

VII. An Introduction to Eschatology

December 1/2, 2010

Various

Aim: To introduce theological concepts regarding the end times and the return of Jesus Christ before addressing the eschatological passages in 1&2 Thessalonians.

Two passages in 1 Thessalonians, 4:13-18 and 5:1-11, and two passages in 2 Thessalonians, 1:6-12 and 2:1-12, are concerned with the subject of the return of Jesus Christ. The study of future events, including the Second Coming, is called 'eschatology.' Traditionally, 'eschatology' refers to the doctrine of the last things (in Greek, *eschaton* is an adjective meaning 'last'). Eschatology includes, among many other issues, questions about the existence and nature of a future millennium. There are honest disagreements here even among conservative scholars. One's millennial position does partially affect the interpretation of these eschatological sections of 1 (and 2) Thessalonians. Therefore, this lesson is a 'parenthesis' in our study of 1 Thessalonians; a brief detour to introduce eschatological and millennial concepts before addressing Paul's teaching on the Second Coming of Christ in 1& 2 Thessalonians.

A. Overview of the Four Millennial Views

The great event of the future is the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Scriptures plainly teach that this advent will be personal (1 Th. 4:16), visible (Acts 1:11; Mt. 24:30-31), sudden and unexpected (1 Th. 5:2-3; Mt. 24:27), glorious and triumphant (Heb. 9:28; Phil. 2:5-11; Lk. 9:22-26; Rev. 12:5; 19:11-16).

The word 'millennium' does not appear in Scripture (neither does 'Trinity'); however, the concept of a millennium is derived from the 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20:1-6. Throughout history, there have been three common views of Christ's return relative to a millennial reign of Christ. The three views – 'pre-', 'post-', and 'a-' bear their names in reference to when Christ returns in relation to the millennium. Pre-millennialists believe Christ will return first and establish a millennial kingdom; post-millennialists believe Christ will return after a millennium of gospel advance, and a-millennialists do not believe in a literal 1000-year period occurring in relation to the advent of Christ.

Historically the church has had devout men holding all three of the main millennial views. In recent times, a fourth view, the dispensational view of pre-millennialism, has grown to be very popular. It is to be considered distinctly different than historic pre-millennialism. Despite its popularity, it is a relatively new theological viewpoint. In the PCA, officers in good standing may hold any one of the three historical views. At Covenant PCA, the current members of the Session are all amillennial, although we have had post-millennial teaching elders in the past.

1. Dispensational Pre-Millennialism

Dispensationalists hold that Christ's Second Coming will not follow, but will introduce the millennium. Dispensationalists interpret Scriptures, especially Old Testament prophecies and the symbolism of the book of Revelation using what they call the 'literal hermeneutic.' That is, they 'take the Scriptures in their literal and normal sense,' leaving little room for figurative language or spiritual application. Even when the Bible is clearly symbolic, they seek to apply a literal method of interpretation. This has led, amongst other things, to the dichotomy of God's people between the Jewish nation and the church. Dispensationalists believe that Christ offered a literal,

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physical kingdom to the Jews but they rejected it. This led to a ‘parenthesis’ in which the church was established. Since the Church is not Israel, it cannot in any sense be a fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecies, but something unknown to the prophets. Thus, most Old Testament prophecies cannot be fulfilled by the Church, but must be postponed until a future, literal millennial kingdom is established on earth centered on the Jewish nation.

The order of events is as follows:

1. A period of apostasy preceding the Lord’s coming.
2. The Lord will come in secret, and will raise the dead saints, snatching them away together with the living believers – an event commonly called the ‘secret rapture.’
3. There will ensue a short seven-year period of great tribulation, in which the Antichrist will rule the earth.
4. Then Christ will appear from heaven openly, Armageddon will be fought and Christ will overthrow Antichrist and the hosts of evil. This will usher in the Redeemer’s glorious reign at Jerusalem, and the temple and the sacrificial worship will be restored.
5. At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be loosed again, and will stir up rebellion against God. His crushing defeat will be followed by the resurrection of the wicked and their judgment and the eternal state.

2. Historic Pre-Millennialism

The coming of Christ will be preceded by certain signs such as the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, wars, famines, earthquakes, the appearance of the Antichrist, and a great tribulation. Historic pre-millennialists do not believe in a secret rapture, but they do believe that the Church will pass through the tribulation and will be on earth during the rise and reign of the Antichrist. They reject the idea of a two-stage coming of Christ before the millennium, and hold that Christ will appear open to take away His saints and to overthrow Antichrist by overwhelming power and establish His millennial kingdom on earth. Evil will be held in check during this age by Christ who rules with a ‘rod of iron.’ However, at the end of the millennium there is a rebellion of wicked men which almost overwhelms the saints. After the millennium the non-Christian dead are raised and the eternal states of heaven and hell are established.

3. Post-Millennialism

Post-millennialism teaches that the second coming of Christ will follow the millennium. The kingdom of Christ is now in existence and will gradually extend its borders through the preaching of the gospel. At the close of the gospel dispensation there will be a millennial period when Christianity will prevail upon the earth. Evil, which will make progress alongside of good up to the millennium, will during the millennium be restrained, and Satan will be bound. Evil is not eliminated but will be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual influence of Christians is heightened. The church will assume greater importance and many social, economic, and educational problems will be solved. The millennium will be followed by an outbreak of wickedness and a terrible final conflict with the forces of evil led by Satan, and there will ensue simultaneously Christ’s Second Coming, the resurrection of all the dead, and the final judgment.

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4. Amillennialism

The amillennialist sees no ground in Scripture for a millennium before the Lord's coming, and he holds that the possibility of a millennium after His coming is excluded by New Testament teaching. He agrees with the 'pre' view that the world will not be converted before the Lord's coming by the preaching of the gospel; while he agrees with the 'post' view that the Second Coming ushers in the end of the world, the last judgment, and the eternal state. He believes that there will be a continuous growth of good and evil in the world which will culminate in the Second Coming of Christ when the dead shall be raised and the last judgment held. Amillennialists hold that the kingdom of God is now present in the world as the victorious Christ is ruling His people by His Word and Spirit, though they also look forward to a future, glorious, and perfect kingdom on the new earth in the life to come. The order of events, according to the amillennialist, is as follows:

1. The Second Coming will be preceded by widespread apostasy from the true faith, which will come to a climax in the appearance of Antichrist.
2. This final rebellion against Christ will be overthrown by Him at His personal appearing, when He will come from heaven to take to Himself His own people, believers who have died being raised and living believers being changed.
3. At this coming, the wicked dead will also be raised for judgment. The earth and the works that are therein will be overwhelmed in fire (2 Pe. 3), and a new heaven and new earth will appear, in which only righteousness may dwell.

B. General Eschatological Teaching in the New Testament

1. Some New Testament Concepts

a) *Last Days*

This expression is very often used of the whole gospel age in which we now live (cp. Heb. 1:2; Acts 2:17; James 5:3; 1 Pe. 1:20). In other words, the incarnation of Christ has introduced the final period of the world's history.

b) *Already Citizens of Heaven*

Christ has ascended to the right hand of God the Father, and believers being vitally and mystically united with Him are therefore with Him in a spiritual sense, inhabiting the eternal world (heaven). See Eph. 1:3; 2:6; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1-3.

c) *The Two Ages*

Christ is enthroned not only in this world (age), but also in that which is to come (Eph. 1:21). The age to come is evidently the eternal state, for in it there is 'eternal life.' Under these two ages Christ includes all time, present and to come (cp. Lk. 20:34-36). The idea of two ages does not leave room for a third millennial age.

d) *Parousia and Apokalupsis*

The Greek word *parousia* ('coming' or 'arrival') means 'personal presence,' and is used of the return of the Lord as that event relates to the blessing of the saints and the destruction of the wicked (cp. Mt. 24:37-39). *Apokalupsis* ('apocalypse') means 'unveiling' or 'revelation.' The

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use of this word emphasizes the visibility and suddenness of the Lord's return (cp. 1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Th. 1:7).

2. Christ's Teaching

1. Parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:24-50).
2. Parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27)
3. The Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:1-51)
4. Parable of the ten virgins (Mt. 25:1-13)
5. Parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30)
6. The Sheep and the Goats (Mt. 25:31-46)

3. Paul's Teaching

1. Acts 17:30-31; 24:15
2. 1 Th. 4:13-18; 5:1-11
3. 2 Th. 1:4-12; 2:1-12
4. 1 Cor. 15:12-58
5. Rom. 2:3-16

4. Peter's Teaching

1. Acts 10:42
2. 1 Pe. 1:3-4, 13
3. 2 Pe. 3:1-14

C. The Book of Revelation

1. Views of Revelation

a) *Preterist*

The Preterist (from Latin *praeter*, 'past') holds that the book has in view, primarily at least, events contemporaneous with the apostle or imminent when he wrote. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD is a significant event which fulfills much of the destructive passages of Revelation. The Preterist interpretation would resolve Revelation into a handbook of the history of the Church under the Caesars.

b) *Futurist*

The Futurist holds that the book has in view, primarily at least, the climactic events centering around the return of our Lord. This view postpones the real importance of most of the book, in its primary reference at any rate, to a short period at the end-time. Thus, the futurist view asks us to believe that the Book of Revelation for the most part has nothing to do with the Church, her trials and conflicts and triumphs. Most pre-millennialists, especially dispensationalists, are futurists.

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c) Historicist

The Historical view claims that the book does not deal with some limited phase of Christ's kingdom at its beginning (as does the preterist) or at its close (as does the futurist), but with the grand sweep of the history of that kingdom from the First Advent to the Consummation. There are three different schools within this view.

The Church historical school takes the book as setting forth the chief phases of Church history. The continuous historical view differs in that it interprets the book as historical *without a break*; there is no overlapping of the visions. The kingdom historical school is sometimes called the 'symbolical' or 'spiritual' school. This school does not take the book as a continuous and unbroken record of Church history, nor even in the strict sense as a précis of Church history.

The Book of Revelation has an emphasis not only on the great climactic end-time event, but on the establishing and preserving of the Church in the meantime and on Christ's continued presence with her. Revelation 1:19 seems to indicate that the book has to do with the whole history of Christ's kingdom up to the consummation. The book calls on the Christian to fight valiantly and comforts him with the thought of redemption already won and with the thought of the conquering Lamb even now in the midst of the throne.

If the book is concerned with the whole history of Christ's kingdom, is it history without a break? It seems particularly clear at the end of chapter 11 that it is not. In chapters 10 and 11, under the last of the seven trumpets it is proclaimed that time shall be no longer and that the mystery of God is finished, His servants rewarded, and the wicked punished. Thereupon, chapter 12 conducts us back to the first advent.

There is progress in the book towards the great climax. The Seven Letters (chapters 2-3) form a section. The rest of the book falls into six sections. In each of these sections John leads us to the end and then begins again at an earlier point. There is a considerable amount of parallelism betwixt the various sections, and the book moves with increasing crescendo to the climax.

2. Structure of Revelation

In the 'progressive parallelism' view, the book of Revelation consists of seven sections which run parallel to each other, each of which depicts the church and the world from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His second.

Section 1 (chapters 1-3) contains John's vision of the risen Christ and the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. There are references to events, people, and places of the time when the book of Revelation was written. However, the principles, commendations, and warnings contained in these letters have value for the church of all time.

Section 2 (chapters 4-7) contains John's vision of worship in heaven and the opening of the seven seals. The various seals are broken and various divine judgments on the world are described. In this vision we see the church suffering trial and persecution against the background of the victory of Christ.

Section 3 (chapters 8-11) describes the seven trumpets of judgment. In this vision we see the church avenged, protected, and victorious.

Section 4 (chapters 12-14) begins with the advent of Christ and describes the continued opposition of the dragon (Satan) to the church. This section also introduces us to the two beasts who are the dragon's helpers: the beast out of the sea and the beast of the earth.

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Section 5 (chapters 15-16) describes the seven bowls of wrath, thus depicting in a very graphic way the final visitation of God's wrath on those who remain impenitent.

Section 6 (chapters 17-19) describes the fall of Babylon and of the beasts. Babylon stands for the worldly city—the forces of secularism and godlessness which are in opposition to the kingdom of God. The end of chapter 19 depicts the fall and final punishment of the dragon's two helpers: the beast out of the sea, and the false prophet, who appears to be identified with the beast out of the earth (see 16:13).

Section 7 (chapters 20-22) narrates the doom of the dragon, thus completing the description of the overthrow of the enemies of Christ. In addition, it describes the final judgment, the final triumph of Christ and His church, and the renewed universe, here called the new heaven and the new earth.

Though the seven sections are parallel to each other, they also reveal a certain amount of eschatological progress. The last section, for example, takes us further into the future than the other sections. Although the final judgment has already been announced in 1:7 and has been briefly described in 6:12-17, it is not set forth in full detail until we come to 20:11-15. Though the final joy of the redeemed in the life to come has been hinted at in 7:15-17, it is not until we reach chapter 21 that we find a detailed and elaborate description of the blessedness of life on the new earth (21:1-22:5). Hence this method of interpretation is called *progressive* parallelism.

There is eschatological progression in these seven sections as a whole. If we grant that the book of Revelation depicts the struggle between Christ and His church on the one hand and the enemies of Christ and the church on the other, we may say that the first half of the book (chapters 1-11) describes the struggle on earth, picturing the church as it is persecuted by the world. The second half of the book, however (chapters 12-22), gives us the deeper spiritual background of this struggle, describing the persecution of the church by the dragon (Satan) and his helpers. In the light of this analysis we see how the last section of the book (chapters 20-22) falls into place. This last section describes the judgment which falls on Satan, and his final doom.

3. Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6

Revelation 20:1-6 is the only passage in the Bible which speaks explicitly of a thousand-year reign. The passage divides into two parts: verses 1-3 which describes the binding of Satan; and verses 4-6, which describe the thousand-year reign of souls with Christ.

a) *Premillennial View*

The premillennial interpretation of these verses sees them as describing a millennial reign of Christ which will occur after His Second Coming. And it is true that the Second Coming of Christ has been referred to in the previous chapter (19:11-16). If then, one thinks of Revelation 20 as describing what follows chronologically after what is described in chapter 19, one would indeed conclude that the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 will come after the return of Christ.

The common pre-millennial view is that the thousand years of Revelation 20 is the period of Christ's earthly reign over restored Israel and the subdued Gentile nations; during this period Satan is bound and evil is repressed, while with Christ reign His resurrected and translated saints; in this millennium Old Testament prophecies about the taming of wild animals, and the restoration of the temple and its worship and ritual are fulfilled; at the end of the millennium Satan is let loose for a short time, and goes forth to stir up the nations to rebel against the

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beneficent rule of Christ and His saints; in this he is successful and leads an innumerable rebel host, but is overthrown, and then meets his final doom in the lake of fire; the judgment of the wicked ensues.

b) Amillennial View

Because of the progressive parallelism of the book of Revelation, the last section of Revelation does not describe what follows the return of Christ described in 19:11-16. Rather, Revelation 20:1 takes us back once again to the beginning of the New Testament era. That the millennial reign described in verses 4-6 occurs before the Second Coming of Christ is evident from the fact that the final judgment, described in verses 11-15 of this chapter, is pictured as coming after the thousand-year reign. Not only in the book of Revelation but elsewhere in the New Testament the final judgment is associated with the Second Coming of Christ (cp. Rev. 22:12; Mt. 16:27; 25:31-32; Jude 14-15; 2 Th. 1:7-10).

(1) The Vision on Earth (Rev. 20:1-3)

In these verses we have a description of the binding of Satan:

¹Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. ²He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

Thousand years: The book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers. Obviously the number 1000 which is used here must not be interpreted in a literal sense. Since the number ten signifies completeness, and since a thousand is ten to the third power, we may think of the expression ‘a thousand years’ as standing for a complete period, a very long period of indeterminate length. We may conclude that this thousand-year period extends from Christ’s first coming to just before His Second Coming.

Abyss: The ‘Abyss’ is not the place of final punishment (cp. the ‘lake of fire’ in vv. 10, 14, 15). The word ‘Abyss’ should rather be thought of as a figurative description of the way in which Satan’s activities will be curbed during the thousand-year period.

Binding of Satan: During the Old Testament, all the nations of the world, except Israel, were under Satan’s rule. They were deceived by Satan as our first parents were in Eden. Christ gave the Great Commission before His ascension (Mt. 29:18). How can we possibly make disciples of all nations if Satan continues to deceive them in the way he has in the past? In Revelation 20:1-3 John gives a reassuring answer to this question. ‘During the gospel era which has now been ushered in, Satan will not be able to continue deceiving the nations the way he did in the past, for he has been bound. During this entire period, therefore, you, Christ’s disciples, will be able to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations.’ This does not imply that Satan can do no harm whatever while he is bound. It does mean that while Satan is bound he cannot deceive the nations in such a way as to keep them from learning about the truth of God. Later in the chapter we are told that when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations of the world to gather them to fight against and, if possible, to destroy the people of God (vv. 7-9). This however, he cannot do while he is bound. We conclude, then, that the binding of Satan during the gospel age means that, first, he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel, and second, he cannot gather all the enemies of Christ together

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to attack the church. Because of the binding of Satan during this present age, the nations cannot conquer the church, but the church is conquering the nations (cp. Mt. 12:29; Lk. 20:17-18; Mt. 13:24-30; Jn. 12:31-32).

(2) The Vision in Heaven (20:4-6)

In these verses we have the passage dealing with the thousand-year reign:

⁴And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Thousand years: Like verses 1-3, verses 4-6 speak of a ‘thousand-year’ period. We may safely conclude that both sections of this same passage are referring to the same period, which spans the entire New Testament dispensation, extending from Christ’s first coming to just before His Second Coming.

Location of thrones: Where are the thrones in verse 4 located? The word ‘throne’ is used 47 times in Revelation, and in all but three occurrences (2:13; 13:2; 16:10) they appear to be in heaven. John also sees the ‘souls of those who had been beheaded,’ so we are safe to conclude that the locale of John’s vision has now shifted to heaven. While the same thousand-year period is in view throughout, verses 1-3 describe what happens on earth during this time, and verses 4-6 depict what happens in heaven.

Purpose of thrones: John sees those who had been given authority to judge sitting on the thrones. Those who are sitting on the thrones are thus reigning with Christ and making judgments (either in concurrence with Christ or with His approval and authority) about earthly matters.

Those seated on the thrones: Who are seated on the thrones? John says, ‘the souls of those who had been beheaded.’ It is clear that he is not talking about people who are still living on the earth. In other words, he sees the souls of the martyrs—believers who had suffered martyrs’ deaths because of their faithfulness to Christ. He also describes those who had not worshipped the beast or his image or received his mark. While this may be a further description of the martyrs, it may refer to a wider group of saints who remained faithful to their Lord. It is likely in this second clause that John is describing a wider group than just the martyrs. John means all Christians who had remained true to Christ and had resisted anti-Christian powers. Those who had died a martyr’s death would constitute a part of this group but not the whole group.

Resurrection: Now follows the most controversial words in the passage: ‘They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.’ Premillennial interpreters, whether historical or dispensational, understand these words as referring to a literal resurrection from the dead, and therefore find in this passage proof for a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The Greek word *ezēsan* can refer to a physical resurrection (cp. Mt. 9:18; Rom. 14:9; 2 Cor. 13:4; Rev. 2:8). That John is speaking of a kind of resurrection here is apparent from the second sentence of verse 5: ‘This is the first resurrection’—words which obviously refer to the living and reigning with Christ of verse 4. But is this ‘first resurrection’ a physical resurrection—a raising of the body from the dead? Obviously not, since the raising of the body from the dead is mentioned later in

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the chapter as something distinct from what is described here (see vv. 11-13). Only if one believes in two bodily resurrections—one of believers at the beginning of the millennium and another of unbelievers after the millennium—will one be able to understand the *ezēsan* of verse 4 as referring to bodily resurrection. Since the Scriptures elsewhere clearly teach only one bodily resurrection which will include both believers and unbelievers (see Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15), what is described in the last clause of verse 4 must be something other than the physical or bodily resurrection which is to come.

Life in heaven: What is meant, then, by the words ‘they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years’? Those who were sitting on the thrones had already died. Though these believers had died, John sees them as alive, not in the bodily sense, but in the sense that they are enjoying life in heaven in fellowship with Christ. This life is a life of great happiness in which they sit on thrones, sharing in the reign of Christ over all things, even sharing in His judging activity! It is a fulfillment of an earlier promise in Revelation (cp. 3:21). We can appreciate the significance of this vision when we remember that in John’s time church was sorely oppressed and frequent persecuted. It would be of great comfort to those believers to know that though many of their fellow Christians had died, some even having been cruelly executed as martyrs, these deceased fellow believers were now actually alive in heaven as far as their souls were concerned—living and reigning with Christ. Their living and reigning shall continue through the thousand years—that is, throughout the entire gospel era, until Christ shall come again to raise the bodies of these believers from the grave. Thus, the thousand-year reign with Christ in Revelation 20:4 is not on earth, but in heaven with the souls of believers who have died. This reign is not something to be looked for in the future; it is going on right now, and will be until Christ returns.

The rest of the dead: The next sentence, verse 5a, is of a parenthetical nature. The word *ezēsan* (‘lived’ or ‘came to life’) as it is used in sentence must mean the same thing that it meant in the preceding sentence. John is here speaking about the unbelieving dead—the ‘rest of the dead’ in distinction from the believing dead whom he has just been describing. When he says that the rest of the dead did not live or come to life, he means the exact opposite of what he had just said about the believing dead. The unbelieving dead, he is saying, did not live or reign with Christ during this thousand-year period. Whereas believers after death enjoy a new kind of life in heaven with Christ in which they share in Christ’s reign, unbelievers after death share nothing of either this life or this reign.

The second death: What happens to the unbelieving dead after the thousand years have ended is what is called in verse 6 ‘the second death.’ While the second death has no power over the believing dead, it is implied that the ‘second death’ does have power over the unbelieving dead. What is meant by ‘the second death’? Verse 14 explains: ‘This is the second death, even the lake of fire.’ The second death, then, means everlasting punishment after the resurrection of the body. As far as the unbelieving dead are concerned, therefore, there will be a change after the thousand years have ended, but it will be a change not for the better but for the worse.

The first resurrection: ‘This is the first resurrection.’ These words depict what has happened to the believing dead. It does not describe a bodily resurrection, but rather the transition from physical death to life in heaven with Christ. The expression ‘first resurrection’ implies that there will indeed be a ‘second resurrection’ for these believing dead—the resurrection of the body which will take place when Christ returns at the end of the thousand-year period.

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Blessedness: ‘Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection.’ The reason the saints are blessed is because ‘the second death has no power over them.’ The second death means eternal punishment. These words about the second death imply that the ‘first resurrection’ which John has just mentioned is not a bodily resurrection. For if believers should here be thought of as having been physically raised, with glorified bodies, they would already be enjoying the full and total bliss of the life to come, and it would not need to be said that over them the second death has no power.

Priests: During the entire thousand-year period the believing dead shall worship God and Christ as priests and shall reign with Christ as kings. Though John is only thinking here about the thousand-year period which extends until Christ returns, the closing chapters of Revelation indicate that after Christ’s return and after the resurrection of the body these believing dead shall be able to worship God, serve God, and reign with Christ in an even richer way than they are now doing. They shall then worship and serve God throughout all eternity in sinless perfection with glorified bodies on the new earth.

This is the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6. So understood, the passage says nothing about an earthly reign of Christ over a primarily Jewish kingdom. Rather, it describes the reigning with Christ in heaven of the souls of believers who have died. They reign during the time between their death and Christ’s coming.

D. Amillennial Theology

1. Inaugurated Eschatology

‘Inaugurated eschatology’ refers to aspects of eschatology which are already present now during the gospel era.

1. *Christ has won the decisive victory over sin, death, and Satan.* Because of the victory of Christ, the ultimate issues of history have already been decided.
2. *The kingdom of God is both present and future.* The kingdom of God was founded by Christ at the time of His first advent, and continues through His dynamic, active involvement in human history. Its purpose is to redeem God’s people from sin and from demonic powers, and finally to establish the new heavens and the new earth. The kingdom of God means nothing less than the reign of God in Christ over His entire created universe. The kingdom of God is therefore both a present reality and a future hope. We who are the subjects of that kingdom live in a kind of tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ We already share its blessings, and yet we await its total victory. All of history must be seen as the working out of God’s purpose. This kingdom vision includes a Christian philosophy of culture and calling.
3. *Though the last day is still future, we are in the last days now.* The ‘last days’ do not merely refer to the time just before Christ’s return, but is a description of the entire era between Christ’s first and second comings (cp. Acts 2:16-17; 1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Jn. 2:18; Jn. 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48).
4. *As far as the thousand years of Revelation 20 are concerned, we are in the millennium now.*

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2. Future Eschatology

1. *The 'signs of the times' have both present and future relevance.* Amillennialists believe that the return of Christ will be preceded by certain signs: for example, the preaching of the gospel to all the nations, the conversion of the fullness of Israel, the great apostasy; the great tribulation, and the coming of the Antichrist. These signs, however, must not be thought of as referring exclusively to the time just preceding Christ's return. They have been present in some sense from the very beginning of the Christian era and are present now. This means we must always be ready for the Lord's return.
2. *The Second Coming of Christ will be a single event.* Amillennialists find no scriptural basis for the dispensationalist division of the Second Coming into two phases (sometimes called the *parousia* and the *revelation*), with a seven-year period in-between.
3. *At the time of Christ's return, there will be a general resurrection, both of believers and unbelievers.* Amillennialists reject the common premillennial teaching that the resurrection of believers and that of unbelievers will be separated by a thousand years. They also reject the view of many dispensationalists that there will be as many as three or four resurrections.
4. *After the resurrection, believers who are then still alive shall suddenly be transformed and glorified.* The basis for this teaching is 1 Cor. 15:51-52.
5. *The 'rapture' of all believers now takes place.* Amillennialists see no scriptural evidence for a secret rapture of the church into heaven preceding a seven-year period of tribulation on earth. Risen and glorified bodies of believers do not belong in heaven but on the earth. Instead, believers who have just been raised from the dead, together with living believers who have just been transformed, are now caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Th. 4:15-17).
6. *Now follows the judgment.* Whereas dispensationalists commonly teach that there will be at least three separate judgments, amillennialists see scriptural evidence for only one Day of Judgment which will occur at the time of Christ's return. All men must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. The judgment has a threefold purpose: 1) it will reveal the glorification of God in the final destiny assigned to each person; 2) it will indicate finally and publicly the great antithesis of history between the people of God and the enemies of God; and 3: it will reveal the degree of reward or the degree of punishment which each shall receive.
7. *After the judgment the final state is ushered in.* Unbelievers and all those who have rejected Christ shall spend eternity in hell, whereas believers will enter into everlasting glory on the new earth. In the life to come heaven and earth will no longer be separated but will have merged (Rev. 21:1-3). In the final state, therefore, glorified believers will be both in heaven and on the new earth, since the two shall be one. Many OT prophecies find their ultimate fulfillment in this final state. When premillennialists charge amillennialists with teaching a future kingdom which is only spiritual and which has nothing to do with the earth, they are not representing the amillennial view correctly. Amillennialists believe that Old Testament prophecies which predict that the land of promise shall be the everlasting possession of the people of God, that the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the earth shall be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, shall be fulfilled not just for a thousand-year period, but for all eternity!

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This interpretation gives us a richer, wider, and more relevant understanding of those prophecies than that which restricts their meaning to a description of an earthly millennium which shall precede the final state.

3. Implications

1. *What binds the Old and New Testaments together is the unity of the covenant of grace.* Amillennialists do not believe that sacred history is to be divided into a series of distinct and disparate dispensations but see a single covenant of grace running through all of that history. This covenant of grace is still in effect today and will culminate in the eternal dwelling together of God and His redeemed people on the new earth.
2. *The kingdom of God is central in human history.* That kingdom was predicted and prepared for in Old Testament times, was established on earth by Jesus Christ, was extended and expanded both in New Testament times and during the subsequent history of the church, and will finally be consummated in the life to come.
3. *Jesus Christ is the Lord of history.* This means that all of history is under Christ's control and will ultimately prove to have been subservient to His purpose. We must therefore be concerned not just with enjoying the blessings of our salvation but also with joyfully serving Christ as Lord in every area of our lives.
4. *All of history is moving toward a goal: the total redemption of the universe.* History is not meaningless but meaningful. We eagerly look forward to the new earth as part of a renewed universe in which God's good creation will realize finally and totally the purpose for which He called it into existence; the glorification of His name.

4. Conclusions

Amillennial eschatology looks for a culmination of apostasy and tribulation in the final emergence of a personal Antichrist before Christ comes again. Amillennialists do not expect to see the perfect society realized during this present age. Yet, since we know that the victory of Christ over evil was decisive and that Christ is now on the throne, the dominant mood of amillennial eschatology is optimism—Christian optimism. This means that we view no world crisis as totally beyond help and no social trend as absolutely irreversible. It means that we live in hope—a hope that is built on faith and that expresses itself in love.

Amillennial eschatology, therefore, gives us a realistic, yet basically optimistic world-and-life view. It is an eschatology which is exciting, exhilarating, and challenging. It is an eschatology which gives us an inspiring vision of the lordship of Christ over history and of the ultimate triumph of His kingdom.

Note: The text of sections A through C1 are primarily lifted directly from *The Momentous Event* by W.J. Grier. The text of sections C2 through D are lifted directly from "Amillennialism" by Anthony A. Hoekema in *The Meaning of Millennium: Four Views* edited by Robert G. Clouse. The teacher of this lesson is grateful to the scholarship of these men cited here.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.