

Foundations 101

Date: December 10, 2008

Topic: Eschatology: The Study of “Last Things” or End Times

Summary: What will happen when Christ returns and all things are reconciled?

Reading Assignment: Systematic Theology pg. 1091-1157 or Bible Doctrine, Grudem pg. 427-437.

I. Eschatology Defined

We believe in the sudden, personal, visible and bodily return of Christ. This is a recurring source of hope for believers in the New Testament and it's a promise given by Jesus throughout his teachings. While there are some disagreements on exactly what will happen when he returns there is little to no debate on the fact he will come again.

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Matt. 24:44)

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:3)

“...and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” (1 Thess. 4:16)

One area of significant debate is whether Jesus can come back at any time. While some believe he can come back at any moment others say that certain things must happen before he can come back. Which is it? There are a number of clear signs that should precede the coming of Christ.

- Preaching to all the Nations (Mark 13:10; Matt. 24:14)
- The Great Tribulation (Mark 13:7-8; Luke 21:20-24)
- False Prophets working signs and wonders (Mark 13:22)
- Signs in the Heavens (Mark 13:24-25; Matt. 24:23-24)
- Coming of the Anti-Christ (2 Thess. 2:1-10)
- Salvation of Israel (Rom. 11:2; Rom. 11:25-26)

The impact of these verses is that it has led many Christians to assume that Christ cannot return at any moment. This would seem to accomplish exactly the opposite of what Jesus meant the signs to accomplish. The signs were meant to arouse our readiness and holiness, not help us decide when he might return. So a hybrid view is best to hold here. Instead of believing that the signs must occur in the future or have occurred in the past we believe that “while unlikely it is possible that the signs have already been fulfilled in the past” (Grudem, pg. 1101) This accomplishes the goal Christ had for the signs and protects the integrity of the scriptural mandates.

II. Components (what will happen?)

When Christ returns to the earth we are told that he will bring about certain things. These things make up the components of eschatology. The debate concerning eschatology is centered around the timing and order of these components not their existence. The components we can be sure of are as follows:

1. **Millenium**

The millennium means “one thousand years.” The term comes from Revelation 20:4-5, where it says certain people “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years had ended. Prior to the millennial reign an Angel came down from heaven, bound up the Devil and threw him into the pit for a thousand years so that he could deceive the nations no more. There are three basic views on the millennium

2. **The Judgement**

3. **Eternal Punishment/Reward**

4. **New Heavens and New Earth**

5. **The tribulation**

For those who hold to a premillennial view they must also decide when the tribulation will happen. The expression “great tribulation” comes from Matt. 24:21, “for then there will be a great tribulation, such has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” This has been historically known as a time where Christians will suffer greatly under the rule of false prophets and the Anti-Christ. Historic

premillennialism believes that Christ will return after the great tribulation citing Matt. 24:29-31:

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (Matt. 24:29-31)

This time of tribulation is believed to last for 7 years. This comes from Daniel 9:24.

"Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place." (Daniel 9:24)

Many believe during this time the Anti-Christ will cause much suffering for Christians because of the way Revelation speaks of the power of our enemy on earth in the end times.

"One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain." (Revelation 13:3-8)

"He said, "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end. Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand. And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days. Blessed is he who waits and arrives at the 1,335 days. But go

your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days." (Daniel 11:9-13)

6. The rapture

Over the 19th and 20th century a “pre-tribulation” view became popular. This view believes that Christ will “rapture” Christians and take them out of the world before the tribulation. There are several reasons given for this view. They include the thought that the tribulation is the wrath of God poured out on the world and it would be inappropriate for God to leave his children in that situation. This is not consistent with the teaching of the New Testament, which says that all the suffering in the tribulation is a result of multiplied wickedness not the wrath of God. (Matt. 24:12) Another reason would be Revelation 3:10 which says:

“Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.” (Rev. 3:10)

This verse seems to indicate that God will take his people out of the world before this time of “trial.” However this verse applies directly to the church of Philadelphia not the entire church in the future. And the time of “trial” is not necessarily the “great tribulation” but more likely is referring to a time of trial for the Roman church under Nero or some other tyrannical leader. And his promise to “keep” them from the hour of trial is not enough evidence to believe he will “take” them out of the world. This phrasing (keep you) usually applies to one's faithfulness not to their security. This also would be a strange dynamic that teaches the opposite of what Jesus teaches about physical suffering.

“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.” (Matt. 24:9)

The idea of being “rapture” or taken up to be with Jesus has scriptural support in 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” (1 Thess. 4:17)

Other scriptures such as John 14:3 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 also speak of being changed in the “twinkling of an eye” but there is no reason to believe this will be a secret rapture for only Christians to see. These are thought of as public and visible raptures that will be a witness to the whole world. If you consider the verse preceding 1 Thess. 4:17 it totally takes away any possibility of this “rapture” (only verse in the Bible that mentions it) being private.

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” (1 Thess. 4:16)

The idea of a “secret rapture” that would take Christians out of the world and leave everyone wondering what happened actually originated in the late 1820’s. During the British Advent Awakening Edward Irving planted his church the Catholic Apostolic Church. They believed deeply in speaking in secret tongues. They would regularly receive “words” from the Lord and one particular evening a young girl named Margret MacDonald received a “word” about a “secret rapture” and the doctrine was birthed. So it wasn’t conceived from hours of prayer and bible study but from a young girl and a hyper-emotional revival meeting.

7. **Satan destroyed**

III. The Views for Eschatology

There are 4 basic views for eschatology. Of course there are numerous hybrid views and unfounded ideas but 4 views have dominated church history and have at least some scriptural support.

1. **Historic/Covenant Pre-millennialism**

This view, which has a long history, basically says that Jesus will return “before” or “pre” the millennium or thousand-year reign. According to this view, the church age (began with Acts till now) will continue until a time of great persecution known as the “great tribulation.” After that time of tribulation at the end of the church age Christ will return to establish his millennial kingdom. When he comes back believers who have died will be raised from the dead, their bodies reunited with their spirits and these believers will reign with Christ on earth for a thousand years. The believers who have been raised from the dead and those who were on earth when Christ returned will receive glorified bodies that will never die and they will reign on earth with Christ. Of the unbelievers who remain on earth when Jesus comes back many will repent, turn to Christ and be saved though many will not and persist in sin till their judgment. At this time Satan will be thrown into the pit (Rev. 20:1-3) so he has no influence on earth during the millennial reign. After the thousand-year reign Satan will be loosed from the pit at which time he will gather the many non-believers who may have falsely repented at Christ’s return and have continued in inward rebellion against him. They will go to war with Jesus and lose, after which will come the final judgment.

2. **Dispensationalism/Pretrib-Premillennialism**

This view has gained popularity over the last 2 centuries in England and the US. It is much like historic premillennialism in that Christ will return before the millennial reign but in this view he will also return secretly right before the time of tribulation. He will then secretly take the current Christians out of the world

leaving the unbelievers to suffer through the tribulation in hopes that some of them will repent and be saved. This is known as the “pre-tribulation” view. This comes from one verse in the NT and a charismatic movement in the late 1820’s.

“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” (1 Thess. 4:17)

One other major distinction is that this view is almost exclusively held by dispensationlists who wish to keep a clear separation between Israel and the Church. This view allows that distinction by taking the “church” out of the world before the tribulation when the widespread salvation of the Jews is believed to happen.

3. A-millennialism

This view says that there is no future millennial reign and Revelation 20 is describing our present time in history or the “church age.” This time ends with the return of Christ. This view is mainly built on the current climate of the world, not any scriptural evidence.

4. Post-millennialism

This view says that the growth and impact of the church and the gospel will continue to increase until we have a Christian society. This time will continue for a while, but not necessarily a literal thousand years. This age will end with the 2nd coming of Christ. This view holds a very optimistic view of the power of the gospel to change lives and change the world and is increasingly popular during times of revival or times of global peace. Their scriptural support is taken from the Great Commission as well as verses like Matthew 13:33 that speak of the kingdom growing like a seed or leavened flour. They see this as a clear indication that the kingdom will expand until the end and usher in the millennial reign.