

Week 22 – End Times & the Return of Christ

End Times and the Return of Christ

The Bible talks about the entire course of history from the creation of man. It also tells us that there will come a time when creation, as we know it, will come to an end. “The world is passing away” (1 John 2:17).

There will be “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). The Bible also speaks of “end times” or “last days.” We refer to these passages in Scripture as “apocalyptic” (from the Greek meaning “uncover”) literature.

In a previous section, we spoke about the perspicuity, or clarity of Scripture. That is, most of the time we can understand Scriptures at face value; we can read the Word and apply it easily, not presupposing some coded, hidden, mysterious meaning. Apocalyptic passages, on the other hand, are highly symbolic and permit multiple legitimate interpretations.

There is a multiplicity of interpretations of each of the biblical passages of the end times. Some say certain passages were foretellings of events that have, by now, occurred. Some say those same passages refer to events that have yet to occur and will take place as a precursor to Christ’s return. Still, others would say that the event described both have occurred in a certain manifestation, and also will occur at some later date in a final manifestation and fulfillment.

Eschatological Views

Eschatology is the field of study of the Bible’s end times passages. When one looks at different views pertaining to the end times, of primary importance is their view on the millennium. The term “millennium” comes from the two Latin terms "mille" and "annus", meaning a thousand years. Revelation 20 makes mention of a 1,000-year reign. Most discussions about these things involve how one interprets Revelation 20:2-7, whether Christ will return before or after this “millennium,” and whether it is a literal 1,000 years or simply represents a very long period of time.

The following four theological views of the millennium are probably the most widely held views.

Classical Premillennialism

In this view, Christ returns before the millennium. This view holds that after Christ’s return, He will set up His kingdom on earth for one thousand years. This view upholds a literal reading of Revelation 20 and typically emphasizes certain negative signs, such as those in Matthew 24 (wars,

earthquakes, the apostasy of believers, the physical presence of the Antichrist, etc.) preceding Christ's return.

Premillennial Rapture

According to this view, Christ raptures the church and then returns again following seven years of Great Tribulation. Similar to Classical Premillennialism, this view believes in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ after His return. However, prior to Christ's return, there will be a "rapture," or "catching up," of the saints. (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18) This view has popularized the "rapture" of the church as the main event, which will precede the second coming. This is also called the Pre-Tribulation Rapture teaching because they often believe the church will be delivered from the Tribulation by this secret rapture.

Amillennialism

Adherents of amillennialism do not adhere to a literal millennium, 1,000- year reign of Christ. This position teaches that the millennium reign of Christ began sometime between the death and the resurrection of Christ, where they believe Satan was bound (Colossians 2:15; Revelation 20:2). They believe that 1,000 is a symbolic number (Psalm 50:10), instead of a literal, and represents a long but unspecified period of time preceding Christ's coming. Considering the apocalyptic nature of Revelation, and acknowledging that "thousand" can mean "unlimited" in other places of Scripture, this position is plausible. "Thousand," therefore, refers to the entire church age until Christ comes again.

Postmillennialism

According to this view, Christ returns after the millennial reign through His church on earth. This view is the most optimistic eschatological position because they believe the millennial reign of Christ begins at some time in history before Christ returns. Postmillennialists believe the church will progress in numbers and influence to such an extent that the world will ultimately be Christianized. Although evil will not totally vanish, the church will have asserted an amazingly strong role in society and the world, after which Christ will return. Their emphasis is the victory of Christ through the church in the earth...then the end will come.

Preterism

In this view, the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation are prophecies about events in the immediate future of those who were listening, but in our past. These writings used the standard prophetic vocabulary of familiar metaphors to predict, in detail, the end of the Jewish nation 40 years ("this generation") later. Preterists fall into three camps: amillennial, postmillennial, and heretical. Amillennial and postmillennial preterists can be thoroughly orthodox and Biblical Christians who join the whole church of all ages in expecting "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, Amen." In contrast heretical preterists, who call themselves "full" or

“consistent” preterists, claim that all of the prophecies of the Bible have already been fulfilled, and we have no future resurrection to look forward to. This denial places them outside the Christian epic.

These various views will continue to be debated. What we don't know is when Jesus is coming again. What we know for certain is He will. A solid belief in the physical second coming of Christ is solid orthodoxy. The particular details will continue to be discussed until He comes. Jesus summed it up by saying this: “Occupy till I come.” (Luke 19:13, KJV)

Review

1. What is eschatology?
2. Name the most accepted belief regarding the millennial reign of Christ?
3. What do you believe are the key signs of Jesus' second coming?