical or spiritual meaning that must be mined. We see this, for instance, when the late Harold Camping began teaching everyone that he knew the date of the rapture years back—he derived a date allegorizing the clear teaching of Scripture. Another example is when theologians spiritualize everything in the Book of Revelation to say something other than what it seems to describe—a period of tribulation followed by a millennial kingdom. When a teacher plays with the biblical text, he communicates to Christians in the pew that Scripture is shrouded in mystery that only special teachers can explain.

We can't spend our time proving the validity of a literal hermeneutic, so let's accept it for the moment. Speaking in broad terms, where do we get the hermeneutic of allegorization? It's Greek in origin; Plato was embarrassed by the immoral conduct of the gods in Homer (Zeus was not the most upstanding fellow), so he allegorized the teachings of his pagan holy book rather than accept the literal interpretation of it. This practice swept throughout the Greek world, interesting some Jewish rabbis who were embarrassed by the clear teaching of Scripture. When Christianity spread to these areas, Greek allegorization also influenced their thought.

As a result, the second century church father Origen taught there were “three senses” for every passage of the Bible: physical, soulful, and spiritual. Christians began thinking that literal interpretation was only preliminary—the more intelligent or spiritual (or imaginative!) believer should perceive meaning above and under the text. Augustine solidified a form of the allegorical method in the fifth century, and it was present in later Catholic theologians like Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Nicholas of Lyra (1279-1340).

While the Reformers did quite a bit for the church to regain a literal view of Scripture, they didn't get everything right. The Reformed Baptists would agree on this regarding the Reformers' transforming Old Testament circumcision into Christian infant baptism. Sadly, the Reformation retained some ideas of allegorizing the Bible's

presentation of the end-times (not that we should reject all their conclusions – the Catholic papacy did and does fulfill a function of antichrist, for instance). Added with prevalent anti-Semitic attitudes at the time, the Reformers were not accepting the possibility of a Jewish and establishment of Israel.

This allegorical method continued on with key systematic theologies like from Louis Berkof and Charles Hodge, and prominent commentators and writers like Matthew Henry and A. W. Pink. Don't mishear me: We learn much from such men, heartily recommending these and other resources from the Reformed camp, but we also see an inconsistent hermeneutic on eschatology. This isn't true of all Reformed theologians, as all the early dispensationalists were Presbyterian or in some way Calvinistic in thought – so, a better way is possible.

So, let's consider what a consistent hermeneutic reveals from Scripture.

WE AFFIRM THE CONSISTENT TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE

As I said earlier, I want to devote the most of our time to seeing what Scripture has to say on this subject. We have to read these texts as written and ask ourselves what they communicate. We're not going to be able to see all that the New Testament says, so we are going to save most of that for next week. Today, let's consider the Old Testament covenants.

There are six great covenants that God made with man that are outlined in Scripture. **Let's start with the Noahic Covenant** (Gn 9). Such was the destruction after the great flood that God promised to never destroy the world with water again, placing a rainbow as His signet of assurance (cf. vv. 8-17). Notice God's wording – He says to Noah, "I Myself do establish my covenant" (vv. 9, cf. vv. 11, 13, 15, 16, and 17). This contract would be with "every living creature" (v. 10) – "the everlasting covenant" (v. 16). Even so, it's unilateral, never saying, "Do this to stay dry" – God instead commits to "remember" the covenant (vv. 15, 16). In other words, kids, the good news is you never have to worry that rain will flood the whole world again; God keeps this covenant active and unchangeable today.

Turn now to Genesis 12, because **the second covenant to consider is the Abrahamic Covenant**. In vv. 1-3, notice that God promises land, seed (offspring), make Abram's name great, and a blessing. Look down to 13:14-17; God uses cardinal directions to describe the land He's granting to Abram's descendants "forever" (v. 15). Next, in 15:6, we read that Abram finally "believed in the LORD," and God replies in the next verse that He's giving him "this land to possess it." The Lord then causes a "deep sleep" to fall on Abram (v. 12) and consecrates the covenant by Himself (v. 17). God then describes the geographical dimensions of the land in vv. 18-21. Before we wrap this up, notice in chapter 17, where God changes his name to Abraham and uses the phrase "everlasting covenant" (v. 7). So, we're looking at a unilateral, everlasting promise of God, *just like with the Noahic covenant*. In this case, the contract includes real estate seemingly as long as rainbows shine, without any stipulation for Abraham's descendants.

The third covenant is the Levitical Covenant, which we will mention briefly. God cut this covenant with Phineas and promised "a perpetual priesthood" (Nb 17; 25:10-13). The word "perpetual" may indicate an everlasting nature, and it indeed extends into the through line of Zadok (1 Chr 6:50-53; Eze 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11). In other words, God promises a coming future messianic temple that will be staffed by this priestly line. That is, unless we allegorize the meaning of all these passages.

The fourth covenant is the Mosaic Covenant, which we see in Exodus 19, 20, and 24:17. This is the first covenant we see that's *bilateral*, dependent on the actions of both the people of God and the Lord. Violating it was the reason the Jews were removed from the land during the Babylonian captivity, though God allowed them to eventually return. Another name for it is the old covenant—it's nowhere called an "everlasting covenant!" So, it doesn't supersede the previous covenants; a literal reading of these passages calls us to expect still the land promises and the perpetual priesthood as much as it calls us *not* to expect a worldwide flood of water again.

The fifth covenant is the Davidic Covenant. Let's turn to 2 Samuel 7, where David declares he will build a house for God. God, however, has a different house in mind—one He'll build Himself. There are strong parallels to the Abrahamic Covenant—in v. 9, God promises to make David's name great, and in v. 10, God promises a place for His people where they will never be disturbed again. In v. 11, God promises to make the house for David, and v. 12, He says, "I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom." Notice the next verse says the throne of His kingdom will be forever, so while this speaks of Solomon, it speaks of Someone greater. Verse 14 comforts and warns all David's offspring, but it also ultimately points to the Son of God and the burden He bears on the cross. In v. 15, we see God promise to never remove His lovingkindness from the house of David, saying in v. 16, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." Thus, the Davidic Covenant points to Christ and to the endurance of the people of Israel.

Several other passages speak to this covenant and the coming Christ (cf. Pss 2:7-8; 89; Is 9:6-7; 11:4b, 9, 10, 11). Zechariah 14 records events associated with this covenant that haven't yet occurred, but Jeremiah 33:13, 23-26 records that the covenant will continue as long as there is such a thing as day and night. This means that the Davidic Covenant, with its Abrahamic connections, is yet future.

Of course, the first words we read in the New Testament are these: "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1). Luke 1 reminds us of the connection of Christ with His promise to the house of David (vv. 27, 30-33, 69) and Abraham (v. 55). Jesus asks for a consideration in light of the Davidic Covenant in Matthew 22:41-46. Fast-forwarding to Revelation 22:16, Jesus again reminds us He is "the root and the descendant of David." Of course, we want to save some of these implications for next week.

What I want us to consider now is the fact how elements of these covenants come to pass *literally* with the first coming of Christ. The descendant of Abraham and David, He was crucified and resurrected to new life and is therefore physically able to sit on a throne forever (not in spirit but in reality). The question before us is whether we should then allegorize that throne and the land of the Jewish people so it can be spiritually fulfilled in by the church.

We're not quite done yet; **the sixth and final covenant is the New Covenant** (Jer 31). Jeremiah chapters 2-29 contain condemnations for disobedience, yet, chapters 30-33 give a vision of hope for the future. Here in chapter 31, the Jews are told "the days are coming" (vv. 27, 31, and 38). This is a promise, mentioning literal, physical places. However, the "forever" promise in vv. 38-40 has no precedent in history—either God broke it or it's yet to come.

Of course, we know the New Covenant wasn't broken, though it may not be where we expect it on God's calendar. Isaiah 59:21 also says it is "forever," and Ezekiel 16:60-63 also speaks of the everlasting covenant—even after the people's idolatry finally caused God to remove His glory and the city falls (33:21)—the New Covenant

continues (36:22ff). Here in Jeremiah 33:23–26, we read that God is not done with Israel as long as day and night continue.

But when is this covenant to come in? We know in the New Testament that the New Covenant comes by the blood of Jesus Christ, which we remember during communion (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). However, the physical evidence is lacking that the New Covenant has come.

CONCLUSION

We can see some clear themes arise just from a literal reading of these covenants. First and foremost, they point to the coming Christ. We don't see the need to allegorize truths now that the New Testament has come to try to "fit" Jesus into the Old. The testimony is clear and speak of the gospel He brings, ushering in clear elements of the promises *literally*.

Many Christians accept that, but they also allegorize God's land and other unfulfilled promises to Israel to "fit" them into the church age. Isn't that inconsistent? God already designed elements of conditionality in the Old Covenant that affected the previous promises (Dt 28:15–68), like when the Jewish "forever" status was postponed during the Babylonian captivity but then they *literally* came back to the *literal* land. God later *literally* fulfilled the word of judgment after they rejected the Messiah, leaving the temple in ruin (cf. Mt 24:2) and the Jews outside the land for most of church history. The Jews have *literally* survived in history and the Lord has appointed them to be a nation again in 1948 (cf. Acts 17:26). That seems to match with what Jeremiah 33:23–26 says about the *literal* people of Israel, that anyone who says God rejected the two families of Judah and Israel are wrong.

Romans 9:4 says the covenants still belong to the Jews (we Gentiles only get included because Christ brings us near [Eph 2:12–13]). If we read these promises *literally*, just as we read the ones about Christ, we must conclude that there are prophetic events God still plans to fulfill *literally*. These plans include a future for Israel—a *literal* land for the people, a *literal* temple to the Lord, and a *literal* throne upon which He will physically rule.

Of course, while it seems the New Testament agrees with this assessment, we'll study that question in more detail next week. For now, I not only hope you consider prophecy from idle curiosity, but also from a standpoint of devotion. If God fulfills His Word to wayward Israel, then will He not also fulfill His promise to save you despite your sin? Place your trust in the Messiah; He bore the reproof of the Father for the sins of all who place repent and their trust in Him.