ESCHATOLOGY 101

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Course Description
Eschatology is the study of last things. The meaning of the word derives from the Greek adjective eschatos which means “last.”

In this course, we will seek to understand what will happen in the world between Christ’s first coming and His second coming (general eschatology “last things”). Should believers anticipate being saved from the most difficult times or should we be prepared for persecution? Should believers expect the immorality in the world to get better or worse? How will we battle evil? How does Jesus expect us to live during these times? Scripture teaches on these things in the passages on the last times. We will become more prepared as we understand what the scriptures say.

We will also try to answer the individual’s questions about death and life thereafter (individual eschatology “last things”). What will happen to us when we die? What will our future with Christ be like? How will Christ defeat Satan? Will we be with loved ones in the New Heavens and New Earth? What are the New Heavens and New Earth going to be like? Will people be made whole again without suffering? Scripture also teaches about our future hope. We will become steadfast through the turmoil of these present days when we rest in the hope of a truly better tomorrow.

Course Objectives
___ To understand more clearly the present journey of the believer on earth. ___ To better anticipate what happens after Christ’s second coming. ___ To introduce students to the major view points and areas of debate within this discipline of theology. ___ To give the student good and sound exegetical and hermeneutical tools to interpret prophetic/apocalyptic scripture. ___ To situate prophecies in their historical, political, literary, and religious contexts.
1. General Eschatology

1.1. Facts .......... Areas of Agreement
Unfortunately, there have been many debates over the details of the future because of the difficult nature of prophetic or apocalyptic literature - its symbols, images, and language. However, there are general areas of agreement about the future that evangelical Bible scholars agree upon. These are facts that are very clear in scripture. Despite the debates of interpretation on some other issues, which we will probably always have, the reader can clearly find wisdom for these days and hope for the days to come in the facts about Christ’s victorious return.

1.1.1. We agree there will be a Personal, Visible, Bodily Return of Christ
Jesus was clear that he would come again. In talking about being watchful for him, he said, “You also must be ready; the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44).

Jesus was also clear that his second coming would be visible to all. While he was teaching his disciples about the second coming, he made sure that they would not be lured out into the loneliness of the wilderness or into the secrecy of an inner room to look for Him by others pretending to have seen Him. His second coming will be like lightning in the sky that is seen from all directions (Matt. 24:27).

Luke records that immediately after Jesus ascended into heaven two angels said to the disciples, “this Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Paul taught, “the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangels call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16). The author of Hebrews is even clearer about a second coming. He states, “and he will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:28). Peter said, “The day the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Peter 3:10). John wrote, “when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Finally, the book of relation has frequent references to Christ’s return, ending with the witness, Jesus, saying, “Surely I am coming soon.” In seeing this vision, John responded, “amen. come, Lord Jesus.” (Rev. 22:20).

This anticipation is one of the predominant hopes of the Christian faith. The authors of the New Testament are crystal clear about this issue. Jesus will come again in the same way that he ascended to heaven after his resurrection. He will come physically. The entire world will see his return.
1.1.2. **We agree that we should Prepare for Christ’s Return**

When Jesus encouraged us to be prepared and to be waiting for him, John responded, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20). All Christians should live in anticipation for Christ to come again. In his letter to Titus, Paul says, “live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13).

We Christians are to be like watchmen on a tower standing guard in anticipation of the time when the master returns so that we can open the gate. We protect the vineyard while the master is away. We must make sure that we are working in the house as diligent laborers to the task so that at the time when He returns we are to be found by Him doing good work and diligent work.

1.1.3. **We agree that We should Prepare for Christ UNEXPECTED Return**

Even though Jesus told his disciples that His second coming would be preceded by several events (the gospel being preached to all nations, the man of lawlessness appearing to stop sacrifice, the great tribulation, and the darkening of the sun), Jesus also taught that we would return expectedly.

But how is it possible to be surprised by something you can see coming? These passages that describe future events which must take place before Christ comes seem to be at odds with a the expectation of a sudden return. They seem to be set signals or signposts on a pathway that lead to the predicting of Jesus’ return.

In the past, authors have resolved that Christ could not come back at any time because the signs have not been fulfilled. However, current evangelical scholarship seeks to uphold the imminence of Christ’s return -- that he could return at any time -- and tries to resolve the tension between the signs and the surprise of the end itself.

On this matter, Wayne Grudem’s work, *Systematic Theology*, has been extremely helpful to relieve the tension. His point is that it was, is, and will be impossible to know when all of the signs will come to completion.¹

I would add here that there is good evidence that of the some of the signs have been fulfilled already and that others are near fulfillment. On the other hand, it has not been revealed to us the true time duration of these events and we have no concrete understanding of their completion except that they will precede Christ’s return. The great tribulation, for example, that will continue to escalate with the increased presence of false prophets, could last days, years, or centuries. There is good evidence that we are already in it, but Jesus didn’t give us these details of the event explicitly. The only

¹ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 1104.
thing we do know for certain is that Christ hasn’t come yet and the sign will be completed before He comes. That could be tomorrow?

Each of the signs are meant to increase our anticipation of Christ’s return, but they will not help us predict His coming. Christ’s return is imminent. He could come back at anytime. However, although God has set a time, that time has not been revealed.

This unfulfilled anticipation frustrates people. It makes us tired. This could be said of the first generation of believers, who asked Jesus immediately after the resurrection if he would restore the kingdom of Israel right then. It can be said of every generation since. However, Jesus and the apostles warned us not to be “lulled into inattention,” as Millard Erickson puts it. One can see this in the parable of the foolish women in Matthew 25:1-13. One can feel this sentiment in 2 Peter 3:8-9 when Peter encourages his potentially tired and impatient brothers and sisters not to forget that God is long-suffering and patient, wanting to bring the end of all things but waiting so that many may not perish.

We are to be like Noah, who knew that he had a job to do, could the end coming, but did not know when the rains would fall. Would the rain come at the same moment that the construction of the Ark was complete and he had gathered enough food to survive the time on the ship? Would the rain come five days before he was fully prepared, so that his family would rush aboard without the adequate food and have to be miraculously fed by God? Would God find favor with anyone else who repented as they saw the creation of the Ark? Would God give them a little more time after construction was over to make up their minds?

Texts that talk about Christ’s unexpected return:

Matthew 24:42; 36-39 - Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Matthew 24:50 - The master of the servant will come, on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of...

Matthew 25:13 - Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Mark 13:32 - But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. Just like a man going away: he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with an assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back -- whether in the east thing, or at midnight, or when the rooster

2 Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 1190.
crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you I say to everyone: watch!

Luke 12:40 - You must also be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Phil. 3:20

1 Thess. 5:2

Titus 2:12-13

Hebrews 10:25

James 5:7-9 - Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.

1 Peter 4:7

2 Peter 3:10

Rev. 1:3

Rev. 22:7 - Look, I’m coming soon!

Rev. 22:12

Rev. 22:20 - Amen, come Lord Jesus!

These passages are clear that we will not know the time when Jesus will come back to this earth. Jesus spoke openly about the mystery of his return and anyone who claims to know specifically when Jesus is coming back should be automatically considered wrong.

Texts that talk about the signs that precede Christ’s Return:

Mark 13:10 - “The Gospel must first be preached to all nations.”

Matt. 24:15-22 - “For then there will be a great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now -- and never to be equaled again.”
1 John 2:18 - “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

2 Thessalonians 2:1 - “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”

Romans 11:25 - “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not think you are superior: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, 26 and in this way all Israel will be saved.”

These passages clearly talk about events that will precede Christ’s return. Do these verses imply that Jesus cannot return at any time? By no means. We can, as the early church did, reconcile these events with the expectation of the sudden return of Christ by humbly anticipating Him when we see things possibly happening without presumptuously predicting that we have indeed and without a doubt reached the end.

1.1.4. **We agree on the Final Results of Christ’s Return**

It should be emphatically noted that no matter what our differences are, Christians who take the Bible as the final authority, believe in Christ’s return, in the judgment of unbelievers, in the final mercy of believers, that we will live with Christ as reigning King in a new heaven and new earth for all eternity.

**Christ’s Return will be Triumphant and Glorious**

Various groups have maintained that Christ already returned in an invisible way. In recent history the Jehovah’s Witnesses made this claim 1914. However Scripture is clear that Christ’s second coming will be quite different than his initial humble incarnation. He will come in the clouds with great power and with great glory (Matthew 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27). He will be accompanied by angels and announced by

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3 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 1191.
the Archangel (1 Thess. 4:16). He will sit triumphant on his glorious throne having authority over all of the nations to judge them (Matt. 25:31-36).

**Christ Will Raise The Dead, both the saved and the lost.**

The resurrection is the most significant reason why Christ’s second coming gives so much hope to believers. Jesus said that those who believe in Him will live even though they die (John 11:14). This means that death will not be the end for believers. We will live again. John 5:28-29 records Jesus saying, “Do not be amazed at this, for time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out -- those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.” Jesus made it possible for us to have hope in a future resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:20-26 says, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But in this order: Christ, the first fruits, then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come in the hands of the kingdom of God the father after he is destroyed all dominion authority and power.”

**Christ Will Judge All Who Have Ever Lived and Assign Their Eternal Destiny**

Matthew 25:31-46 records Jesus teaching “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me,l you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

2 Timothy 4:1 says, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead.”
Christ will lift the Curse on Creation and Renew the Universe to Eliminate Evil

It is clear that this world is suffering because of the curse which came into this world because of sin. Romans 8:18-25 says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. This tells of the present suffering, but looks to a future renewal.

2 Peter 3:10-13 also points to a future day of change as well: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

One of the most beautiful pictures of this is depicted in Revelation 21:1:” Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea... “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Throughout prophetic literature the sea represents sin. There will be no more sin and no more decay because of sin. God will return this world back to perfection.

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4 “The Day of the Lord” is synonymous for the second coming of Christ. In the past, it has been used as a general reference concerning of momentous moments of God’s working. However, in the context of Peter’s letter, he is making reference to the coming of Christ. Christ will bring about the end of this corrupted world and create a new perfect world.
1.2. Different Views about the details of Christ’s Return (Eschatological Views)

In this section we are about to enter into areas of the eschatological conversation that theologians disagree upon. There is a variety of different views and each view is driven by presuppositions already held about other theological/historical subjects. As a result, there are large collections of literature concerning the views and foundational issues that influence them. Many devoted Christian authors come to different conclusions. In the past, open dialogue has been impeded by inflammatory and threatening comments. It should be noted before we get started that the following discussions and evaluations should be done graciously and carefully because each view is within orthodoxy. Each view seeks to represent the “what the Bible says.” Prophetic literature is difficult because of its symbols, images, and language. What ought continue graciously.

The following section requires patience and critical thinking. Each view that will be evaluated is a complex building. Very often we try to tear down one position and build up another by starting on the top and from the outside, but, in reality, a view cannot be demolished and another one supported without starting from the foundations and working from the inside out. With that being said, the position of this course is most favorable to inaugurated-millennialism and least favorable to dispensational premillennialism.

As you work through the views and the details you will automatically be drawn to one based on who you are and your previous readings. Below are six key questions that should guide your process. All the views grow out from the answers they find to these questions. You should look at them and re-look at them. We will present each view, including positives and negatives, and then try to resolve the issues by working the answers to each question below. For now, think about these questions. Write some of your preliminary answers. Be prepared to follow all the scriptures and think on them.

✧ What is the nature of the Church? Are the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs fulfilled by the church?

✧ How will God fulfill the physical promises to Israel? Has this already happened in the past? Will the church receive this blessing now? Is God interested in National/Political Israel being restored to the land of Palestine?

✧ When did the end times begin? Have they begun yet? How do we know?

✧ Does the book of Revelation apply to the past, present, future, or all?

✧ Does Revelation 20 symbolically repeat the imagery of chs. 19-20 or is it literally speaking of a future millennium?

✧ Are there two stages of the second coming (rapture + return) or just one final return (rapture = return)?
The following eschatological views all use the word “millennialism” somewhere in their title. The word millennium means 1000 years. It comes from Revelation 20:4-5, which describes Christ reigning with the resurrected for a thousand years. These titles, which center around this passage, describe the heart of each view. Each view wants to clarify “what the millennium is” and “how it relates to the second coming” because they each hold this period to serve an important function. The function of the millennium differs with each view based on the way they answer the above questions.

1.2.1. **Dispensational Premillennialism**

1.2.1.1. Beliefs

1.2.1.1.1. The church is a mystery unknown to the Old Testament. There is a separation between Israel and the church. The church exists during an interval in the midst of God’s program for Israel. This interval is called the “church age,” which is a different “dispensation” than the ones concerning Israel. God is not dealing with Israel presently, but He will return to dealing with them in the future, apart from the church. Christ will return for the church before the tribulation because the tribulation marks another dispensation which is for the nation of Israel, not the church.

1.2.1.1.2. Israel must be restored to the land so that God’s promises will not fail. This restoration includes the return of Israel to Palestine, the rebuilding of another Jewish temple, a system of animal sacrifices, and the supremacy of national Israel over the gentiles. Dispensationalists hold to a continuing unconditional covenant of God with national Israel, so that when God has completed his dealings with the church, he will return to his relations with National Israel. Jesus will literally sit on David’s throne and rule the world from Israel. All of the prophecies and promises regarding Israel will be fulfilled within the millennium, which will be markedly Jewish in character.

1.2.1.1.3. The end times will begin after the church age, when the church has been raptured. The tribulation is the wrath of God. Christians will not face the wrath of God. The tribulation period is a time for National Israel to be brought back to God. The Kingdom of God will come on the earth during millennium.

1.2.1.1.4. The book of Revelation applies primarily to the future.

1.2.1.1.5. Revelation 20 is not a repeat of chs. 1-19. There is a future millennium and Christ will return before it. The prefix “pre” means “before.”

1.2.1.1.6. There are two different returns of Jesus. One is a secret return to save Christians from the pending tribulation period. They call this the rapture. This makes the return of Christ imminent for Christians and concludes that the signs to precede his second coming will occur before his second, second coming.
1.2.1.2. Positive Arguments

1.2.1.2.1. The OT predicts a universal reign of peace for a restored Israel under the personal rule of a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:1-16; Jeremiah 31:31-36; Ezekiel 34-38; Daniel 9:24-27; Zechariah 14).

1.2.1.3. Problems

1.2.1.3.1. The NT does not imply in any way that the church is just an interruption in God’s plan with Israel. Romans makes it clear that “the children of the promise,” the Abrahamic promise, are people of faith not just people of Jewish nationality. The church is a combination of believing Jews and gentiles. The gentiles come into the Kingdom along with believing Jewish disciples in order to fulfill God’s promises to Abraham. Romans 11:25 does talk (or could imply) about a future repentance of the Jewish people. Also, Jesus said in Matthew 23, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” However, these passages imply that the Jewish people will be grafted back into the church rather than re-establish a political nation. God is very concerned with the salvation of the Jews but their hope is just the same as everyone in the church -- salvation through faith in Christ.

1.2.1.3.2. The OT hope that the land will be restored to the people of God and their will be a universal reign of a Davidic King may just as well point to the eternal state (Revelation 21-22; Isaiah 65-66), not to a future millennium. The promise to Abraham was that his offspring would inherit the land “forever,” not just 1000 years.

1.2.1.3.3. The NT says nothing about a pre-tribulation stage of the second coming. There is simply no mention, or even allusions to, a church age or a
rapture distinctive of the second coming. In both the OT and the NT God preserves his people through great tribulations, but not out of great hardships.

1.2.1.3.4. A practical problem with this view is that it can disillusion God’s people about suffering. Jesus calls believers to suffer as He did. Christ calls us to testify through suffering (Philippians 1-2) and He was honest with his disciples that the world would hate them and mistreat them (John 15:15-25).

1.2.2. Historic Premillennialism

1.2.2.1. Beliefs

1.2.2.1.1. The church in many ways is the Spiritual Israel. When Christ came, gentiles and believing Jews were merged together into the church. God’s promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church and any future promises apply to the church.

1.2.2.1.2. God is no longer concerned with National Israel. Christ will fulfill the physical promises of Israel by physically reigning with the Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) in a future millennium. God still has a special interest in the Jewish people. There will be an influx of Jews into the church during the millennium.

1.2.2.1.3. The end times began after the ascension of Christ. Christ’s Kingdom has already come, but is not yet in its fullness. It will come in its fullness during the millennium.

1.2.2.1.4. Because the book of Revelation applies to the church, individuals within this view differ on their views of chapters 5-19. They agree that these things will happen to the church, but disagree if it is happening right now. The millennium is unanimously understood to be in the future.

1.2.2.1.5. Revelation 20 is not a repeat of chs. 1-19. There is a future millennium and Christ will return before it. Some premillennialists take this to be a literal one thousand yeas and others understand it to be a symbolic expression for a long period of time.

1.2.2.1.6. There is just one return of Jesus. Jesus will return after the tribulation to establish the millennium. After the millennium there will be a rebellion.
1.2.2.2. Positive Arguments

1.2.2.2.1. The OT predicts a universal reign of peace for a restored Israel under the personal rule of a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:1-16; Jeremiah 31:31-36; Ezekiel 34-38; Daniel 9:24-27; Zechariah 14).

1.2.2.2.2. The premillennial version of eschatological events overcomes many weaknesses of the dispensational position. For one, it better represents how the church fulfills the personal rule of the Messiah.

1.2.2.2.3. If Revelation 20 is a literal scene, it indicates that the millennium is a time where Satan is bound and unable to deceive the nations. This is not true of this present age (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

1.2.2.2.4. If Revelation 20 is a literal scene, those who “come to life” at the beginning of the millennium are persons who have physically died (Revelation 20:4). We know that the resurrection of the righteous occurs at the second coming (1 Thes. 4:13-18). This would imply that the second coming occurs at the beginning of the millennium.

1.2.2.2.5. If Revelation 20 is not a repetition of chs. 6-19, the first resurrection within the millennium occurs after the Beast. The beast is a symbol for the future anti-Christ at the end of this age. Therefore, the millennium comes after this age.

1.2.2.3. Problems

1.2.2.3.1. The OT hope that the land will be restored to the people of God may just as well point to the eternal state (Revelation 21-22; Isaiah 65-66), not to a future millennium. The promise to Abraham was that his offspring would inherit the land “forever,” not just 1000 years.

1.2.2.3.2. What possible purpose does the millennium serve in this view of the end? It seems to have no purpose at all. Christ can fulfill the physical promises
of Israel by physically reigning with the Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) in the new heavens and new earth.

1.2.2.3.3. Will resurrected saints really mingle with mortal sinners on earth? It seems grotesque to think resurrected believers will have to go through a final battle after already dying and coming back to life.

1.2.2.3.4. Revelation 20 continues in the literary genre of the rest of the book. It doesn’t make sense to move to a literal interpretation of this passage. This is really the only biblical reference to a 1000 year reign and clearer passages should be allowed to govern the interpretation of this difficult passage.

1.2.3. Postmillennialism

1.2.3.1. Beliefs

1.2.3.1.1. The church is the Spiritual Israel. When Christ came, gentiles and believing Jews were merged together into the church. God’s promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church and any future promises apply to the church. However, there will be an influx of Jews who come into the church by accepting Christ during the millennium.

1.2.3.1.2. God is no longer interested in National Israel. Christ will fulfill the physical promises of Israel by reigning in the hearts of people universally in a future millennium. As the gospel spreads Christian influences on society will more and more function according to God’s standards, and gradually a “millennial age” of peace and righteousness will occur on the earth. They believe Satan was bound at the time of the cross and will remain bound until the second coming (Mark 3:27). Thus, this view is very optimistic about the power of the gospel to transform society. The Great Commission is carried out in the authority of Christ. Therefore, it will be successful (Matthew 28:18-20; Isaiah 45:22-25; Hosea 2:23). Due to the reality of the twentieth century we are not as near to the second coming as we thought we were.

1.2.3.1.3. The end times began after the ascension of Christ. Christ’s Kingdom has already come, but is not yet in its fullness. It will come in its fullness during the millennium.

1.2.3.1.4. Because the book of Revelation applies to the church, individuals within this view differ on their views of chapters 5-19. They agree that these things will happen to the church, but disagree if it is happening right now. The millennium is unanimously understood to be in the future.
1.2.3.1.5. Revelation 20 is not a repeat of chs. 1-19. There is a future millennium and Christ will return after it. The millennium is understood to be an extended period of time during the end of this age.

1.2.3.1.6. There is just one return of Jesus. After the tribulation, the millennium will come about through spread of the gospel. Christ will return after that time.

1.2.3.2. Positive Arguments

1.2.3.2.1. The OT prophets predict a period of universal peace and righteousness under the rule of Christ (Psalm 2:7-9; Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4; Daniel 2:44).

1.2.3.3. Problems

1.2.3.3.1. The NT never envisions a Christianized world before the 2nd coming; the opposite is true. Revelation envisions that the 2nd coming will follow the outward victory of evil and the persecution of the saints. The “golden age” of peace and righteousness need not be before the 2nd coming (Isaiah 65:17-25). Christ can fulfill the physical promises of reigning with glory by physically reigning with the Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) in the new heavens and new earth.

1.2.4. Inaugurated-Millennialism (Classically known as Amillennialism)

1.2.4.1. Beliefs

1.2.4.1.1. The church is the Spiritual Israel. Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews; therefore, the gentiles and believing Jews who accept Him are merged together into the church. They are “the children of God.” God’s promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church and any future promises apply to the church. God still has a special interest in the Jewish people. There will be an influx of Jews into the church before the second coming.

1.2.4.1.2. God is no longer concerned with National Israel. Christ will fulfill the physical promises of Israel by physically reigning with the Christians (both Jews and Gentiles, the Remnant of Israel) in the New Heavens and New Earth.
1.2.4.1.3. The end times began after the ascension of Christ. Christ’s Kingdom has already come, but is not yet in its fullness. It will come in its fullness during the New Heavens and New Earth.

1.2.4.1.4. Because the book of Revelation applies to the church. The prophecies are unfolding in this time. The millennium is unanimously understood to be presently unfolding.

1.2.4.1.5. Revelation 20 is a repeat of chs. 1-19. There is no future millennium. Christ is reigning in the hearts of his people who are saved and battling satan and his forces until the end. The millennium is a symbolic expression of the end times that will last for a long period of time.

1.2.4.1.6. There is just one return of Jesus. Jesus will return after the tribulation to judge the living and the dead. After the resurrection and judgement there will be a renewed universe.

1.2.4.2. Positive Arguments

1.2.4.2.1. The NT teaches that the promises of Abraham’s seed is fulfilled in all believers through faith in Jesus. The NT never envisions a Christianized world prior to the 2nd coming. Revelation envisions that the 2nd coming will follow the outward victory of evil and the persecution of the saints. The “golden age” of peace and righteousness need not be before the 2nd coming (Isaiah 65:17-25). Christ can fulfill the physical promises of reigning with glory by physically reigning with the Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) in the new heavens and new earth.

1.2.4.2.2. Revelation 20 continues in the literary genre of the rest of the book. It makes sense to interpret this passage figuratively -- translate the images literally as images.
1.2.4.2.3. There is only one coming. There is only one judgement. The second coming will bring in the final eternal state of the universe. At the same time, all the dead, both righteous and unrighteous, will be resurrected. It makes sense that the climax of history would indeed be a “climax.” It is the final event before the end of this world. It makes sense that this all happens in short order.

1.2.4.2.4. There is no salvation after the second coming. No age beyond that point in which one may turn to Christ.

1.2.4.2.5. The Kingdom of God is already inaugurated, but is not yet fully come until the end of the end. Therefore, the forces of evil will remain strong and be concentrated against the church, yet the people of God will resist and be protected with the power of Christ. This refutes the optimism of postmillennialism and affirms the persecution within historic premillennialism. This also reflects the present condition of the world.

1.2.4.3. Problems

1.2.4.3.1. To see Revelation 20 as a recapitulation of Revelation 6-18 might require a strained interpretation. Inaugurated-millennialists have interpreted the text in a number of ways and their lack of unanimity may indicate that their system does not explain the text well.

1.3. Resolving the Issues

At this point it is important to return to the questions that drive each position. In order to resolve at least some of the disagreement, we will attempt to answer each of these questions. As mentioned above, this course favors inaugurated millennialism. However, we will try to let Scripture speak for itself so that you the student can formulate your own theological framework concerning these issues.

1.3.1. What is the Nature of the Church?

There have been volumes and volumes written about the nature of the church. What is the church? What is the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God? What is the relationship between the church and Jewish people -- specifically now, the nation of Israel?

These questions are so important for two reasons: First, the imagery of Revelation is Jewish in nature. The Jewish looking pictures are symbols of something else, but what are they symbols of? Are they symbols of the church or of a future nation of Israel? If one concludes that the church has somehow taken the place of the nation, then these prophetic images are easily understood to portray the church. If one concludes that the church is somehow different then the nation of Israel, then these prophetic images are
difficult to understand because they were written to the church and include references to the church. Second, the promises to Israel included land and a King. If one concludes that the church has taken the place of the nation, then the news about Israel using Russian and American missiles to invade Palestine is not a matter of celebration. If one concludes that the church is somehow different than the nation of Israel, and that God is still for the nation of Israel, then the domination of Israel in the Middle East is something to be celebrated. The Bible has specific metaphors for the church to explain some of these things.

First, the church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4). Through salvation people are brought together under Christ as the “head” into one universal unite. Anyone saved through faith is a member of the church and performs a certain function within it. The church is Christ’s hands and feet and hears on the earth. We do the bidding of the head, which is Jesus.

Second, the church is also a gathering, similar to the gathering of the people in the Old Testament for ceremonial meetings (Numbers 14:1). It is called together by the Father (Ephesians 1:18; 1 Peter 5:10), saved by the sacrifice of the Son (John 3:16; Hebrews 10:10), and empowered by the Spirit, (Exodus 13:22; John 14:15 -- 31).

Third, the church is the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2-3). Just as a pure and beautiful woman is presented to a groom on her wedding day because she will become one with her husband in spirit and flesh, so the church has been united with Christ through faith. Our faith is like the marriage bond. We were saved through faith and enter into a relationship with Jesus in the Spirit.

Fourth, it is also the temple of the Holy Spirit. The church is in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit, in both an individual and collective basis. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3, “do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.” Paul also describes believers as “a holy temple in the Lord... a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22). And in that same context, Paul portrays Jesus as the cornerstone of that temple. Finally, Peter speaks of believers also as “a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5).

In all the examples above, the church is pictured as a group of individuals who’ve come into a relationship with God through belief in his Son. This was the invitation that Jesus first extended to the Jewish people as their Messiah. Jesus invited the Jewish nation to identify Him as their Messiah and to follow His Kingship, but many of them rejected his offer (Matthew 21- 22:14). However, Jesus came out of the Israelite nation to fulfill God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12) that his offspring would be a blessing to all nations. Therefore, all nationalities are invited to become the people of God through making Jesus their King. All people groups are represented. There is no place for favoritism with in these images. As a body, the eyes are not more valuable than the hands. As a gathering, all people come through the same mediator, who is Jesus Christ.
As a bride, each individual makes the same pledge and walks the same path way into unity. Finally, as the Temple, we all rest on the same cornerstone as our foundation.

Therefore, there is no salvation outside of the church. The church includes Jews and Gentiles who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah spoken of by the prophets in the Old Testament. Within these metaphors there does not seem to be any indication that this institution, this organic, universal, gathering is somehow secondary or distinctive from another group of God’s choosing. The invitation was to the Jews first and then to the whole world to join them. Some Jews believed and some gentiles believed. Together they became the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom

Very important to the discussion, is an understanding of the kingdom of God. Prior to the first coming of Jesus, the nation of Israel was referred to as the kingdom of God. Solomon was the King over the “the kingdom of the Lord” (1 Chron. 28:5). It is important, and not incidental, that the topic of Jesus’ very early messages, and possibly all of his messages to some degree, was “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 4:17). Jesus also announced that he would build his church and that the powers of death would not prevail against it. Immediately after saying that phrase he went on to say to Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he told them to pray to the Father: “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Some authors have maintained that identifying the church as the kingdom of God is stretching a metaphor too far. However, Jesus consistently referred to the church as the kingdom of God and encouraged the church to pursue the kingdom of heaven. These authors’ attempt to make a distinction between the kingdom and the church because they see the kingdom as the reign of God. Just as Solomon physically reigned, these authors are generally still looking for Christ to fulfill a physical David reign within “the Kingdom.” However, Christ is currently reigning. He rules in the hearts of his followers and they affect change in the world on his behalf. Christ’s kingdom has already started on earth. There is a clash of the kingdoms going on between those in the church and those outside. But, the kingdom is not yet in its fullness. We all look forward to the day when Christ will reign physically with us, but this comes after his return. Jesus could talk plainly about the kingdom and invites people to enter it, even though He won’t physically immediately. Just as He rebuilt the temple, spiritually; he has also inaugurated His kingdom spiritually.

This is called inaugurated eschatology. This language was first used by the historic premillennialists and is now affirmed by many other views. It brings together many of the views. Even though they differ as to when the physical reign will occur (in a future

millennium or in the future new heavens and new earth), three out of the four views agree that “the Kingdom” is synonymous with “the church.”

In Relation to Israel

One of the most divisive and dangerous issues in the church today is the promotion of the nation of Israel. On one hand, dispensationalists regard Israel and the Church as two entirely separate entities with which God deals with in different ways. Among these individuals are those who promote the political agendas of Israel within the land of Palestine. On the other hand, reformed theologians see the nation of Israel as an accursed people who have rejected their Messiah. God is of course interested in seeing them restored to Himself, but He is not concerned that people who are outside His people receive the promises to His people. They believe that the church swallowed up the Jewish people who were faithful to Jesus, those who showed themselves to be true Jews, true children of the Abrahamic promise (Romans 2:28), and added the gentiles to them in order to make the Kingdom. Within this view the church is often called the “new Israel” or “spiritual Israel.”

This issue is so divisive because it divides the Christian body into two opposing forces. The dispensational position, which promotes the political agendas of Israel, seeks to see Israel rule in the Middle East at, what seems to be, the expense of Palestinian human rights and the concerns of Palestinian Christians who live and minister there. The covenantal position, which promotes the gospel and a form of neutrality between the Palestinians and the Israelis, seeks a resolution that seems to be insensitive and unfavorable to the Jewish nation. Even though each view tries to truly understand what the Bible says on this matter, it seems difficult to support the dispensational position.

First of all, Paul went to great lengths to correct a misconception among the Jewish people themselves. The misconception was that one was a child of the God because is of the Jewish blood that flowed through one’s veins. It is clear that this is the issue which Paul deals with specifically in Romans, “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision something external and physical. A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (2:28-29.) Therefore, there has always been a spiritual group within the nation of Israel who were actually listening to God and there was also a mass of individuals who were not part of his promises at all.

Secondly, Paul also went to great lengths to in include Gentile believers as children of God’s promises. To the Galatians he wrote, “and if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:29). Other important passages that Paul uses to develop his theology of the church are Romans 4:11, 16, 18; and “Those who are not my people I will call “my people,” and her who was not beloved, I will call “my beloved” (9:24-25).
N.T. Wright encourages us not to forget the Jewish nature of Jesus. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. There is no other. And it is the Jewish Messiah who saves the rest of the world. “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). It will not come from Arabs, Americans, or Africans. Salvation is from the Jews. However, the Bible teaches that there is no difference between physical Jews and physical gentiles. Each must be changed spiritually in order to become a child of God. All Jews and Gentiles become “real” Jews through faith in Jesus in order to be saved! But what does that look like? How much of the traditional/national Judaism must we take with us into the Kingdom? This was the struggle of the early church, between Paul and Peter (Galatians). This was the issue of the first Christian council in Acts 15. This continues to be a topic of question in the church today, but it is a topic for the church. How Jewish should we, the church, be now that we are the descendants of Abraham?

There is, however, a future for the Jewish people. The God is concerned that they come to repentance and in Romans 11 Paul affirms that many Jewish people will be grafted back into the church (26). This is very different from saying that there is a future for the nation of Israel. The Scriptures clearly support the idea that many Jewish people will learn to recognize Jesus as their Messiah through the spread of the Gospel, but it does not support a propping up an Israeli government in Palestine in order for a Jewish nation to reclaim the land.

To sum it up, the church sprung out of the Jewish people and so God’s promises are true and good because, even though some Jews disobeyed, others followed their Messiah (Romans 3:3) and continued to walk in covenant with him. The church is the new Israel. It does not replace the nation, it rather occupies the place in the new covenant which faithful within Israel occupied in the old. Whereas the kingdom of God was populated by a small remnant of Jews within the national Israel in the Old Testament; the kingdom of God is populated by the multinational people of the church in the New Testament. The people of promise continually walk a separate path to that of others in the nation of Israel. There is a special future for some Jewish people. However, it will be through a large scale conversion to Christ and entry into the church.

This conclusion allows interpreters to understand the Jewish images in the book of Revelation as applying to the people of God, both before the first coming and after the first coming. The symbols can refer to the historic tradition that the church was birthed out of. The symbols can refer to the nation of Israel and allude to the people of God at the same time. For example, the woman with 12 stars over her head who is pregnant can be identified as the Jewish people waiting for the birth of their Messiah. However, that same woman who leaves from Satan who is angry because he has been defeated already can be seen as the people of God in the new covenant. The same woman represents the same people group: the people of God of Jewish nature who were waiting for the Messiah who are included with the people of God who fight persecution since the Messiah (Revelation 12).

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This conclusion also promotes neutrality when it comes to the nation of Israel. Even though there are reasons for just war, Jesus spoke much about pacifism and the spread of the gospel in the midst of persecution. Even though there is a real interest in a tiny country in the middle east, Christians should be using this interest promote peace and the Gospel among the Arabs and Jews. If we promote peace and teach the salvation of the Messiah in both groups may come to reconciliation. Much of the Christian world has given up on the power of the Gospel to change the hearts of Muslims in particular. Others have given up on the power of the Gospel to change the hearts of Jews. However, our mandate is to promote justice and mercy. We should carry these things on the wings of the Gospel.

1.3.2. How will God fulfill the physical promises to Israel?

Because so much time has already been dedicated to understanding the nature of the church. This section will be significantly shorter. It is my hope to present a brief and concise answer to this question.

In the Old Testament it seems that God promised a restoration, a return to power, for the state of Israel with the coming of the Messiah. It is obvious that Jesus turned many of the anticipations of his physical reign on top of their heads. He did not calm and conquer the Romans. He did not force the Jews into submission. He did not vindicate his believers by giving them positions of political and monetary significance. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He did this by shedding his blood so that as “many who would receive him might be saved.” However, it is clear that Jesus will return in a completely different way at his second coming. Jesus will return and physically rain with his people for eternity in the new heavens and a new earth. Jesus is the perfect example of the resurrection. He died. His soul was separated from his body. He came to life again with a new resurrection body. And He will return in the future to physically be present with his people. Therefore, a simple answer to the question is as follows: God will fulfill the physical promises to Israel in the future when Christ’s Kingdom comes in its fullness.

Premillennialists believe that Christ’s kingdom will come in its fullness during the millennium, which is after his return and before the new heavens and the new earth. inaugurated-millennialist believe that Christ’s kingdom will come in its fullness during the new heavens and the new earth. These views are very similar in that they are waiting for the fullness of God’s kingdom to happen in the future. They only differ on the interpretation of Revelation 20. The inaugurated millennialist position is the simplest of the two and holds two a symbolic translation of Revelation 20. Whereas it seems that this is the stronger position, you the student should note how close the positions are. God is working with the church. God will be faithful to his physical promises. The new heavens and a new earth will be a physical and perfect resurrected state. God will be faithful to his promises.
1.3.3. **When did the end times (tribulation period) begin?**

Many people really want to know whether we are in the last days or not. Christians want to be aware of what’s going on and their role within that. Will Christians be spared from the time of tribulation? Or should Christians be anticipating persecution at this very time? There are three good ways to approach this subject:

I. We should understand what the Jews expected.

II. We should understand what Jesus taught.

III. We should be able to see within the authors of the New Testament how they reacted to the promises given by the prophets and the teachings of Jesus to understand their state.

1.3.3.1. What did the Jews Expect to happen in the Last Days?

*They expected a coming Redeemer in the last days (Isaiah 2:2; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1).*

The whole of the Old Testament points towards the coming of a new covenant and a new redeemer. In Genesis we learn that this coming Redeemer will be an offspring of Eve (3:15), and then also the offspring of Abraham (12:2-3), and then also from the tribe of Judah (49:10). In 2 Samuel 7 we learn that this offspring will come from the line of David. Other passages in Scripture describes Redeemer as the king (Zech. 9:9), as a priest (Psalm 110:4), and as a prophet (Deut. 18:15). Isaiah describes this individual as a suffering servant (Isaiah 53). Daniel portrays him as “the son of man” (Daniel 10) It was the Jewish expectation that a deliverer would come and brings salvation with him.

*They expected him to bring the kingdom of God and the restoration of Israel (Psalm 2; Daniel 2:44-45; 7:13-14; Jeremiah 23:3; Ezekiel 36:24-28)*

*They expected him to bring a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-32)*

*They expected God to bless them and judge his enemies on “the day of the Lord” (Zephaniah 1:14-15)*

*They expected God to create new heavens and new earth following “the day of the Lord” (Isaiah 65:17)*

1.3.3.2. What did Jesus say about the Last Days?

We have already covered what Jesus taught concerning Himself as the coming Redeemer. It is obvious to Him that He was the coming Redeemer:

that he was bringing about the kingdom of God
that he was establishing a new covenant through his broken body and shed blood

that he would judge his enemies as his second coming

and of that he would bless his people and judge his enemies prior to creating a new heavens and new earth.

In these ways, Jesus affirmed that he was ushering in the last times because He fulfilled the expectations of the Jews who were looking for Him. However, Jesus also taught in detail about some of the events that would initiate and occur within the last times. Specifically Jesus sat with his disciples in the temple just before His last Passover (Matthew 23-24). We will discuss these signs here.

**The Gospel Must be preached to all nations**

Within Jesus’ discussion with his disciples in Mark 13, which was concerning the end of the age and then His second coming, Jesus told them that a sign of the end would be that through their work the gospel would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.

First we must understand what Jesus meant by the “whole world.” Jesus used the greek words “ ὅλῃ οἰκουμένῃ,” literally ‘the whole inhabited area,’ which was a common way to refer to ‘the known Roman world.’ R. T. France suggests that this is not so much a geographical term that must include every area and community on the earth, but rather an indication of the universal offer of the Gospel to all nations. The disciples would be a part of the worldwide spread of the Gospel by taking the gospel to ‘their’ known world. Paul recognized this. In his letter to the Colossians, he spoke about the worldwide spread of the Gospel. He wrote about “the Gospel, which has come to you, as is indeed in the whole world, is bearing fruit and growing.” He also wrote about “the Gospel, which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven...” The disciples had already brought the Gospel to representatives of every nation in their lifetime. They hadn’t physically taken it to every creature on earth, but the nations had heard. The message was out there, everywhere. These types of statements make it very possible that this sign could be fulfilled already.

As well, it is also plausible that every nation had heard the Gospel through the work of the early church, but certain nations exist today without the gospel because their ancestors failed to pass down the teachings that they received thousands of years ago, when they lived within the known world. Populations spread out from one center. Certain people continue to walk with God and others disobey. We have seen this in the redemptive story when Israel conquered Canaan. They were used as an instrument of judgement on the nations whose ancestors had walked away from God generations earlier. There was no pre-invasion effort by the Israelites to draw the inhabitants of the land back to God in their time. God had given those peoples a chance, but the time had
come for judgement. The generations of that time were found guilty because of the
decisions their ancestors made. This makes it even more possible that this sign has
been fulfilled even though the entire world today doesn’t know about Jesus.

The Abomination that Starts in the Great Distress

There are many theories concerning the great tribulation period that Jesus warned his
disciples about. The reason for this is because the text of Matthew 24 is both specific
and general. Specifically, the text states that the tribulation period will commence when
a man stands in the temple and desecrates it. It is also specific that this time will be
painful and cut short so that people survive it. Generally, the text does not give the date
of commencement or any specific details as to the duration of the event. What does it
mean to be cut short? Does that mean a short period of time or does it mean a long
period of time that is not allowed to continue because of the heightening pain?

These specific/general traits create two ways to read and interpret the text:

First, some readers understand the text to be talking about the fall of Jerusalem which
happened during a Roman siege in 66 to 70 A.D. These readers understand Jesus’
prophecy about the abomination that causes desolation to have already been fulfilled
and so they believe that the tribulation period has already started.

This is supported as Jesus taught on the coming tribulation while he was teaching in
that actual temple between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his arrest at
Gethsemane. As the messianic King, Jesus confronted the Pharisees and the
Sadducees boldly during his time in the temple courts itself. After he had significantly
warned the teachers of the law about their hypocrisy and stated specifically that
Jerusalem would not see him again until she would repent, he left the temple and was
walking away when his disciples called his attention to the buildings, specifically the
Temple that they had just been in. They were noting that the temple was built with
people’s gifts to God. They may have been asking him, “If Jerusalem will not see you
for a long time, what will happen to these places that your people have built?” It was
Herod’s temple, the particular one that initiated Jesus’ response about the end times.

Herod’s Temple, which was the third Temple to be constructed, was partially complete at
this time. It was a symbol of union between the Roman Empire and the Jewish people
because the motive for construction was to appease the anger of his Jewish subjects.
However, it must have been an insult to many of Israelites. God didn’t even allow
David, a man of His own heart, to build a temple because of the unjust blood he shed as
the King of Israel. Yet, at that time, a pagan, who had murdered children, assumed the
work of God. Solomon built the first Temple, which was destroyed by Babylon.
Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest completed the second Temple. Herod began
building a third Temple which would be greater than the other temples. He began to
dismantle the second Temple in 21 BC. At the time of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, the
sanctuary had been completed for over 40 years. However, the total project was not
complete and it was as if Jesus stood by the pillars of an unfinished, blasphemous, construction project and said, “Don’t put your hope in the Jewish leaders who have rejected their Messiah and sold themselves to the tyranny of an evil state. Put your hope in me. These walls will not stand for long. It will be obvious soon that rejecting me and trusting in human institutions is futile.” Then he proceeded to explain some details to help them anticipate his coming again. As history would unfold, the entire project was not completed until A.D. 64, only six years before it was destroyed by the Romans because of a Jewish revolt.

The revolt which sparked the destruction of the Temple occurred as a result of the persecution and humiliation of the Jews in Palestine. The Roman governor Florus, who was appointed to oversee the Jews in 64 A.D. demanded money from the temple treasury and allowed his soldiers to slaughter innocent Jews. As the Jews had a brief victory in 66 A.D., Emperor Nero dispatched Vespasian, his most able general, to reclaim Galilee and the northern lands. By 69 A.D. Nero died and Vespasian gained control of the empire. His son Titus took command of the forces in Palestine and destroyed the Temple on August 29, 70 A.D.

This first group of commentators believe that the destruction of the Temple and the capture of Jerusalem was the fulfillment of the abomination that causes desolation. They also believe that the great tribulation began at this time. This is very possible. The text certainly allows for this reading because of its context and grammar. It is very possible that the tribulation has already started and that Titus was the great abomination that Jesus talked about.

However, there is a second group. These other scholars believe that this event concerning the temple will happen in the future. They believe that the nation of Israel will rebuild another temple and that the great tribulation time will happen after that temple is destroyed in the future. Their rationale for this argument is the unequaled and shortened aspects of the tribulation. They suggest that this couldn’t have started so long ago because the tribulation period will be short (verses 22-24). With this being said, humanity has not seen a short period of time unequalled in pain from the beginning of the world. Therefore they anticipate it in the future.

To give some conclusive thoughts on this matter, it seems that the context of Matthew 24 leads readers to interpret the abomination that causes desolation as Titus in 70 A.D. Based upon the text, this seems to be the most appropriate interpretation of that sign - the abomination that caused desolation, which stopped the sacrifices and ushered in the tribulation period in 70 A.D. However, this does not make matters simple. Jesus neither named Titus nor even a Roman emperor as the abomination. It is hard to be certain.

This interpretation fits within three out of four of the views (Jesus came, the end times/tribulation began, Jesus will come at the end). So there is wider agreement that there will be a great tribulation, but there is wide agreement that it has already started.
Powerful Signs
The occurrence of powerful signs in the heavens is one sign that has almost certainly not yet occurred. Nonetheless, they could occur very quickly within the space of a few minutes. These particular signs are not the type that would lead us to deny that Christ can return at any time.

1.3.3.3. How did the New Testament authors view the Last Days with respect to what the prophets and Christ said?

They saw Jesus as the redeemer of Israel (1 Peter 3:18; Acts 7; Hebrews 9:11-14)

They saw that Jesus brought a new covenant to Israel (Acts 3:24-26; Hebrews 8)

They understood themselves to be already living in the last days. (Acts 2: 16-17; Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:1-3; Jude 17-20)

They anticipated that Jesus would return again to judge the living and the dead, establish his throne, and create all things new (Revelation 21-21).

We have already covered how many passages that refer to Jesus’ second coming. These passages explain in detail the facts about the second coming that bring us hope. However, there are other passages that talk about the end times, prior to the second coming. The apostles also taught about signs that would occur before the second coming. We will discuss these signs here.

The False Prophets and then the AntiChrist (the man of Lawlessness)
John wrote the believers, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). This sign says false prophets had already come to in the time of John. However, it is a very vague sign that was probably given as a general warning of future battles (or warning of a future battle) so that the church would be ready. False teaches and demonic powers have been present throughout all redemptive history. The magicians in Exodus 7:11 and Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:9 are primary examples. It seems likely that this general sign will probably continue right up until the return of Christ. Because Christ hasn’t returned, it is unlikely that this prophesy has been fulfilled, but the anti-Christs present today could very be easily defeated tomorrow if Christ returned. This biblical text is very clear; we are in the end times.
Paul also wrote to the Thessalonians concerning the coming of Jesus. In his second letter, chapter 2, he encouraged them not to be unsettled or alarmed by a teaching asserting that the day of the Lord had already come. To counter the false teaching, Paul described a man of lawlessness who would oppose everything spiritual and set himself up in God’s Temple proclaiming himself to be God because of his arrogance. Since that letter circulated and influenced the early church, Christians have been anticipating this man with the rise of many powerful men and the army states that accompanied them. We continually ask, “Will this one be the one?”

Christians anticipated that the Roman emperor Nero would be the antichrist and then later his predecessor Domitian because both of these men persecuted them during their reigns. When Hitler persecuted the Jews and sought world domination, people thought that he would be the final antichrist. Hitler was even influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a natural philosopher and authored a book called *The Antichrist*, which begins:

“This book belongs to the most rare of men. Perhaps not one of them is yet alive. It is possible that they may be among those who understand... of that sort only are my readers, my true readers, my readers foreordained... The rest are merely humanity. One must make one’s self superior to humanity, in power, in loftiness of soul, in contempt.”

Many other historical figures like some of the popes during the reformation (see Wesley’s notes) or Joseph Stalin during the cold war were expected to rise up and be conquered by the coming of Christ. Even today, there is a new theory that a future leader of the United Nations will rise up and dominate the world.

When looking at the text itself, commentators are significantly divided about the interpretation. It is suggested that this passage (2 Thes. 2:1-2 or 3-4) is difficult to understand because the language which Paul uses is cryptic to those of us who do not know what he said orally to the readers. These two verses are among the most problematic texts in the whole of the Pauline corpus. One significant cryptic issue is that the text seems to connect Jesus’ second coming directly to this individual: “whom the Lord will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.” Jesus hasn’t come back yet, so is it possible that this sign has already been fulfilled? Is it possible that Titus could have been this man?

Some authors are so disillusioned by the lack of sequence in the events that they claim this text is no longer valid. This conclusion comes because the second coming of Christ did not immediately follow the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. Other authors are claim the temple will be rebuilt in order for this prophecy to be fulfilled. In response to these conclusions, I find it is hard to hold to the inerrancy of the Bible and reject this

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passage as invalid. On the other hand, I also find it hard to believe that this doesn’t refer to the fall of Jerusalem.

John and Paul lived in the Roman world and saw the emperors of Rome rule. Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus (a.d. 39-81) was alive during this time. John and Paul were talking about rulers they could see coming. They were pointing to the stones of the temple they could lean against. When Caesar Titus besieged Jerusalem, he killed thousands upon thousands, fed some of his captives to wild animals, and stopped daily sacrifices immediately. These actions are consistent with what is predicted here - precisely. So it seems very plausible within the context of both Paul and John that this was Titus, who was immediately deified by his people upon his death and his choice to destroy the temple was made specifically to overthrow the Jewish faith in Yahweh and the Christian faith in his Messiah.

Furthermore, as disciples of Christ, Paul and John’s teaching here echoes of their teacher. These men were well studied in Jewish prophetic literature and with Christ’s teachings. They would have been fully aware of Christ’ prediction about the coming man who would be an abomination that would cause the desolation of the temple. With these references put into that context, Paul and John were reiterating what Jesus said. This man of lawlessness, who fulfilled Daniel’s prophecy of the last times, was most likely the Emperor Titus, who destroyed the temple and scattered Jews and Christians with severe persecution. Titus came from a long line of Greek and Roman emperors who were merciless to God’s people and His temple. Jesus made it clear in the temple that Daniel 9 and 11 had not been fulfilled, even though Jews might have been questioning this during his time with the presence of Gaius Caesar. John, understood that this person was about to come, but explained that many were coming before him - just like him. Paul, then later was also making clear that this person had not come yet either. Each individual prophesied about the future of Herod’s temple. Emperor Titus came after these prophecies so it is very acceptable that Jesus, Paul, and John were all prophesying about the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

I have to admit one weakness for this argument. Whereas the language of Matthew 24 is agreeable to this type of reading (the abomination comes and then tribulation begins) and 1 John 2:18 is agreeable to this reading (the anti-Christ will come just as many have already come), the language of this text leads the reader to connect this individual directly to the second coming, “whom the Lord will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.” However, a literal rendering of “with the breath from his mouth” may involve a number of serious complications.9 This imagery is used to describe the risen Christ, who condemns people already if they stand in unbelief (John 3:18). Christ warns the church of Pergamum not align with a certain group of Gnostics, “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16) This certainly is not a reference to his second coming, but rather he is saying that He will in some way judge them and

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remove their witness in the world prematurely. Therefore, it is possible that the anti-
Christ was overthrown by Christ’s judgement concerning his actions and that he will be
destroyed when he is resurrected and judged finally at the second coming of Christ.

Many Jews Will Return to Christ

In Romans chapters 9 to 11, Paul teaches on the relationship between believers and the
Jewish people around them. He encourages the Christians not to become arrogant
because of the unbelief of the Jewish people who have rejected Jesus.

There’s been much debate on the nature of the church because of the book of Romans.
Does the church replace Israel? Paul’s explanation of the church is that Gentiles have
now been joined into the people of God with believing Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles, of
whom all are believers in Jesus Christ, our now said to be recipients of the promise
given to Abraham. The church is made up of the children of God who are the true
people of God’s promises - no longer a Jew because of blood. In some respects then,
we can talk about the church being a spiritual Israel. We can also talk about Christians
who are Gentiles being made into spiritual Jews. However, God still has a plan for
Jewish people who currently do not believe, in order to be joined back with the church
and the people of God. In other words, to become children of the Abrahamic promise
through faith in Christ. So in one sense, the church, which is a combination of Jews and
Gentiles, does stand in the position that Israel stood prior to the coming of Christ, but in
another sense completely, the church does not replace the nation of Jews. Romans
9:25 talks about many Jews returning to Jesus. John Wesley says, “and so all Israel
shall be saved - being convinced by the coming of the Gentiles. But there will be a still
larger harvest among the Gentiles, when all Israel is come (comes?) in.”

There are many ministries caring for the Jewish people and reaching out to the nation of
Israel with the Gospel, so it is possible that enough Jews have been saved to validate
the completion of this sign. It is impossible for us to know the hearts of men. There
could be many Jewish people who have turned to Christ without us knowing.
Furthermore, the words “all Israel” do not denote the salvation of every Jew who is alive,
but rather signifies a number of great significance.

However, it is unlikely that this sign has been fulfilled because we have not observed a
significant response to the gospel within the Jewish people even similar to that of
modern-day China or other nations that are seen as becoming “Christianized.”

Conclusion

Some interpreters view the entire events of Matthew 24 to be complete, including the
gospel being preached, the abomination, the tribulation period, and the powerful signs.
This is unlikely though. Jesus was warning about the “signs of the end.” Where as it
has been demonstrated above that the reading of this text does point to some of these
events being situated in the first generation, it is also clear that Christ’s return comes
“immediately” after the distress. Therefore, some events, such as the preaching to all nations and abomination of desolation, that initiated the end times, have probably been fulfilled, while others, such as powerful signs, are still to come.

1.3.4. **Does the book of Revelation apply to the past, present, future, or all?**

The author knew the churches well and wrote to them. He is writing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets whereby the message was applicable to them.

The genre of Revelation is Apocalyptic. Apocalyptic Literature is a genre with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by another-worldly being to a human recipient. The vision discloses a reality. The vision takes its reader out of his or her time and space so that the reader can see the world over all time and from a heavenly perspective. Through the heavenly revelation the reader receives a message about God’s activity in history to achieve his future purpose for the world.

Revelation is a prophetic letter. Revelation is saturated with allusions from the Old Testament prophets. Revelation is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. It finds itself in the form of a letter. John wrote specifically to seven churches and generally to the entire church. Therefore, the content of the entire letter must relate both to the concerns and situation of its addressees and to the entire body of Christ. It must have meant something to the people it was addressed to and it must mean something to us today. We should interpret Revelation, in some ways, the same way we interpret Paul’s epistles.

The symbolic world that the author created was to confront the powerful images of the Roman’s vision of the world. Civic and religious architecture, icons, statues, rituals, and festivals all provided powerful visual impressions of Roman imperial power and of pagan religions. Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of the world: how it looks from heaven to which John was caught up into.\(^\text{10}\) Once the counter images are understood in their context, then any reader of any time can understand what God was trying to reveal to his church.

\(^{10}\) Bauckham, Richard The Theology of the Book of Revelation, pg 17.
2. **Individual Eschatology**

At this point we will turn our focus to the individual. What is death? What happens at death? Where does the body go? How will we spend eternity?

2.1. **Death**

2.1.1. **The Reality of Death**

The author of Ecclesiastes says, “death is the destiny of every man. The living should take this to heart.” the Bible is the inspired word of God and so if King Solomon recognized this principle and wrote it down, then God himself is encouraging each one of us to be prepared for death.

Westerners have extreme confidence in the wealth and resources that they have. It seems that they are almost shocked by the thought that modern medicine cannot solve all of the physical decay that brings about death in the body. Eastern religions have developed a belief system around reincarnation, by which individuals return to life in a different form in a cycle that could last forever or up until a point that they reach a quiet piece of almost nonexistence. Naturalists believe death is simply the end of the process, a final stage of life, and we must accept it. They believe that there is really no hope for the future.

While disagreeing with the naturalists about life after death, Christians certainly believe in preparing and confronting death. Romans 8 talks about the decay of the entire world, which leads to death. All Scripture affirms that our bodies, our present temporary tents will eventually be destroyed.

2.1.2. **The Nature of Death**

But what is death? Ecclesiastes 11 says, “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth... Before the dust returns to the ground came from and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

This first teaches that death is physical. It is the moment when our body ceases to have life. The body ceases to fight the planet’s tendency to decay. It no longer functions to produce all the elements that combine to make life, but it is destroyed by the elements.

Secondly, it teaches that death has a spiritual element. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus contrasts the death of the body with the death of the body and soul: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul: rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Death then is the separation of the body and the spirit. The body ceases to produce life and the soul returns to God, who is the giver of life and breathed the breath of life into dust from the ground in order to create man (Gen 2:7). Therefore,
when we talk about death, we are not talking about the end of existence. Life and death according to the Scriptures are not to be thought of as existence and nonexistence, but two different stages of existence. However, Scripture clearly refers to a state of spiritual deadness. The book of Revelation refers to this as the “second death.” The second death is something separate from and subsequent to normal physical death. Revelation 21:8 says, “but as far as the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” The second death is an endless punishment and separation from the presence of God.

2.2. The Intermediate State

2.2.1. The Importance of the Doctrine

The doctrine of the intermediate state is an issue which is both very significant and yet difficult. “Intermediate state” refers to the condition of humans between their death and the final resurrection that will happen when Christ returns. The question is, what is the condition of the individual during this period?

The intermediate state is not the final state of an individual. It may be similar to the final state, but individuals in the future will be resurrected and judged by God. On one hand then, the doctrine of the intermediate state is less important than the doctrine of the final state. However, people ask legitimate questions about what their loved ones are doing after death. As well, some of the views of the intermediate state seem to be quite anticlimactic or hopeless. Therefore, it is incredibly important to grieving individuals that pastors and believers be able to give them clear guidance in such a difficult time. The goal would not be to give people false hope or misleading information, but to inspire them even if there are only a few passages that refer to this and clarify the situation.

2.2.2. Current Views

As we have already seen with other topics regarding the future, the view of the intermediate state differs depending on some Christian backgrounds. We will now examine various current understandings of this doctrine.

Soul sleep

One view of the intermediate state is that individuals sleep during the period between death and resurrection. This view developed in the 16th century and today Seventh-day Adventists list this among their fundamental beliefs.

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The major problem with this view, even though it is simple and it refers to the passages in Scripture that talk about individuals “falling asleep” at the time of their death, is that a number of scriptures disagree with these thoughts. There are several biblical references to personal and awake existence between death and resurrection. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is a good example. The primary intent of the parable is not to teach about the intermediate state. We must also be careful not to make parables say things that they do not say. However, it seems unlikely that Jesus would use an illustration that would completely misrepresent what the future holds in such a drastic way. In this parable it is clear that both Lazarus and the rich man are awake and all ready feeling the consequences of their actions on earth. Moreover Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross, “truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” Luke 23:43 are clear that both Christ and the thief would be in existence between their resurrections. Christ’s resurrection would happen with only three days later and he is the first fruits of the resurrection, but the thief would see him in his intermediate state and while the thief was in the intermediate state himself.

Purgatory

The Catholic concept of purgatory comes from the text in Hebrews 9:27: “it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment.” The idea here is that no formal judgment comes immediately after death and so therefore the soul becomes aware of God’s judgment upon it immediately. One of the major features of purgatory is that it is “a temporary state of punishment for those who, departing from this life in the grace of God, are not entirely free from sins or have not yet fully paid dissatisfaction due to their sins.” Since nothing defiled can enter into heaven, God cannot justly receive them into his immediate presence. On the other hand, he cannot justly consign them to hell, for they have done nothing wanting such a severe measurement. Purgatory is a middle state, so to speak, where they may be cleansed of all their sins.

This view is contrary to many clear teachings in Scripture, including Colossians 3:1-14 and Ephesians 2:8-9. To be sure nothing pure can enter heaven, the saving grace offered by Jesus cleanses us from all of our sins. As the book of Hebrews teaches, God no longer looks on our sin but on the purity of our Savior (chapter 4). On this basis, the concept of purgatory must be rejected.

A Suggested Resolution

As in most cases, there is a tension between concepts and Scripture. Individuals can force the text to say something and forget to include what other texts say about their


13 Millard Erickson, Systematic Theology, 1179
theory. These individuals find themselves proposing a view that sounds sophisticated and superior, but they have to work all round the Biblical texts. A great resolution to this is to let the Bible speak for itself. With regards to the intermediate state the Bible speaks clearly about a few things.

First, it speaks clearly that there will be a time in between the first death, physical death, and the resurrection. So there is an intermediate state.

Secondly, the Bible references made above teach that individuals are either present with God because of their salvation or already feeling the consequences of their lostness in hell. Whereas the concept of purgatory recognizes this immediate nature of judgment, it creates an environment that is not in Scripture. Scripture does not teach that the righteous dead descended into hell for a time. The few examples that we have, teach that people like Lazarus go into the presence of God and people like the rich man go into hell and neither cross over to the other side.

Therefore, we can comfort those who have loved ones with the hope that they are present with their Lord right now. They are enjoying paradise and freedom from decay right now. We also have the solemn work of making others aware that their loved ones may not have that same hope. We can talk clearly about the ability to repent in quietness and in solitude so that individuals may not assume what they cannot know, but we must also talk plainly about the need for repentance before death because there is a judgment that occurs after and without a change of situation.

2.3. Final States

2.3.1. Heaven

The word “heaven” has various meanings. The first is in reference to “the heavens,” which is used to designate the universe or the place where the stars are. The second usage is a synonym for God himself. The prodigal son confessed, “I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Luke 15:18, 21). The third meaning of the word “heaven,” is the dwelling place of God. (Matt. 6:9; 7:21; 10:32; 33; 12:50)14

The story of humanity began with God’s desire to dwell with his people. We see that God dwelt with Adam and Eve. God desired to dwell with the people of Israel. His presence stayed with them in the tabernacle. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, those believers in the new covenant are blessed with the dwelling of God in them (1 Corinthians 6). The new heavens, which will be created, are said to be like the garden and like the tabernacle and like the indwelling of the Holy Spirit whereby God will dwell with his people.

The new heavens and the new earth are spoken of in ways that give us hope of a physical dwelling with God in perfection. Those who place their hope in Jesus Christ as their savior (John 3:16-20) are forgiven of their sins and given permission to live in this heaven. The presence of God means that there will be no more curse or sin. Because God will be present with us in a way that is beyond his current presence; we will therefore live in a state without evil and without decay (Revelation 21:4).

Life in heaven will be full of rest, worship, and service. The writer of the book of Hebrews comments that a great Sabbath rest is still in the future for us. It will be greater than the rest that the Israelites found in the promised land (Hebrews 4:9-11). John’s vision of heaven includes multitudes and multitudes in constant praise of God. When Jesus commands us to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” He is making clear reference to the glory of God being praised on earth as it already is in heaven. So our final state will be a place of worship and adoration where every tribe and tongue and language comes together to give glory to God (Isaiah 6:3 Revelation 19:1-4). There was also a suggestion that heaven will be a community. It will be a physical place on a physical earth and this will include service. This is implied because of the eschatological setting, which returns to a similar state that the garden was in. Humanity was to serve as under-lords carrying out God’s work on his behalf in the garden.

2.3.2. Hell

Because hell seems to be such a harsh reality, it is one of the first topics of the Christian belief that is attacked or skipped over. Part of the problem is the tension between the love of God and his judgment. Yet we should regard the doctrine of everlasting punishment as a clear doctrine because it is clearly taught in Scripture.

The Bible implores several images to explain the future state of those who stand condemned because of their unrighteousness and unbelief in Jesus. Jesus said, “then the King will say to those on his left hand, depart from me, you cursed, into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). He also described this state as outer darkness: “the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matthew 8:12). The final condition of the wicked is also spoken of as eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46), torment (Revelation 14), the bottomless pit (Revelation 9:1-2), the wrath of God (Romans 2:5), the second death (Revelation 21:8), and eternal destruction and exclusion from the face of the Lord’s (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Hell is the opposite of heaven. It is the absence of God and the banishment from his presence. It is an experience of intense anguish, whether it involves physical suffering or mental distress or both (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:43-48) is open for debate.
Bibliography:


