



End Times Made Easy

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| Introduction to Eschatology



1 Introduction

The return of Jesus is the great hope of the church; the outstanding unfulfilled landmark on the spiritual horizon! It is referred to some 300 times by the NT writers (on average, once every 15 verses).

No subject or doctrine has been so fiercely debated or widely interpreted as that of the End Times. Words such as "Apocalypse", "Armageddon" and "Judgement Day" have captured the minds and imaginations of believers and unbelievers alike! Sadly, there is widespread disagreement, misunderstanding and (most often) ignorance amongst Christians about many of the end-time events.

There is increasing speculation, claim and counter-claim about what the future holds for us. Many false prophets - and frightened or ill-informed Christians - will give undue emphasis to world-events and calendar changes.

How vital, therefore, that we have a secure and solid base in the Word of God! Just as Paul urged Timothy to "present himself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" ([2 Tim 2:15](#)), so we must be secure in our conviction about what the Scriptures say, especially as that Day approaches. We need a sound theology of the future; a thoroughly Biblical understanding of the *end times*, which affects our life and conduct in the *present times*.

There is no doubt we will be challenged as never before, that we will be called upon to give a reason for the hope we have, and that we will have opportunities to be an agent of peace and security to those confused and frightened around us. We need to find a sure and solid conviction about what *God* has said on the matter!



| 2 A Theology of Hope!

We must appreciate at the outset that the doctrine of the last things is a vital and integral part of the whole Gospel of Christ, and cannot – and should not – be studied or viewed in isolation. For example, doctrines relating to the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead are essential aspects of the Gospel: the Gospel is incomplete without them; they are part-and-parcel of the Good News! Our study of eschatology must therefore result in a ‘theology of hope’ rather than a ‘hopeless theology’.

When Jesus spoke of His return He described it as “the renewal (NSB: “regeneration”) of all things” ([Mt 19:28](#)). Peter said that the goal of eschatology was “the restoration of all things” ([Acts 3:21](#)). Paul said that the time of future glory will be one in which “the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” ([Ro 8:21](#)). In other words, the overwhelming message of the Scriptures is that eschatology has to do with the bringing of creation and mankind to its original God-intended destiny.

The End Times are about the destruction of Satan’s destructive purposes, and the triumph and victory of God’s redemptive purposes! The End Times are simply the final phase in the completion of God’s glorious purpose which He effected through Christ when he acted to “reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” ([Col 1:20](#)). “Biblical prophecy...has everything to do with Christ’s cross, Christ’s church, and Christ’s coming.”¹

¹ Samuel E Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press, 2003, p11

| 3 What do we mean by “End Times”?

We can distinguish between two similar phrases used in the Bible:

- The “**Last Days**” refers to the whole period of time between the resurrection and the return of Jesus. These last days are the days in which God has spoken through His Son ([Heb 1:2](#)); they are characterised by the outpouring of the Spirit which began at Pentecost ([Joel 2:28](#)). These are the ‘last days’ in relation to God’s programme for the world.
- The “**End Times**” describe the last part of those last days. They are the days in which the ultimate future event, which is the return of our Lord Jesus Christ and the consummation of all things, will take place. The study of ‘end times’ is called *eschatology*. Note that “end times” is not itself a Biblical phrase; The Bible speaks of the “end of the ages”.

It is our privilege to be living in these last days; and it is our growing conviction that we are those upon whom the climax of the ages will come.

4 Getting the Right Approach

Scripture is our authority and our only reliable source. In our approach to studying the end times we must appreciate that God revealed all that we need to know in His Word, and has seen fit to give us only relatively brief statements on certain matters. Therefore, we must ‘proceed with caution’ in a number of ways:

4.1 Four Things to Avoid

- We must **avoid dogmatism** where the Bible is not dogmatic! Much harm has been done by zealous but incautious people who have allowed their enthusiasm and imagination to run riot in wild and dogmatic assertions.
- We must **avoid over-literalisation**. Much of the Biblical information about the end times (particularly passages in Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation) comes cloaked in the particularly obscure literary genre of *apocalyptic* literature, which contains highly imaginative symbolism. We must appreciate that much of this imagery is not intended to be taken literally!
- We must **ensure consistency** in our approach to the end times and to the rest of Scripture. We cannot seize upon certain isolated texts and derive from them doctrines and theories that contradict or modify any other doctrine plainly stated elsewhere in Scripture.
- Above all, we should approach this study with an **appreciation of the overall purpose** and intention of the Scriptures dealing with the end times. God does not want us to be fearful and confused: in every case the purpose of the Biblical writings is to give believers hope and encouragement concerning the future.

4.2 Three Guiding Principles

Taking the above cautions on board, our approach to eschatology must be based around the following crucial ‘rules’ or ‘principles’ of interpretation²:

1. **“The Clear before the Difficult”** – that is, we should study the clear passages of scripture before we come to the difficult ones. Moreover, we should interpret the difficult passages *in the light of* the clear ones!

² See Samuel E Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press, 2003, p27-29

2. **“The Literal before the Figurative”** – that is, we should study literal passages before we study figurative ones. Moreover, the figurative passages should be interpreted within the doctrinal boundaries set by the literal passages.
3. **“The General before the Detailed”** – that is, the general truths of eschatology should be grasped before we come to discuss the details of prophecy. In other words, before we can deal with the details of eschatology and properly interpret the difficult passages, we must first discover the broad and basic structure of history and the End Times.

Following these 3 simple and self-evident principles of Biblical interpretation will help save us from unnecessary complexities and confusion, and will make our study of the End Times simple!

5 Four Schools of Thought

Four broad schools of interpretation have arisen over the centuries regarding the nature of the prophetic scriptures concerning the End Times (and particularly regarding the Book of Revelation). These can be summarised as follows:

School	Beliefs about end time prophecies
Preterists ³	Already fulfilled in the early church
Historists	Progressively fulfilled in church history
Futurists	To be fulfilled in the end times
Idealists	Prophecies are spiritual not literal

We can explain this in a bit more detail, as follows:

5.1 'PRETERISTS' regard the majority of the events described in the end time scriptures as having been *already fulfilled* in the early history of the Church (and particularly in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70); they therefore see no real current prophetic element in them at all.

The difficulty with the Preterist approach is that some of the events described have clearly never happened. Also, if it were a description of things fulfilled during the days of the early church, why was the book regarded so highly by those who determined the canon of Scripture?

5.2 'HISTORISTS' regard the end time scriptures as a *prophetic programme* covering all that would take place progressively in the events of church history, between the early church days and the end of time. Actual historic events are cited as fulfilling the pictures of Revelation. Historists believe that most of the

³ From a word meaning 'past tense'

events described in Revelation have now occurred and that only the end-part of the book is yet to be fulfilled.

The difficulty with the Historist approach is that its advocates often use very remote and obscure historic events as evidence for the fulfilment of many of the predictions, whilst ignoring other historical events altogether. Moreover there is no consensus amongst them as to which events are the fulfilment of which predictions; different historical event are seen as fulfilment of the same passage(s).

5.3 'FUTURISTS' believe that the end time scriptures are mainly *prophetic*, with the majority of things described still to happen, most shortly before the second coming of Christ (and many of them during a future period of Tribulation.

Futurism was popularised by Edward Irving in the first half of the 19th Century, and became the theological cradle for the birth of 'premillennialism', and particularly for 'dispensational premillennialism' ("Dispensationalism"), a popular eschatological system developed by JN Darby which continues to have influence amongst many evangelical Christians today⁴.

5.4 'IDEALISTS' regard the end time scriptures as depicting great *spiritual realities* rather than any particular actual events of history past or future; none of the book would be regarded as prophetic. Idealists therefore see Revelation as a book of ideas, principles and concepts occurring repeatedly throughout history.

The difficulty with the Idealist approach is that the correspondence between Revelation and other plainly prophetic scriptures is clear; therefore, if the Idealists are right then we must also say that these other scriptures are purely spiritual or idealistic.

So, which approach should we take?... As with many divergent theological views, there are aspects of truth in each of these schools of thought. However, in interpreting the prophetic scriptures we must make the important point that - in many cases - *prophecy is fulfilled at more than one level*, and at more than one time. Thus, we will see that many events have a 'partial fulfilment' that has already occurred, but that there remains a 'total fulfilment' still to come. This same principle in interpreting prophecy can be clearly seen, for example, in the Psalms: many of David's psalms describe his own kingdom and rule, but also point ahead to the coming of Christ the King.

⁴ We will address the many problems of Dispensationalism in a later section.



| 6 Key Texts

Scriptures dealing with the end times are found throughout the Bible. However, some of the most important eschatological passages – to which we shall refer throughout this Module – are:

- Daniel 12
- Matthew 24-25
- Mark 13 (Parallel passage of Mt 24)
- Luke 21 (Parallel passage of Mt 24)
- 1 Corinthians 15:20-28
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
- 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
- Revelation

7 Overview of the Module

The rest of this module will cover the following topics:

- **Part (2): The Basic Framework: Matthew 24-25** – We begin with what Jesus said about the End Times, as recorded in this ‘Olivet Discourse’ (His most complete statement on the subject). Here we will see that the signs of the end times, and gain an understanding of the basic sequence of events.
 - **Part (3): Getting to Grips with Revelation** – Next we will unravel the Book of Revelation! We will see that its purpose, structure and content are not too difficult, and that the overall message is one of hope, encouragement and great victory!
 - **Part (4): Mysteries, Myths and Man-Made Muddles!** – We then pause to consider several of the more tricky aspects of eschatology, including some things about which there is considerable confusion and disagreement. But we will see that when we take the broad overall picture presented in the New Testament many of these ‘hot potatoes’ can be quite easily dealt with.
 - **Part (5): When Christ Returns: Resurrection and Judgement** – We finish with a survey of these two key Biblical doctrines, which Hebrews 6 describes as being “foundations” of our faith.
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