

Your Kingdom Come: The Doctrine of Eschatology

LESSON
THREE

THE COMING OF THE KING



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Your Kingdom Come: The Doctrine of Eschatology

Lesson Three

The Coming of the King

INTRODUCTION

When couples are about to have their first child, they often go through a predictable process. They get extremely excited. They worry about getting everything ready for the baby. They ask friends with children numerous questions. They may even read books and articles. They want to learn everything they can about pregnancy, the birth process, and taking care of a new baby. And those of us who already have children understand why. Having your first child changes your life in ways that can be dramatic, exciting, and maybe a little scary. And something similar should be true when we look forward to the return of our Lord Jesus. His return is going to change everything. So, it makes sense that we would want to understand what's about to happen, and to live in ways that prepare us for his earthly kingdom. This is why we study eschatology.

This is the third lesson in our series *Your Kingdom Come: The Doctrine of Eschatology*, and we've entitled it "The Coming of the King." In this lesson, we'll explore what the Bible says about Christ's return or "second coming," and its relationship to events that lead to the end of the age.

In prior lessons, we've defined eschatology as "the study of last things" or "the doctrine of last things." And we've said that individual eschatology is "the study of how individual human beings experience the events of the last days." In this lesson, however, our topics fall into a different subcategory known as "general eschatology." General eschatology is:

The study of God's universal acts of judgment and salvation in the last days.

It addresses some of the same issues as individual eschatology. But it emphasizes the *events* rather than how individuals *experience* the events.

Our discussion of "The Coming of the King" will divide into three parts. First, we'll examine what Scripture says about the return of Christ. Second, we'll consider the signs of the times that point to his return. And third, we'll survey the major evangelical views of the millennium. Let's begin with the return of Christ.

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Near the end of his earthly ministry, before he ascended into heaven, Jesus assured his followers that he would eventually return. We see this, for instance, in his

Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, 25, and in his Farewell Discourse in John 14–17. Then, at the moment he ascended into heaven, Jesus sent two angels to remind the apostles that he would come back. As Luke wrote in Acts 1:10-11:

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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” (Acts 1:10-11).

Several other New Testament books also mention Jesus’ second coming. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would be ready for it in 1 Thessalonians 3:13. And he reassured them that they hadn’t missed it in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2. The author of Hebrews associated it with salvation for those who waited for Jesus in Hebrews 9:28. Peter described it as the end and renewal of the world in 2 Peter 3:4-10. And in John’s apocalyptic vision in Revelation 22:12, Jesus told John to be faithful until he returned. Jesus’ return to earth is taught throughout the New Testament, and has always been a central article of faith in Christian theology.

Jesus is coming back; he told us in the Bible that he is coming back. We could look at his words in the upper room; we could look at the teaching of the apostles, Paul, Peter, John in the letters, and particularly in the Revelation. So, it is a fact of Scripture that Jesus Christ will return at the end of the age. And that’s a great hope for us because, as believers, we long to see our Savior, and when he returns, then that’s when death will be removed utterly from our experience, we will be made perfectly holy in soul and body, and we will be in the company of all the saints and the holy angels in the presence of Jesus forever. So, we not only confess that Jesus is coming back, but we do so with gusto and longing.

— Dr. Guy Waters

In this lesson, we’ll focus on two aspects of the return of Christ: first, the necessity that he return; and second, the manner in which he’ll come. Let’s look first at the necessity of Jesus’ second coming.

NECESSITY

Many Christians in privileged parts of the world don’t worry very much about Christ’s return. They are largely content to enjoy the blessings of this life, and look forward to life in heaven during the intermediate state. Like the rich young ruler in Mark 10:21-25, their wealth makes it hard for them to place sufficient value on the kingdom that Jesus will consummate when he returns. But in other parts of the world, Christians

suffer for their faith. So, it's easier for them to look forward to the perfect world Jesus will bring. They have no trouble at all recognizing the necessity of Christ's second coming.

It's necessary for Jesus to return because God's work is not done. God's plan is not completed. There is creation, there was a fall, there is redemption in Christ, and there will be consummation. History is coming to a close. God is going to wrap things up. All things that are wrong will be set right. And Christ has *promised* that he would return. He says in John 14 that he goes to prepare a place for us, and that if he goes and prepares a place for us, he'll return and receive us unto himself. Christ is also going to return to judge the living and the dead... There are a number of reasons that the return of Christ is important, not the least of which is that the *return* of Christ is sort of the consummation of the resurrection of Christ. He *is* risen. He is risen indeed. But he is risen *that he might come again*. And this is what we say in the Lord's Supper. Right? "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This is central to the message of the gospel.

— Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.

There are numerous reasons for the necessity of Jesus' return. But for our purposes, we'll focus on his role as Abraham's heir, and his role as David's heir. Let's look first at Christ's role as Abraham's heir.

Abraham's Heir

In Genesis 15, 17, God's covenant with Abraham includes promises of land for Abraham and his descendants. And in both these chapters, the land is specifically identified as Canaan. In fact, that's the very reason that the Bible and theologians refer to Canaan as "the Promised Land." But in Genesis 17:5, God also promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations. In other words, while his inheritance would *include* Canaan as its centerpiece, it wouldn't be *limited* to Canaan. In Romans 4:13, Paul interpreted this promise to mean that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the entire world.

In addition, many years after the events of Genesis 17, God confirmed his covenant with Abraham at Mount Moriah. At that time, God tested Abraham by commanding him to present his son Isaac to God as a burnt offering. This was a shocking command for two reasons. First, God hadn't previously required human sacrifice. And second, in Genesis 17, Isaac had been identified as the heir to Abraham's covenant promises. So, if Isaac were to die, God's promises would appear to fail. But at the last moment, God spared Isaac from death. And then God confirmed his covenant with Abraham in a way that ensured all God's covenant blessings would now be realized

through Isaac. And God added more detail to the covenant vocabulary, so that it explicitly included the *whole world*. In Genesis 22:17-18, the Lord said to Abraham:

Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (Genesis 22:17-18).

In the original Hebrew, these promises refer to Isaac, who was a type or foreshadow that prefigured Christ. First, the word translated descendants and offspring is “*zarah*,” which means “seed.” Now, in its singular form, *zarah* can still refer to a large number of seeds. But in this case, it takes a singular form of the verb “*yarash*,” here translated “take possession,” and a singular form of the possessive pronoun, here translated “their.” So, a more literal rendering of this passage would be:

Your descendant will take possession of the cities of his enemies, and through your descendant all nations on earth will be blessed (Genesis 22:17-18).

In other words, Abraham’s covenant promises would be realized through his special descendant Isaac. And these promises included taking possession of the Promised Land and extending that possession to all nations.

The expectation in Isaac’s day was that he would live in the land he conquered. Of course, as history progressed and God revealed more of his plans, it became obvious that the promises to Isaac would ultimately be fulfilled through his descendant Jesus. Jesus would also be offered as a human sacrifice to God. But this time there wouldn’t be a last-minute reprieve. Just as Abraham’s obedience had earned Isaac a place as ruler of God’s covenant people, Jesus’ own obedience would earn him that same right. And Jesus would personally bless every nation in part by living among them in the land he conquered.

One of the reasons that Jesus’ return is necessary is because of the promises made to Abraham and Isaac. God swore that one of Abraham’s descendants would defeat his enemies and possess the *entire world* as his habitation. And the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is the descendant through whom those promises will be realized. But in order to seize his enemies’ territory, and in order to live in the world he’s conquered, Jesus has to be here — on earth. He has to come back personally, so that the promises to Abraham and Isaac can be fulfilled.

Besides the necessity for Jesus to return as Abraham’s heir, he also has to return because he’s David’s heir.

David’s Heir

As we saw in a prior lesson, Isaiah 9:7 tells us God’s promise that one of David’s descendants would rule over Israel forever. We see similar ideas in 2 Samuel 7:16, and Ezekiel 37:24-28. And Daniel 7:14 adds the detail that David’s heir will actually rule

over, and be worshiped by, “all peoples, nations and men of every language.” But Jesus didn’t restore David’s throne during his earthly ministry, let alone establish a permanent, worldwide, earthly kingdom. And he certainly isn’t worshiped by everyone on earth yet.

Now, it’s important to point out that Jesus is already reigning as king over both heaven and earth. Just before he ascended into heaven, he told his disciples that he possessed complete authority over heaven and earth. In Matthew 28:18, he said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).

Jesus is king over both heaven and earth; he has *all* authority. Paul talked about this in Ephesians 1:20-22. He explained that Christ reigns in heaven, and that his royal rank is higher than any other title that can be given, both in this age and in the age to come. And Paul repeated this idea in many other places, including in 1 Corinthians 15:25, and Colossians 2:10.

But at the present time, Jesus’ throne is in heaven, not on earth. So, in order to fulfill God’s promise to David, Jesus still has to return to earth, re-establish the Davidic throne over Israel, and from there, rule over the whole earth forever. As the angel told Jesus’ mother Mary in Luke 1:32-33:

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33).

Similarly, in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus himself specified that when he sits on his throne rendering royal verdicts on the wicked and the righteous, that throne will be on earth. Listen to Matthew 25:31-32 where Jesus said this:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-32).

The picture is of Jesus coming down from heaven, glowing in radiant splendor — or “heavenly glory” — and attended by armies of conquering angels. And to where is he coming? To earth, where the nations that he plans to judge are located.

All Christians should look forward to the future earthly reign of Christ that will begin when he returns. We see this hope reflected in the apostle John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, 22. And it’s displayed in Jeremiah’s prophecies about Jerusalem in Jeremiah 3:17, and in his words about Davidic kings in Jeremiah 17:25 and 33:17-22. It was the belief and hope of Jesus and those who followed him in the New Testament, and it should be our belief and hope, too.

Having looked at the necessity of the return of Christ, we’re ready to consider the manner of his coming.

MANNER

Jesus has several important tasks left to accomplish in order to consummate God's earthly kingdom — and he'll be accomplishing those tasks personally. So, we know he's coming back. But *how* is he coming back? What will it look like? And how will we recognize him? In the simplest terms, Jesus will descend from heaven as the victorious, conquering King over all creation.

We'll mention four aspects of the manner of Christ's return. It will be personal, physical, visible, and triumphant. Let's look first at the fact that it will be personal.

Personal

As we've seen, it's necessary for Jesus to return to earth *personally* in order to fulfill the promises made to Abraham and David. He won't simply send his Holy Spirit to affect the next stage of the kingdom, although the Holy Spirit will certainly be involved. And he won't merely act through his church, although we'll definitely participate in the events that consummate his kingdom. His return isn't a metaphor that the New Testament uses to describe the large-scale conversion of the lost, or the spread of peace to all nations, or the victory of the church throughout the world. In fact, it's not a metaphor at all. Jesus really is coming back — in person — to finish his work.

After Jesus rose from the dead, but before he ascended into heaven, he spent 40 days teaching his faithful apostles about the kingdom of God. Then, in Acts 1:4, 5, he explained that he was going to send the Holy Spirit to empower the church for ministry. In response to this, in Acts 1:6, the apostles asked him:

**Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?
(Acts 1:6).**

This question reveals an important assumption, specifically, that Jesus himself would restore the kingdom to Israel.

The apostles naturally wondered if Jesus' other eschatological works would quickly follow their reception of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus told them not to speculate about this timing, and only reassured them that the Holy Spirit would empower their ministries. Immediately after this, he ascended into heaven.

So, what were the apostles thinking at this point? It's probably safe to say that they were wondering how the kingdom could possibly be restored when the one who was supposed to restore it had just ascended into heaven. In fact, the very next verses suggest this was the case. As the story continues, two angels appeared and told the apostles that Jesus would *personally* return in the future, presumably to finish his work of consummating God's kingdom on earth. As we read earlier in Acts 1:11, the angels asked the apostles:

Men of Galilee ... why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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 (Acts 1:11).

The fact that Jesus left didn't mean he'd forgotten about restoring the kingdom. On the contrary, he was coming back personally to complete his earthly kingdom. The apostle Peter was so persuaded of this reality that it became part of his gospel presentation. Listen to what Peter told the crowds in Acts 3:21:

[Jesus] must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything (Acts 3:21).

Many other New Testament writers and figures also argued that Jesus will return personally to consummate God's messianic kingdom on earth. But the idea is probably most common in Paul's writings. For instance, in places like 1 Corinthians 15:23, and Philippians 3:20, 21, Paul tied the personal return of Christ to the resurrection of believers. In 2 Timothy 4:8, he said that God would reward those who anxiously await Christ's return. And in Titus 2:12-14, he associated Jesus' personal return with the importance of godly living.

Having seen that the manner of Christ's return will be personal, let's explore the idea that his return will include a physical component.

Physical

It's important to remember that Jesus didn't give up his humanity when he ascended into heaven. He is one person — the Second Person of the Trinity. But he has two natures: a divine nature and a human nature. In his divine nature, Jesus is already present and working everywhere on earth. But he also has human work left to do. And for that, he has to return in his full humanity, including his body. For instance, he's the covenant heir of Abraham and David only according to his *human* nature. As a result, the promises made to Abraham and David can *only* be fulfilled through his *humanity*.

Similarly, in Acts 3:20-22, Luke argued that Jesus has to return in his human nature in order to complete his work as the prophet like Moses. And of course, the angels at his ascension said that he'd come back physically. Recall Acts 1:11, where the angel told the apostles:

This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven (Acts 1:11).

The apostles saw Jesus humanly ascend into heaven, and they were told that they would see him return the same way. That can only mean that he will return in his human body. Besides this, several passages compare our glorified human bodies to the glorified human body Jesus will still have when he returns. And that means that he'll be just as physical as we will be. We see this in places like 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, and Philippians

3:20, 21. The New Testament consistently teaches that when Jesus returns, he'll appear in his glorified physical human body — the same body that rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

Now that we've seen how the manner of Jesus' return will be personal and physical, let's address the fact that it will also be visible.

Visible

It might seem obvious to say that when Jesus returns in his glorified human body, we'll be able to see him. But there are actually some cults that deny Jesus' visible return. Often, this denial stems from the mistaken belief that Jesus has already returned. And since no one saw this return, they argue that it was invisible. One of the most obvious problems with this error is that the New Testament explicitly says that Jesus will be *seen* when he returns. For example, in 1 John 3:2, John wrote:

When he appears ... we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

And in Revelation 1:7, John prophesied:

Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him (Revelation 1:7).

And in Matthew 24:27-30, Jesus himself described his second coming this way:

As lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man... [T]he nations of the earth ... will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory (Matthew 24:27-30).

The last two passages are particularly helpful because they indicate that Jesus won't just be visible to a few people. Everyone on earth will see him. And the reason for this isn't hard to grasp: Jesus' return will be an earth-shattering event. The radiance of his glory will be like the sun, and his heavenly armies will fill the sky. And then every last human being will have to face him on his judgment throne. As Jesus taught in Matthew 16:27:

The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done (Matthew 16:27).

The New Testament tells us that just like the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be; that suggests it's going to be highly visible and indeed something

that's impossible to miss. And in the language of Paul's writings, he speaks of the second coming of Christ being accompanied with a shout and the sound of a trumpet. Again, these are things that suggest to me that the second coming is going to be something that we could not miss even if we wanted to, that God's going out of his way to make sure that we notice this cataclysmic, historical event. So, I would say it's *entirely* visible, noticeable, and *cannot* be missed by any human being that's still on earth at the time of Christ's return.

— Rev. Dan Hendley

So far we've described the manner of Christ's return as personal, physical, and visible. Now let's see how it's also triumphant.

Triumphant

During his first coming, Jesus appeared to be anything but triumphant. He was born to a poor, humble family. He never attained political or military power. And in death, he allowed himself to be condemned and executed like a criminal. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:7-8:

[Jesus] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:7-8).

The Greek verb in the phrase “made himself nothing” is “*kenóo*.” Its use here is the basis for the theological term “kenosis,” which is Jesus' act of veiling his divine glory during his first advent.

Some interpreters have wrongly understood Jesus' kenosis as a loss of certain divine attributes. But God can't stop being God. He can't — even voluntarily — put aside any of his divine attributes. Rather, Jesus' kenosis consisted in *hiding* his glory, especially by means of the incarnation and the indignities he suffered. But when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, his kenosis ended. At that time, the Father pulled back the veil to reveal the glory Jesus has always possessed as God. As Jesus prayed in John 17:5:

Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began (John 17:5).

Jesus' glory has never been veiled again. And when he returns, it will be on full display. He will come in radiance and splendor, riding the clouds of heaven and attended by hosts of angels. Matthew 24:30 says he'll come “with power and great glory.” First Thessalonians 4:16 tells us that he'll be announced “with the voice of the archangel and

with the trumpet call of God.” Second Thessalonians 1:7 tells us that he’ll come with blazing fire and angelic armies. And Revelation 19:11-16 tells us that he’ll be crowned with many crowns, followed by the armies of heaven, and carrying an iron scepter to rule the nations. In short, his appearance will be as a triumphant king leading his armies in victory. And everyone will bow before his power and authority. Listen to Philippians 2:9-11, where Paul described the results of Jesus’ kenosis:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

This is the ultimate victory. When Jesus returns and defeats his enemies, no one will be left to oppose him. Everyone, without exception, will bow and acknowledge his greatness, and submit to his rule. Revelation 22:3-5 teaches that his throne will be in the New Jerusalem, where his glory will be so bright that the city won’t need lamps or even the sun. And Revelation 11:15 indicates that his heavenly kingdom will spread out to encompass the entire world.

As believers, one of our greatest hopes is the future physical return of Christ. When Jesus returns, creation will be perfected and God’s glory will be seen throughout the world. Until that time, part of our job is to live in ways that anticipate and proclaim that ultimate victory. We’re to be holy, to honor our king, and to prepare his kingdom for his arrival. But in some sense, we’re also to be thankful for his delay. Why? Because every day Jesus waits is an opportunity for his enemies to repent, so that they receive his forgiveness now and his everlasting blessings when he returns.

Now that we’ve considered the coming of the king in terms of the return of Christ, let’s address our second major topic: the signs of the times.

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

When we speak of “the signs of the times,” we have in mind the events that indicate the progress of God’s eschatological timeline. As we’ve seen in a prior lesson, the “last days” or “eschaton” unfolds in three stages: the *inauguration* of God’s earthly messianic kingdom, which took place during Jesus’ first advent; the *continuation* of the kingdom, in which we now live; and the future *consummation* of the kingdom that will occur when Jesus returns. In this section of our lesson, we’re primarily concerned with the signs leading to Christ’s glorious return.

We’ll discuss the signs of the times in three parts. First, we’ll see that the timing of Christ’s return is a divine mystery. Second, we’ll highlight some significant precursors to Christ’s return. And third, we’ll identify some interpretive strategies theologians have used to explain these precursors. Let’s begin with the fact that the timing of Christ’s return is a divine mystery.

DIVINE MYSTERY

In Matthew 24:3, Jesus' disciples asked him:

When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? (Matthew 24:3).

Before they even asked him this question, the disciples realized that Jesus was going to leave for a while and then come back. And they knew that he wasn't going to bring in the fullness of God's messianic kingdom on earth until he returned. But they still wondered *when* these things would happen.

In answer to this question, Jesus told them about the signs that would precede his return. In Matthew 24:27-30, he said that the sun and moon would go dark, and that he would then appear in the sky, arriving on the clouds and shining with great glory. But he didn't tell them when it would happen. In fact, he *couldn't* tell them because it was a divine mystery that even he didn't know. As he said 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 (Matthew 24:36).

From the perspective of his *human* nature, even Jesus didn't know when he would return! Sadly, many theologians throughout history have considered themselves to be wiser and better informed than Jesus, and have tried to set dates for his return. But they've all been proven wrong. As Jesus' said in Matthew 24:42-44:

Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come... [T]he Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (Matthew 24:42-44).

Many other passages confirm that the timing of Jesus' return is unknowable, including Matthew 25:13, Mark 13:32, 33, Luke 12:40, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, and 2 Peter 3:10. If there's one thing Scripture says clearly about the timing of Christ's arrival, it's that only God knows when it will happen. No one else can predict it.

Having seen that the signs of the times won't reveal the divine mystery of when Christ will return, let's explore a few significant precursors to his second coming.

SIGNIFICANT PRECURSORS

Even though we can't know when Jesus will arrive, Scripture does mention several circumstances that are precursors to his return. Generally speaking, these precursors aren't absolute. As we saw in a prior lesson, God's prophecies are fundamentally conditional. Just as a potter can recast clay into a different vessel, God has freedom in how he fulfills prophecies about the future. Nevertheless, the circumstances

that Scripture says will precede Christ's return still guide us. They create legitimate expectations for how the future may unfold. And they warn and encourage us as we prepare for Christ's arrival.

We'll mention just three of the most prominent precursors to Christ's return, beginning with demonic opposition to God's kingdom.

Demonic opposition

Scripture teaches that Satan and his demonic forces have opposed the spread of God's kingdom throughout history. So, demonic opposition isn't anything new. But Scripture also teaches that a particularly terrible period of demonic opposition will precede Jesus' return. Revelation 7:14 calls this "the Great Tribulation" — a time when demons will empower false prophets to perform misleading signs and wonders. And similar ideas appear throughout John's visions in Revelation. For instance, in Revelation 16:13-14, John wrote:

I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs... They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs (Revelation 16:13-14).

Jesus also spoke of the great tribulation in Matthew 24:21, associating it with the events surrounding the end of the world. And, like John, he said it would be characterized by false signs and miracles. As Jesus said in Matthew 24:24:

False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect — if that were possible (Matthew 24:24).

Clearly, God's demonic opponents will use every trick and power they have to hinder his plans for his kingdom.

A second precursor to Christ's return is human opposition to God's kingdom.

Human opposition

Scripture describes many human beings that will cooperate with the demonic opposition to God. For instance, Revelation 13 indicates that Satan will use two beasts: one from the land and one from the sea. It doesn't indicate whether these beasts represent individuals, groups of people, or even institutions. But they do appear to be human. For one thing, they influence humanity in a way that implies control over societies and governments. For another, the beast from the land is identified by what Revelation 13:18 calls "man's number," or "humanity's number," or perhaps, "the number of a person." Beyond these beastly figures, a powerful "false prophet" is mentioned in Revelation 16:13, 19:20 and 20:10.

Human opposition to God's kingdom also appears in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10, which mentions a rebellion and "the man of lawlessness." The man of lawlessness will be satanically empowered to perform false miracles, and will eventually proclaim himself to be God. And less spectacular opposition will also exist, such as the false prophets and false Christs mentioned in Matthew 24:24, and the many antichrists talked about in 1 John 2:18.

When we read about demonic activity in the New Testament or about the Antichrist in 1 John, or the beast in the book of Revelation, we realize that all of those evil characters, all of those evil gods, if you will, they can only do what God allows them to do. And as a result of that, it's almost like the book of Job; Satan comes in and he asks Yahweh's permission about what he can do, and so, it's not as if God and Satan are in this dualistic battle, and we're not certain which one will win. It's as if God is working out his plan, and even the Evil One is one of those entities that he uses to make sure that his plan is worked out. So, *nothing* — whether it be the beast or an antichrist or the Evil One himself — nothing can stop the plan of God. And in fact, all of those entities are used to make sure that the plan of God comes forth in the way that it should.

— Dr. Samuel Lamerson

A third precursor to the second coming is successful worldwide evangelism.

Worldwide evangelism

In Matthew 24:14, Jesus gave this prophecy:

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

Despite the various forms of serious opposition God's kingdom faces, the kingdom will successfully present its gospel message to the nations.

Jesus repeated this idea at least twice after this prophecy. In the Great Commission, which he issued after his resurrection, he told the eleven faithful disciples to proclaim the gospel to the nations and to train those that received it. And he associated this work of evangelizing and training with the entire continuation of the kingdom until the end of the age. Listen to his words in Matthew 28:19-20:

Go and make disciples of all nations ... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus' reference to the end of the age suggests that he knew the eleven wouldn't complete this work, and that the church would have to continue it.

Jesus spoke similarly in the last moments before his ascension. In Acts 1:8, he told his faithful apostles that they would use the power of the Holy Spirit to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. And Scripture indicates that this worldwide evangelism will gain many converts. As a result, by the time Jesus returns, the church will include members from every tribe, language, people and nation. We can see this in several places, including John's heavenly visions in the book of Revelation. As just one example, here's John's report in Revelation 7:9:

Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands (Revelation 7:9).

The white robes and palm branches carried by the multitude indicate those that were faithful to God. So, in this vision, John was looking at redeemed people from every part of the world. This tells us the messianic kingdom will push through its opposition and succeed both in announcing the gospel and in gaining converts.

So far our discussion of the signs of the times has covered the fact that the timing of Christ's return is a divine mystery, and several precursors to Christ's return. Now we're in a position to address some interpretive strategies for explaining these precursors.

INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES

All evangelicals agree that the church has always faced opposition, and that it will continue to face opposition in the future. We all agree that evangelism has been successful in the past, and we're determined to continue evangelizing until Jesus returns. Beyond this, we all recognize the importance of global missions, and rejoice that the church exists, perseveres, and thrives all over the world. But despite all this agreement, we sometimes interpret the precursors to Christ's return in very different ways.

In general, evangelical interpretive strategies exhibit four main tendencies. It's helpful to recognize these tendencies so that we can learn from them and improve our understanding of Scripture.

Some interpretive strategies focus on when the precursors to Christ's return will appear in history. These strategies tend between preterism and futurism. At one extreme, preterism says that these precursors appeared in our past and will not be repeated in the future. For example, a preterist might say that the Antichrist was a human being that lived during the first century, and that we shouldn't be looking for anyone like him in the future.

At the other extreme, futurism says that the precursors to Christ's return haven't appeared yet, but will appear in the future. For instance, a futurist is likely to say the Antichrist will live in the last generation before the second coming. And between these two extremes is a wide range of views related to the timing of people and events. For

example, some might say that the Antichrist is a *type* of person or human institution that lasts or is repeated throughout history.

Other interpretive strategies focus on how the precursors to Christ's return will be manifested in history. These strategies tend between historicism and idealism. Historicism relates these precursors to actual people and events throughout history. For instance, during the Reformation in the 16th century, many historicists believed that the Antichrist was the Roman Catholic pope, or even the papacy itself.

By contrast, idealism relates the precursors to Christ's return to abstract concepts and general principles. For example, an idealist might argue that the Antichrist is *anyone* that preaches falsehood and opposes Jesus. And between these two extremes is a wide variety of views that interpret the precursors to Christ's return with varying degrees of historicism and idealism. For instance, some might say that there have been several Antichrists throughout history, but not insist that they be connected through a visible institution like the papacy.

These four tendencies overlap in many ways. And individual interpreters often use different strategies, depending on the passages they're interpreting. A person might tend toward preterism in one passage, and futurism in another, or toward historicism in some passages and idealism in others. Sometimes an interpreter will even use different strategies *within* the same passage.

Each of these interpretive strategies has strengths and weaknesses, and evangelicals use all of these strategies to varying degrees. So, rather than thinking of them as systems that demand our loyalty, it's probably better to conceive of them as tools that help us understand various aspects of Scripture. And when it comes to interpreting a particular passage, we should let the context dictate which tool or tools we use.

Now that we've summarized the Bible's teaching on the return of Christ, and surveyed the signs of the times, let's turn our attention to our third major topic: the millennium.

THE MILLENNIUM

The term "millennium" literally refers to a period of one thousand years. But when we speak of the millennium, we have in mind the eschatological period of Christ's reign mentioned in Revelation 20:2-7. This is the only place in Scripture where this period is said to be a thousand years long. But many interpreters believe the millennium is also mentioned in other passages — especially in Old Testament predictions of a long period of prosperity for Israel.

With regard to the timeline of eschatology, all evangelicals believe that Christ reigns from heaven now. And we all believe that Jesus has to return before God's reign on earth is consummated. In this sense, we all hold to some form of inaugurated eschatology.

As we mentioned in a prior lesson, inaugurated eschatology is the idea that God's eschatological kingdom has begun or "been inaugurated" in Christ, but that it hasn't yet come in all its fullness. But despite our general agreement about the inaugurated nature of

God's kingdom, we often disagree over where to place the millennium in the eschatological timeline. In fact, this kind of disagreement has characterized the church since the earliest centuries.

For instance, Justin Martyr, who lived from approximately A.D. 100 to 165, wrote the following in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 80:

I and others ... are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged.

Here, Justin defended the view that Jesus would return before the millennium. But elsewhere in this same chapter, he wrote this:

I and many others are of this opinion ... but ... many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.

It seems that there have always been a variety of opinions about the timing and details of the millennium.

There are so many schools of thought regarding the millennium, and so many variations within those schools, that we can't possibly cover all their details in this lesson. So, our goal will simply be to introduce the four main systems, and to provide a brief description of each of them. But we also want to emphasize that each of these systems is held by Bible-believing, evangelical Christians. So, regardless of which system we find most reasonable, we should respect those that hold to other systems, and conduct ourselves with love and humility when we disagree with them.

In this lesson, we'll briefly describe four views of the millennium that predominate today: historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. Let's look first at historic premillennialism.

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM

Historic premillennialism is one of two premillennial systems we'll examine. In older writings, it's often called "*chiliasm*," from the Greek word "*chilioi*," meaning "thousand."

The term "premillennialism" itself refers to the belief that Jesus will return before the millennium begins. And the term "historic" denotes that this view has been held throughout church history, unlike the more modern dispensational premillennialism.

Historic premillennialism teaches that the church will go through the great tribulation just prior to Jesus' return. When Jesus arrives, he'll gather the believers that are still alive, bind Satan from influencing this world, and begin his physical, earthly millennial reign. And — this last point is critical — one of the key distinctions of premillennialism is that it looks for Christ to reign physically on earth during the millennium.

Some premillennial interpreters believe the millennium will be exactly one thousand years long, but most allow that “one thousand” might metaphorically indicate a long time of unspecified length. Similarly, historic premillennialism isn’t entirely unified on the details of the “gathering” or “rapture” of believers. So, we should pause to explain it more carefully. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Paul described the rapture this way:

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, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The word “rapture” comes from the Latin version of these verses, which uses the verb “*rapio*,” where the English has “caught up.” So, the “rapture” is the event in which believers are *caught up* or *gathered* to Christ in the clouds.

Historic premillennialism teaches that those believers that remain alive when Jesus returns will be gathered to him in the air. Then they’ll immediately return to earth with him as part of his victorious military parade, and live on earth during his millennial reign. However, some historic premillennialists think the rapture will also include resurrected believers. But others argue that the resurrection of believers won’t take place until the final judgment at the end of the millennium.

In any case, during the millennium, believers and unbelievers alike will enjoy earthly blessings, peace and prosperity. This millennial period won’t be the final state of the new heavens and new earth; although, some historic premillennialists believe the final state will begin during the millennium. But they all agree that the millennium will be far more glorious than our current age. Historic premillennial theologians often see the millennium predicted in Old Testament passages that describe an era of blessed, but mortal life, such as Psalm 72:8-14, Isaiah 11:2-9, and Zechariah 14:5-21.

One of the distinctive components of both premillennial systems is that *unbelievers* won’t be resurrected until the end of the millennium. But, there will still be unbelievers living on earth during the millennium, and there will still be sin and corruption and death. Isaiah 65:20 is thought to refer to this time when it says:

Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed (Isaiah 65:20).

Premillennialists believe that Isaiah predicted a time when people will live much longer than they do now. And they argue that other Old Testament passages, like Isaiah 11:10, 11 suggest that sinners will still seek salvation at this time. Since these descriptions don’t match the present state or the final state, they are interpreted as references to the millennium.

At the end of the millennium, historic premillennialists say that Satan’s rebellion will take place. This will be followed by the resurrection of everyone that hasn’t been

previously resurrected. Then the final judgment will come. At that point, God's eternal reign over the new heavens and new earth will be fully realized.

I hold to a premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, at bottom, because it is the most straightforward reading of the passage... I think it's natural to see that at the end of Revelation 19, the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire and then Satan is not ... the dragon is not thrown into the lake of fire, he's bound for a thousand years. And then before the thousand years there's a resurrection of believers and they reign with Christ for a thousand years. And then, at the end of the thousand years, Satan is released, and then he's captured, and only then is he thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet already were.

— Dr. James M. Hamilton

Having seen how historic premillennialism views the millennium, let's look at the distinctive views of dispensational premillennialism.

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

As a premillennial system, dispensational premillennialism holds that Jesus will return *before* the millennium, and — as in some forms of historic premillennialism — believers will be resurrected before the millennium begins. Jesus will reign physically on earth *during* the millennium. And unbelievers will be resurrected and judged *after* the millennium. But unlike historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism generally teaches that resurrected and still-living believers will be raptured to heaven before the great tribulation begins, and that they'll remain there until the end of the millennium.

One reason for this difference from historic premillennialism lies in the *dispensational* aspect of dispensational premillennialism. Dispensationalism teaches that God works in different ways during different eras or “dispensations.” And one consequence of these dispensations is that God has a different plan for the Jewish people than he has for the church.

According to dispensationalism, God sent Jesus to be the Messiah for the nation of Israel in order to fulfill his promises to Israel in the Old Testament. But when Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God put his plans for them on hold. In their place, God raised up the Gentiles in the church. Of course, there are Jewish believers in the church, too. But God still intends to fulfill his purposes to *national* Israel. To accomplish this, God will rapture the church before the tribulation and deal primarily with Israel during the millennium.

Most dispensational premillennialists believe that those who remain on earth after the rapture will undergo the great tribulation, which will last for seven years. At the end of the tribulation, Jesus will return, and the millennium will begin. Jesus will restore the nation of Israel, and visibly reign over all nations from his throne in Jerusalem. During

this time, God will fulfill his Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel. For example, listen to what God said in Amos 9:11-15:

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name ... I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them... I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them (Amos 9:11-15).

Dispensationalists believe that prophecies like these will be fulfilled for the nation of Israel in the millennium.

At the end of the millennium, Satan will instigate a rebellion, but God will completely defeat Satan and his armies. Afterwards, God will resurrect the unbelievers, plus any believers that came to faith and died after the rapture. Then the last judgment will take place, and the final state in the new heavens and new earth will begin.

I'm a progressive dispensationalist because I think it takes in the best of both covenant theology, which maintains that focus upon the one people of God and the covenant promises in the Old Testament, but also, it takes the best of the classic dispensational view that sees a future program and plan for Israel as well. So, I kind of get the best of both worlds.

— Dr. Danny Akin

Now that we've looked at the millennium from the perspective of historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism, let's explore postmillennialism.

POSTMILLENNIALISM

The term postmillennialism refers to the belief that Jesus will return after the millennium ends. This is in direct contrast to both premillennial systems, which say that he will return before the millennium begins. Another important contrast between premillennial systems and postmillennialism is the location of Christ during his millennial reign. Premillennialism places Christ physically on earth. But postmillennialism locates him physically in heaven while he reigns spiritually on earth.

In the postmillennial system, the millennium is an age of success for the gospel that prepares the earth for Christ's return. Some believe the millennium stretches from Jesus' ascension to his return; others think it will be the last thousand years before he comes back. But all postmillennialists hold that the general trajectory of history throughout the millennium will produce greater and greater success for the gospel and the church throughout the world. Christ's reign will ensure that the nations come to faith. Christian morality will characterize human society. And God's kingdom will eventually

cover the whole world. To support this idea, postmillennialists point to scriptures that ensure Christ's ultimate victory over his enemies, and interpret these as references to his reign during the millennium. For instance, listen to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:25:

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:25).

Postmillennialists generally believe that verses like this teach that Christ will successfully defeat his enemies *before* he returns.

Postmillennialism sees the millennium as a time of increasing victory for the kingdom of God. So, it sometimes takes a preterist position with regard to the great tribulation, believing that it took place in the first century A.D. Still, nearly all postmillennialists acknowledge Satan's rebellion at the end of the millennium, and his defeat when Christ returns.

Like some forms of historic premillennialism, postmillennialism teaches that the rapture will include resurrected and still-living believers. These will meet the Lord in the air when he comes, and immediately return with him to earth as part of his victorious military parade. Unbelievers will also be resurrected at this time, and Jesus will render his final judgments on both believers and unbelievers. Finally, he'll usher in the new heavens and new earth, and the final state will begin.

I think one of the most compelling, biblical reasons to affirm a postmillennial view is when you take a look at redemptive history as a whole... In different times, postmillennialists have believed in a certain thousand-year golden age... But many today that say they're postmillennial don't necessarily believe in any kind of golden age. What they really mean is more of a positive approach to the realities of the gospel, that it's going forth and that the nations will ultimately come before the coming of the Christ, and that it will be an upswing... And when we look in Revelation, we see, as they look at the multitudes, the whole earth, in the new heavens and the new earth, is filled with imagers of God from every tribe, tongue and nation. And I think there's a progressive flow to all of Scripture, pointing to this reality that ultimately God's initial plan, his initial call to Adam and Eve, for the whole earth to be filled with his imagers, will come true. And it'll be the true people of God over the whole face of the earth who have been redeemed and renewed in the image of Christ.

— Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

Having surveyed historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism and postmillennialism, we're ready to address the fourth major eschatological system: amillennialism.

AMILLENNIALISM

The term “amillennialism” literally means “no millennium.” Its name refers to the belief that the millennium won’t literally be one thousand years long. Other systems also allow that the phrase “one thousand years” might be figurative. But all forms of modern amillennialism *insist* on a figurative reading.

Like some forms of postmillennialism, amillennialism views the millennium as the entire period between Christ’s ascension and return. During this time, Jesus reigns over the earth from his throne in heaven. And like *all* forms of postmillennialism, amillennialism believes that Jesus will return *after* the millennium.

What distinguishes amillennialism from postmillennialism is that amillennialism doesn’t *insist* that Jesus’ millennial reign will constantly expand the kingdom and improve the world. From an amillennial perspective, the church’s experience, success and growth will be determined largely by the actions of the church itself, and by God’s free acts of providence. So, it’s *possible* that the world might continue to become more and more faithful to God, but it’s also possible that it might not. With regard to the great tribulation, some amillennialists believe it occurred early in church history, and others associate it with Satan’s rebellion at the end of the millennium.

From this point forward, amillennialism is indistinguishable from postmillennialism. Jesus will crush Satan’s rebellion when he returns. He’ll rapture resurrected and still-living believers, and immediately return with them to earth. Unbelievers will be resurrected, and Jesus will render his final judgments on everyone. And finally, Jesus will usher in the new heavens and new earth, and the final state will begin.

There are several legitimate evangelical interpretations of eschatology, and my view is amillennial... It just seems to me that when you’re looking especially at Pauline eschatology — and of course, Geerhardus Vos wrote that wonderful treatment of Pauline eschatology — you’ll see a simplicity in Paul’s eschatology that Jesus Christ comes and there’s the end, and everything finds its fulfillment at that moment, and we’re ushered into the new heavens and the new earth, and it seems beautifully simple. And great beauty is simple. And it seems to me that biblical eschatology is simple.

— Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Regardless of which view we embrace — historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism or amillennialism — it’s important to remember that each of these views is held by evangelical Christians. And that should incline us to be humble, charitable and teachable as we study the millennial timeline.

One of the most important things to note is that all evangelical forms of millennialism — “post,” “a-,” or “pre” — believe in the future second coming of Christ, the general resurrection of the dead, the

final judgment, heaven and hell. There also seems to be in the last 20 to 25 years or so some growing consensus on some basic ideas, particularly what is often described as the “already and not yet” ideas. George Eldon Ladd, who was a historic premillennialist, was very important in promoting this idea of the “already and not yet,” this inaugurated eschatology idea. But we also see this among amillennialists and postmillennialists, understanding that the first coming of Christ is what inaugurated the last days... There does seem to be a growing consensus on this big idea of “already, not yet.” And I find that encouraging, that despite the differences of agreement, as we continue to study the Scriptures, we’re doing away with some of the problems that each of these views had in the past and coming to more and more agreement.

— Dr. Keith Mathison

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on “The Coming of the King” we’ve considered the return of Christ in terms of its necessity and manner; we’ve explored the signs of the times with regard to divine mystery, precursors to Christ’s return, and interpretive strategies; and we’ve discussed the millennium from the perspectives of historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism.

At many points in church history, differences over eschatology have led to strife and division. And this is just as true today as it’s ever been. But when it comes to the major evangelical eschatologies we’ve mentioned in this lesson, we should resist division. After all, every evangelical confesses that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. We all agree that he currently reigns from heaven. We all believe he’ll return bodily and visibly to continue God’s reign on earth, and that through him all God’s promises will be fulfilled. And we all place our hope in the fact that after the millennium, he’ll bring in the final state of the new heavens and new earth. Our disagreements pale in comparison to the things we hold in common. And our fellowship should reflect that.

Dr. Matt Friedeman (Host) is Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary and founding pastor of DaySpring Community Church in Clinton, Mississippi. Dr. Friedeman earned his M.Div. from Asbury Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. from the University of Kansas. He is a contributing columnist for the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, a political analyst for WAPT-TV, chaplain for the Hinds County Penal Farm, and is very active in prison and pro-life ministries. He is also the author of several books including, *The Master Plan of Teaching*, *LifeChanging Bible Study*, and *Discipleship In The Home*.

Dr. Danny Akin is President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr. is Dean of Seminary at Africa Christian University in Zambia.

Dr. James Hamilton is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Preaching Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church.

Rev. Dan Hendley is Senior Pastor of North Park Church in Wexford, PA.

Dr. Samuel Lamerson is President of Knox Theological Seminary and Professor of New Testament.

Dr. Keith Mathison is Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformation Bible College.

Prof. Brandon P. Robbins is Staff Apologist at the Apologetics Resource Center for Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. Guy Waters is Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sanders L. Willson is Senior Minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, TN and serves on the boards of The Gospel Coalition, Union University and Reformed Theological Seminary.