

UNDERSTANDING “END TIMES” PROPHECY

While there may be some prophecy that we will never fully understand, the vast majority can be understood with reasonable certainty keeping the following keys (borrowed from *The Faith Once For All*, by Jack Cottrell) in mind:

- 1. The Old Testament was written for the sake of the New Testament church.** The Hebrew nation was entrusted with ancient prophecies that all, in one way or another, point to the advent of Jesus Christ and the church He established. For that reason, most should be easy enough to understand, considering they have already been fulfilled. In addition, this means that we should look first to find fulfillment in past events.
- 2. The New Testament often interprets the Old Testament for us.** There are numerous examples of NT writers explaining how OT prophecies are fulfilled in Christ or how they will be fulfilled in His church (see especially Matt. 11:13-14). Obviously, we should not contest their interpretation. Moreover, we should follow their example whenever possible in interpreting the rest.
- 3. Prophetic language is often figurative.** In other words, not all scripture is meant to be interpreted literally. This is one of the primary dividers between different prophetic interpretation methods. Requiring a strict literal interpretation of all scripture is not only counter-intuitive but also self-contradictory. Revelation, the most notoriously difficult book to decipher, begins by explaining that the revelations in the book were “sent and signified” by God through an angel. Translated more succinctly, this means “to communicate through signs and symbols or figures.”
- 4. Prophecy is fulfilled on different levels of reality.** Some predictive biblical prophecies describe events that affect *physical* realities and others affect *spiritual* realities. This may seem like a cop-out (especially if you are prophetic literalist), but Paul describes two different levels of reality when he says, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel,” (Rom. 9:6). Clearly, he is describing a physical Israel and a spiritual one in the same sentence. These keys should help us better understand all four eschatological schools of thought.

All four theories center around the chronological relationship of the millennium to Christ’s second coming. “Millennium” literally means “one thousand years.” The millennium figures prominently in only one biblical passage (Rev. 20:1-7) where it appears six times:

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who

have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison”

Scholars disagree on whether this describes one thousand literal years or if it is symbolic for a long period of time. The only other appearance of the word *chilia* (Greek for “one thousand”) is 2 Peter 3:8, “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a *thousand* years, and a *thousand* years as one day,” a scripture which only fuels the fire of disagreement. Not only do scholars disagree on the literality of the millennium, but also the timing of the millennium and the nature of the “Millennial Kingdom.” Let us lay out the four theories:

1. Postmillennialism. This theory places Christ’s second coming after, or “post,” millennium. This theory is attributable to Thomas Brightman (1562-1607) and was embraced by Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Restoration Movement. This view suggests that Christ’s ascension ushered in a gradual binding of Satan, not through divine intervention, but by human processes set in motion by the gospel. As the gospel is preached, the world will become more and more Christian and consequently more and more prosperous until Satan is fully bound and unable to affect us. Then Jesus will rule from heaven for a millennium (whether literal or figurative) during which time we will continue to live much as we do today but within a much more perfect environment. Toward the end of this millennium, nearly everyone becomes saved. Eventually, this ever-improving paradise will be disrupted by the loosing of Satan, designed chiefly as a reminder of how bad it was under Satan’s power. Then Satan will be defeated, followed by Jesus’ second coming and the judgment.

There are a number of problems with this view. First, the NT does not appear to support this level of optimism as regards man’s intent and activity. Second, the Bible teaches that things will get worse and worse, not the opposite (1 Tim. 4:1-3 and others). Third, the idea that spiritual progress leads to material progress is not borne out in history. Finally, the imminence of Jesus return and the urgency of the Great Commission would be undermined because we are surely at least one thousand years off.

2. Traditional Premillennialism. This view began very early with Tertullian, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus, and has been in and out of vogue ever since. In this view, Jesus’ return will precede the millennium. Unlike postmillennialism, this theory accepts that things will get worse, and we fail to convert the world. This eventually leads to the rise of the Antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, and great tribulation. Then Christ visibly returns, knocks Satan’s block off, rescues His people, and all of the saints, dead or alive, are caught up to meet Jesus in the air, after which they follow Jesus back down to rule with Him in His millennial kingdom. This stance is premillennial, but posttribulational.

Jesus rules over the earth during the millennium from His headquarters in Jerusalem, during which many great things happen, but many still refuse to follow Him. At the close of the millennium, Satan is loosed and he gathers the remaining rebels for a battle at Gog and Magog. Jesus wins the battle and all of the rebels are resurrected for punishment.

This view is convinced that the events described in Revelation are arranged in chronological order and can be interpreted literally. Also, there appears to be little support for the idea of two resurrections of the dead (one for saints and one for the wicked). Finally, how can saints live in paradise if it is still partially populated by unbelievers? This view does not, in my opinion, mesh with scripture.

3. Dispensational Premillennialism. This view also teaches that Jesus will return before the millennium, but it has a distinctive not present in any of the other views: the “secret rapture.” This

theory can be traced to a Brit, Dave MacPherson, who apparently discovered the “secret rapture” idea from the visions of a Scottish teenager named Margaret Macdonald in 1830. This view was quickly adopted by many influential nineteenth-century church leaders including Darby, Moody, Blackstone, and Scofield.

Like traditional premillennialism, this view places Christ’s return before the millennium, but unlike any of the other theories of prophetic eschatological interpretation, this view breaks up world history into five to seven separate “dispensations” most importantly, the Mosaic era, the present church age, and the future millennial kingdom. Two key elements are necessary to arrive at this dispensational view – there must be a complete distinction between Israel and the church and you must approach all prophetic interpretation from a literal perspective. This view finds fulfillment of all kingdom prophecies in a future earthly kingdom for physical Israel. You must accept that Jesus first came to establish the kingdom of God but was foiled by the Jews and the Romans and had to change His mind. Consequently, we are in a holding pattern waiting for His return with little purpose except preparing people for kingdom come. Cottrell describes this period as reminiscent of halftime activities at a football game (484).

This view also breaks the “second coming” into two events. The first could come at any time, without warning. This is the “secret rapture” of the saints, also called the *parousia*, which means “the coming or presence of Christ.” In this rapture, all of the dead in Christ will be raised, the living saints will disappear, and both will reappear in their glorified bodies to join Jesus in the clouds. God snatches the church from the earth because it no longer serves any purpose and because the world is about to suffer every manner of hardship for seven years (the Great Tribulation), focusing especially on physical Israel. God, in His mercy, wishes to shield His church from that tribulation, hence the rapture. This is called *pretribulational premillennialism*. Once in heaven, all of the glorified saints will stand before the judgment seat of Christ where they will receive their heavenly rewards and will begin a seven-year wedding feast in heaven.

All sorts of crazy things happen on earth during those seven years. All of the terrible visions in biblical apocalyptic literature are literally taking place including conversion of the Jews and the Battle of Armageddon, numerous judgments and plagues, and finally Christ’s physical, visible return (the second half of the second coming). This time there is no secret; Jesus makes a huge entrance and wipes the floor with Satan and His henchmen. Next, all of those who came to Christ after the rapture but before now and then died will be resurrected along with the OT believers in order to be judged. The saved return to earth to rule with the living “tribulation saints” under the physical rule of Jesus for a literal period of one thousand years.

At the end of the millennium, Satan is loosed; he gathers his troops and strikes in the Battle of Gog and Magog. Jesus once again takes Satan down, the wicked dead are now resurrected and the final “Great White Throne Judgment” takes place, leading to eternal blessing or punishment.

There are tons of problems with this view. Here are just a few:

The secret rapture is unbiblical. The rapture mentioned in 1 Thess. 4:17 is no secret nor does it precede any tribulation. Instead, it signals the end.

The total distinction between Israel and the church is unbiblical; scripture clearly supports a physical Israel (the Jews) and a spiritual Israel (the church), and dispensationalism renders the church as nearly irrelevant. If so, why would He tarry?

This view's insistence on literal interpretation of everything is unbiblical and it is just silly (it does make for exciting thrillers, though).

The biggest problem with this view is the fact that it is prone to obsession and speculation and frequently leads to brothers and sisters ignoring important ministry in their preoccupation with reading the signs of the times. This is dangerous to individuals and to the church, not least because it is just false.

4. Amillennialism. This view began in the fourth century and is associated with Augustine. This was the dominant medieval interpretation. Amillennialism means "no millennium," which does not really fit the theory. Amillennialists believe in the millennium of Revelations 20, but they hold that we are in the millennium right now. The millennial kingdom does not involve any actual physical capitol, but is instead a spiritual rule with the church as its subjects. Satan is indeed bound, but that does not render him completely impotent. The binding refers to the preaching of the gospel unhindered. Before the church age, the whole world was deceived by Satan, but now, through Christ, it is possible to see through Satan's web of deception to the truth. So, in other words, we are in the millennial kingdom right now and we, the church, are the spiritual Israel. This view is by far the least complicated. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be loosed to launch a full-scale spiritual attack on the church – worldwide, Armageddon and Gog/Magog combined. In the midst of the battle, Jesus returns and destroys the enemies of the church. Then, we are caught up with Him in the air -- believers both alive and resurrected, unbelievers both alive and resurrected – all changed to imperishable bodies and led to the judgment of all peoples. Finally, all will go to either eternal blessing or eternal punishment.

It is my opinion that Amillennialism is easily the best supported and most logical of the four views.