

Jason Upchurch - A Simple Hope: Eschatology in the New Testament

This morning I want to expand on what I mentioned last week about this passage being very formational on my understanding about eschatology. Eschatology is the study of the last last things, end times. Eschatos in Greek means “end,” “ology” basically means the study of something.

I think everyone really does want to know what the future holds. Where are we heading, how will it unfold, what can we do, what should our attitude be?

I think most of you know that my eschatology has changed over the years. And if I’m honest I think it continues to be refined and honed as I look through Scripture. I think that’s a good thing, that our doctrine always being clarified and fine-tuned as we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Bible.

When it comes to eschatology, one of the frustrations is that there seem to be so many passages it’s hard to organize them all. It’s a vast topic and often confusing, despite the ridiculous amount of charts associated with end times discussions.

And at the same time eschatology doesn’t seem to affect our lives all that much. Does being premillennial or postmillennial really make us better husbands and wives and workers and neighbors? For all the labor that seems to go into the study, it doesn’t seem like there’s a lot of sanctification.

I will say that I think there really is a sanctifying effect. Let me give you a little analogy:

Think about watching a movie that’s a little bit scary to kids. What’s a little scary to us is very scary to them. If you’ve seen the movie before you can pause the movie and tell them “Hey, I know it seems scary now or hard now, but I’ve seen the end and it all works out for good. The bad guy loses and the good guy wins. They live happily ever after” It doesn’t always take all the fear away, but your movie eschatology - knowing what the end holds - often gives hope and courage to keep going.

The same is true with biblical eschatology. Maybe it doesn’t instantly make your life better or change your circumstances, but it gives us a proper perspective for what the ultimate end holds and that gives us the courage to keep going and stay faithful.

And I will say that there are some differences in how premillennial, amillennial and post millennial view what’s happening in the world and how they see the end.

But ultimately, want to hear “Well done, what?” Good and faithful servant. We are faithful right now no matter how bad life is, so that we hear those words when we stand before him. In that sense, eschatology is eternally and inescapably practical.

Now, when it comes to eschatology, there are certain aspects that are critical for all believers to hold on to. There’s basically 5 things: the future coming of Jesus, the resurrection of believers and unbelievers, the judgement, eternal heaven, eternal hell. Everyone who is a believer holds to those 5 things. If you remember from several weeks ago, those are things we die for. Those are first importance.

But there’s a whole lot that’s less important. Particulars about the rapture, and the antichrist, the millennium. Those issues are issues we can debate about in a friendly way or simply decide on.

Now, the irony here is that I’ve said that many of the particulars aren’t nearly as important and you know what we’re going to spend the next 40 minutes on? The particulars. Why? Because I believe this passage lays out the simplest understanding of eschatology in the Bible and it fully conforms to what the rest of the Bible has to say.

So what we’re going to do this morning is a rocket ship flyover of what the NT has to say about the return of Jesus.

My view is often called an amillennial. In Rev. 20 there is a description of a 1,000 year reign of Jesus with the saints. And so most of the major end times views are labeled in relation to that 1,000 year reign.

Premillennials say Jesus is returning before that 1,000 year reign. Amillennialism and post-millennialist are half brothers and both believe Jesus is coming back after that period of time.

Postmillennialism sees many of the promises in the OT being fulfilled before Christ comes, amillennialism sees many of the promises fulfilled in the NHNE.

To be honest, I don't care about the labels. What I care about is what the Bible teaches.

Here's the gist of I see: We're waiting for Jesus to return. When he does he will glorify all the saints in new, resurrected bodies, he will aide all unbelievers and throw them in the Lake of Fire, and he will then usher in the New Heavens and New Earth. That's it.

What about the millennium? The 1,000 year reign of Christ on the earth that we see in **Rev. 20**? We'll get there. For now, suffice it to say that I believe the millennium in Rev. 20 is just the way John describes the saints who have died and are reigning in heaven with Jesus right now. So I don't believe the Bible supports a future 1,000 year reign of Jesus on the earth after Jesus comes. I think what Revelation is describing is happening in heaven right now. If you're pre-millennial and twitching right now, bear with me. At least you'll have an idea about why someone might not view **Rev. 20** as future.

I'll mention why I don't see that in these passages, and it's okay if you disagree with me on these things.

We see some of the reasons for that right here in **1 Cor. 15. Read 22-24**

So this is pretty simple. Jesus rose 2,000 years ago and when he comes everyone else will rise. That's it. Then the end - meaning the NHNE - that's when Jesus hands the Kingdom back over to the Father. That's just a simple reading of the text.

Christ has risen as the first fruits. He is reigning now and when he comes everyone else will rise in the resurrection. The Bible only describes one future mass resurrection of all people. That's what Paul describes here.

But if you believe in a future millennium on the earth you necessarily have to believe in multiple future resurrections which the Bible never talks about.

For instance, in a pre-tribulation view, there's a resurrection at the rapture, then one seven years later at the second coming, and then they either believe in many resurrections in the middle of the millennium as people die and are raised **or** they believe in another general resurrection at the end of the millennium. Depending on the pre-millennialist, there could be 2 or 3 or millions of resurrections.

John 5:28-29: An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement.

When Christ returns everyone is raised and then it's the end. Here's another reason I don't believe in a future millennium on the earth: When Christ comes, death dies. **Read 25-26**

So Christ is reigning until all his enemies are destroyed. The last enemy in the lineup is death. Death is the last enemy that Jesus destroys and then he comes back. If there's death after the return of Christ, then he hasn't actually defeated death. The pre-millennial position believes that there is death after the return of Jesus.

But Paul seems to make clear that death is over once Jesus returns. **Read 27-28**

This is the whole scenario. Christ reigns now. One day he comes back, all are raised, and the NHNE begins when the Kingdom is given back to the Father.

One quick note here: One objection I used to have to the amillennial view was: "There's 2,000 years between Christ rising and his second coming, couldn't there be 1,000 years between his coming and the end?" The answer is, it would be possible; except Paul makes it clear that Christ defeats death at his coming.

Look at 1 Thess. 4:13ff. I used to hold very ardently to a pre-tribulation rapture view; and this passage was one the main reasons.

But it was actually studying this passage that turned me away from that view because I realized I was putting things in the passage that weren't there.

The pre-tribulation rapture view is probably the most dominant view in American Christianity. And gist is that there will be a secret rapture of believers that leaves the whole world with just unbelievers. And then there's a 7 year tribulation where the world gets really bad. Then Jesus comes again, then there's the 1,000 year millennial reign of Jesus on earth, then the NHNE.

It's all what the Left Behind books are all about and the Late Great Planet Earth and all those other end times movies. No one makes end times movies of the amil position or the post mil position because they'd be pretty boring. But pre-tribulationists point to this passage.

What they'll say is that **1 Thes. 4:13-18** is talking about the secret rapture. And **5:1-11** is talking about the second coming. Suffice it to say I don't think passage teaches that. I think Paul is talking about the second coming in both passages. **Read 13-18**

So this is the same pattern we see. Jesus will bring with him at the second coming those who have fallen asleep. The saints who have died. As Jesus comes down to earth, those people will be reunited with their glorified bodies in resurrection. Once the dead saints receive their glorified bodies, believers who are alive when Jesus comes back will be transformed into glorious bodies.

Pre Trib folks will say "See, this is the secret rapture." The word rapture comes from **Vs. 17** where it says we will be caught up. That word caught up in the Latin translation is rapturo. Believers alive when Jesus returns will be caught up to meet Jesus.

And technically speaking, all the major eschatologies believe in a rapture. We all believe we will be caught up.

But it ain't gonna be secret. Everyone will know. **Vs. 16:** this happens and everyone knows it: there is a cry of command, the voice of an archangel (which elsewhere is deafening), and the sound of God's trumpet. This is no sense in which this is secret.

Now, remember I said the pre-trib view sees this as a distinction between the rapture and the second coming here?

The problem is that Paul sees no distinction. He doesn't see these as 2 events, he sees them as 1 event. The coming of Jesus in chapter 4 is a blessing to believers. But that very same coming in chapter 5 is a terror to unbelievers. And in both chapters we a call to be ready. **Read 1-4**

We don't know when Jesus will return, but it shouldn't surprise us. We don't know when a thief is going to come, but if we know **that** a thief is coming we will be on guard always.

We also know this is not talking about 2 separate events because Paul tells the Thessalonians believers to be ready for the second coming in **Vs. 4**. Why would they need to be on guard for the second coming if they've already been raptured out secretly? That doesn't make any sense. **Read 4**

No; Paul is talking about the same thing in both chapters: the second coming of Jesus. Those who are alive will be caught up in the air as Jesus descends with the saints. Those who are unbelievers are judged and experience the wrath of God.

Real quick: I mentioned eschatology **does** have implications for how we live our lives. In almost every passage that talks about Jesus's return there is an ethical implication. **Read 5-11**

If you're a child light, live like it. Live a sober life of love because you know that Jesus is coming at an hour we don't expect. So we live our lives ready to meet Jesus at any moment. God has not destined us to death and hell and wrath, he's destined us to glory. So live like you're ready to enter glory at any moment.

By the way: the second coming is often called the "Day of the Lord" or the "Day of God" or the "coming of the Lord" - those all refer to the same day. **Read 4:15, 5:2**

These terms all refer to the same exact Day when Jesus returns, and we'll these terms later on as well.

Look at 2 Thes. 1. This chapter is also huge in my thinking about eschatology. Because here we see that when Jesus comes back, every unbeliever is sent immediately to hell forever and every believer is instantly glorified. The world as we know it is over when Jesus returns.

Now, Paul says these things to encourage the Thessalonians who were apparently enduring persecution. And Paul's encouragement is basically: hey, Jesus is coming back and will send all your persecutors to hell. Be encouraged! **Read 5-10**

Wow!

This is one of the most surprising encouragements in the NT. Usually when we're persecuted we think "Well, maybe God will save our persecutors someday." And that's true, we hope that that happens. But this is kind of like those imprecatory psalms where the psalmist prays "Lord, break the teeth of the wicked...tear out the fangs of the young lions" - in Jesus's name.

It's also okay to be reminded that God will absolutely afflict those who afflict us. You ever had some punk picking on your little brother or friend. Oh it's go time! Paul says when Jesus comes back it is the most awesome go-time in the history of our universe.

Inflicting vengeance. Mighty angels. Flaming Fire. Eternal destruction. Who gets that? Everyone who does not know God or obey the gospel. **Read 7-8**

When Jesus is revealed. This is what happens to unbelievers when Jesus returns. No unbeliever makes it out alive.

And every believer is glorified. Every believer is granted relief. Every believer marvels at Jesus.

Which begs the question: if all unbelievers are in hell, and all believers are glorified - who would be in the millennium? There's no one to go into the millennium. Death has died, and so has every enemy of God.

You can go online and watch a really fascinating round table discussion of the millennium called the Evening of Eschatology. John Piper moderates a discussion between Sam Storms, Doug Wilson, and Jim Hamilton. And premillennialism Jim Hamilton - a great brother in the Lord - admits the hardest part of believing in a future millennium is figuring out how people get into the millennium. Passages like these make a very strong case that it's not possible.

Now, on your own time if you read **2 Thess. 2** it's a little crazy, we won't work through that. But just know that there's some intervening stuff with the man of lawlessness before Jesus returns. But what we know for sure is that when Jesus returns all unbelievers are immediately thrown into the Lake of Fire, every believer is glorified forever.

Turn to 2 Pet. 3. This passage is just about as clear as it can possibly be in terms of what our hope is. The beginning of the passage is addressing the concern that Jesus promised to return but it had been a long time.

Now, get this: when Peter is writing this it had probably been like 30 years since Jesus ascended to heaven. "Peter, Jesus said he would return. It's been forever..." No, it's been 30 years. You guys we don't need to worry that it's been 2,000 years or if it will be another 2,000 years. So here's how Peter replies. **Read 1-7**

So Peter says scoffers will come - they were promised to come. And those scoffers, after 30 years, say the same thing scoffers say now: "Where's Jesus at? He said he'd come!"

Peter says, have you forgotten the Flood? Everyone was going about their thing thinking God wouldn't come in judgment. And you know what happened? One day he came and the earth was destroyed by water.

The same is true now. One day he's coming - O Glorious Day! - and when he does **Vs. 7. Read**

The ungodly will be burned up by fire on that day when Jesus destroys the existing heavens and earth. Now, notice what Peter says next. **Read 8-9**

Now Peter mentions a thousand years. It's interesting to note that almost everywhere the number 1,000 is used it's used figuratively for just a really big number.

Psa. 50:10 For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.

Peter's point here is that God works on his own timeline. What seems long to us is short to God, and what's short to God is long to us. But Jesus is coming. **Read 10**

So Jesus is coming; this is the Day of the Lord. And he's coming like a thief. We saw that earlier - it's all the same event: the second coming.

And what happens when he does? Several things happen **at the return of Jesus**: The heavens will pass away with a roar. The heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved. And everything ever done on the earth will be exposed. That's final judgement.

Now, what does it mean that the heavens are burned up and everything dissolved? I don't 100% know. If I were to guess God is basically undoing creation down to it's atoms and resurrecting creation into a glorified state. Just like we go into the ground at death and become dust, and God resurrects us, it seems like he does that with the physical world. That's a guess, no one knows for sure.

But the only point I want to make is that that happens precisely when Jesus returns. The heavens are burned up, everything is dissolved, judgement happens **when Jesus returns**. Not 1,000 years after. When he comes this happens.

And then, just in case we missed it, Peter says almost the same exact thing a second time. **Read 11-13**

So we are waiting for the coming Day of God. That's the same thing as the Day of the Lord, the coming of Jesus. And because of that day, the heavens are set on fire and dissolved and everything is melted down. The universe is unmade at the Return of Jesus.

And Peter says something profound in **Vs. 13**. What are we waiting for? What is our hope? **Read 13**

Our hope is new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. Our hope is not a secret rapture or a future millennium. Our whole hope is that at the coming of Jesus all things are made new. We're made new in glorified bodies and the universe as we know is made new. It is dissolved down and purged of sin and recreated in glory.

This is our hope.

Now, we're going to turn to **Rev. 20** in a minute. But I want to set this up a little before we get there.

What I've taken you through are all very straightforward statements. These are clear statements, written as simple letters with clear timelines. Part of understanding the Bible correctly is to begin with really clear passages and then move to less clear passages.

When we turn a few pages into Revelation we are looking at a book that is apocalyptic and symbolic in nature. Almost every number has some meaning more than just the number. Why are there 24 elders in Revelation? It seems to represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of Jesus. It's the OT and NT saints worshipping the Lamb together.

Everything is also presented in fantastical descriptions. The people of Satan have marks on their hands and foreheads. And the people of God have marks on their hands and foreheads. Jesus's hair is like snow white wool, his eyes are like lasers, his face is like the sun in full brightness. The New Jerusalem is over the top amazing.

There's scorpions and locusts and beasts. And it reads like something out of Ezekiel or Isaiah or the prophets. You know why? Because it is a recasting of the prophets in light of Jesus.

Revelation is not a 7 year timeline that we get to follow as the Tribulation unfolds. No, John says that what he's writing down takes place soon. These events begin to unfold as the gospel goes forth. And he frames the progress of the gospel in terms of the OT prophets.

All that to say, Revelation is a less clear book than all the other passages we've looked at. So when we're trying to figure out what it means we prioritize the other clear passages to help us understand it.

Rev. 20. First off we have the binding of Satan. There's a lot of talk about the binding of Satan. If we're in the millennium now, how can Satan be bound especially when Peter says he prowls around like a lion? Let's see.

Read 1-3

So a few observations. Satan is a spiritual being. Is he really bound with a literal chain, in a literal pit, with a literal key? Like could we actually throw Satan in jail? No. Of course not. That's not the point.

The binding of Satan is not absolute, it serves exactly one purpose. And John tells us what it is in **Vs. 3. Read**

Satan being bound is only so that he doesn't deceive the nations any longer. And you say, there's a lot of people who are deceived. I agree. But where is the gospel going? To the nations. Isn't it amazing that in the OT there was very little gentile belief in Israel's God. There were some: Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, others. And there's even more gentiles who believe in the gospels. Then what happens after Pentecost? The gospel explodes and goes to the whole world of Rome. And now it's not even close: There are more gentiles who follow the Jewish Messiah than Jews. God is opening the eyes of the nations to the gospel.

So the binding of Satan is only in the sense that he doesn't deceive the nations. What will happen just before Jesus comes back? **Read 7-10**

Satan is unbound and allowed to what? Deceive the nations. That's the only sense in which Satan is bound. I think that happens right before the return of Jesus. Now, what about this thousand years?

Everyone has to reconcile this passage. Here's what I think it's describing: I think this is the condition of saints who are in heaven reigning with Jesus right now. **Read 4-6**

First off: Thrones in Revelation are always in heaven. So I think this is a look into heaven.

Second: we're talking about people who have been beheaded but have been made alive. They're martyrs who are in heaven waiting for the return of Jesus. When a Christian dies, they are made truly alive.

Third: Jesus destroys all of the unbelievers and Satan with fire from heaven. When have we seen the enemies of Jesus destroyed by fire coming down from heaven? At his second coming.

Fourth: The rest of the dead - unbelievers - do not come alive like these believers come alive. So it's not talking about physical resurrection here. What's being described here is a spiritual resurrection of those who have been killed or gone on to be with Jesus.

Fifth: Revelation records over and over again the return of Jesus. You know what happens right after this section? The earth is unmade, judgment happens and the NHNE begins. **Read 20:11-21:5a**

I think Revelation gives us the same hope we see in every other passage. Maybe it's more colorful, but it's the same. We're waiting for Jesus, he'll raise us and change us, and eternity begins because he has made all things new.

Pray