

ESCHATOLOGY | A STUDY OF THE END

Grace Bible Church | Fall 2023

PURPOSE

Scripture is full of prophecy—revelation of events that will come to pass at some point in the future. While many prophecies came to pass in history or at the first coming of the Messiah, there remains a vast amount of prophetic material that has yet to find its fulfillment. As Christians, we live in light of these events that are still to come. This course will be an overview of these ‘last things’ as we survey the Scriptures and piece together what God has revealed about the future.

RATIONALE

This course will seek to interweave doctrine and application. All of Scripture is inherently applicational, “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Thus, as we survey what the Scriptures reveal about the future, we will also take time to ask how these things ought to shape our life in the present.

EQUIP

When God reveals His plans for the future of His creation, He always does so with a particular purpose. These things are not just interesting tidbits of information to store away—the people of God are meant to respond to God’s revelation of eschatological events. Thus, this course should have a discernable impact on the way we think, the way we act, and the way we order our lives. As we progress through the course, we will seek to identify these impacts, including:

- 1) ***Producing Hope***: God tells us what is coming to remind us that our hope does not reside in the present but in the future.
- 2) ***Reinforcing Confidence***: God tells us what is coming so that, when this life is difficult, we would maintain our confidence in God and persevere in our faith.
- 3) ***Creating Urgency***: God tells us what is coming so that we would have a sense of urgency in how we live. Eschatology should inform how we think about and use the resources God has given us; it should also cause us to be intentional in evangelizing unbelievers that God places in our lives.

OPTIONAL READING

Benware, Paul. *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006.

Ice, Thomas D. “Has Bible Prophecy Already Been Fulfilled?” in *Article Archives* 96 (2009).
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=pretrib_arch

Merkle, Benjamin L. *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies*. Bellingham, CA: Lexham Press, 2020.

COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1: The Importance of Prophecy & Its Interpretation

Week 2: Views on the Timing of Prophecy Fulfillment

Week 3: The Kingdom of God

Week 4: Dispensational vs. Covenant Theology

Week 5: The Biblical Covenants

Week 6: Israel & The Church

Week 7: The Millennium

Week 8: Future Events Pt. 1 – The Rapture

Week 9: Future Events Pt. 1 – Daniel’s Seventieth Week (The Tribulation Period)

Week 10: Future Events Pt 3 – Resurrections

Week 11: Future Events Pt 4 – The New Creation (The Eternal State)

WEEK 1 | IMPORTANCE OF PROPHECY & ITS INTERPRETATION

Over twenty five percent of your Bible is prophetic material. J. Barton Payne in his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* lists 1817 prophecies (1,239 Old Testament & 578 New Testament) encompassing 8,352 verses. Of those prophecies, many have already been fulfilled in history. There remains, however, a huge percentage of Biblical prophecy awaiting its fulfillment. Eschatology is the study of these unfulfilled prophecies—the study of “last things,” those events still to come. Given how much of Scripture is devoted to these last things, it is imperative that Christians give the proper time and attention to understanding them. As Paul said, “All of Scripture,” including prophecy, “is breathed out by God and profitable for training, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

Why is an understanding of Biblical prophecy important?

IT PRODUCES CONFIDENCE

It can be discouraging when we look at the world around us. Our country is in decline, our culture is depraved, the “church” is diminishing—if we did not know how the story ends, it would be tempting to lose heart. However, we do know how the story ends, and this gives us confidence to persevere in the face of a wicked and adulterous generation. In His mercy, God tells us what is to come so that we would have confidence:

- Prophecy Demonstrates God’s Sovereignty
 - Isaiah 55:11 – so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
 - Matt 24:35 – Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
- Prophecy Demonstrates God’s Goodness
 - Romans 8:18-23, 28 – For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation

waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. . . . And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

- Rev 1:3 – Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

- Prophecy Clarifies God’s Plan
 - Matt 24:7 “. . . See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.”
 - Rev 1:19 “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.”

- Prophecy Produces Comfort
 - On the heels of his explanation of the rapture and its timing, Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are to “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:18)

IT PRODUCES MOTIVATION

Prophecy is not an end unto itself. God tells us about the future in order to inform how we live in the present. Prophecy motivates us to live for the Lord in a number of ways:

- Prophecy Motivates Holy Living
 - 1 John 3:2-3 – Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we

shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

- Titus 2:11-13 – For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ
- 2 Peter 3:10-13 – ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. ¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.
- Prophecy Motivates Diligence
 - Matt 25:14-30 – The Parable of the Talents
 - 1 Thess 5:1-11 – Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

- 1 Peter 3:14 – Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.
- Prophecy Motivates Endurance
 - Matt 24:10-13 – And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.
 - 1 Cor 15:58 – Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.
 - Rev 2-3 – “The one who conquers”
 - Rev 3:10-11 – Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

IT PRODUCES URGENCY

Because we know that Christ’s return is imminent, we ought to live our lives with a sense of urgency and a recognition of the limited, and thus valuable, nature of our time in this life:

- Prophecy Produces Urgency for the Believer
 - Matt 24:42-44 – Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.
 - Matt 25:13 – “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

- Eph 5:15-16 – Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.
- John 4:35-36 & Matt 24:14
 John 4:35-36 – Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. ³⁶ Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

Matt 24:14 – And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

- Prophecy Produces Urgency for the Unbeliever

- Luke 3:7-9 – He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”
- 1 Thess 5:2-3 – For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.
- Rev 21:7-8 – “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

THE INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

When interpreting prophetic texts, there are certain realities and hermeneutical principles we must keep in mind if we are going to arrive at the proper conclusion.

SOME REALITIES

God has given prophecy to be understood

An important doctrine to keep in mind when studying Biblical prophecy is the perspicuity, or clarity, of Scripture. The Bible is meant to be understood and can be understood with careful and diligent study.

The perspicuity of Scripture does not mean every passage is simple and easy to grasp. While the most vital gospel truths can be understood by children (Deut 6:6-7; 2 Tim 3:14-15), other passages are indeed “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). However, nothing in Scripture is inscrutable; some passages and some doctrines simply require more labor and deeper study to understand. In Revelation 1:1 John tells us that what follows is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants the things that must take place. . .” In other words, God gave us the book of Revelation *so that* we would have clarity on what is to come in the future!

Prophecy is not meant to be enigmatic—it is meant to be clear so that the believer, having diligently studied these texts, can approach the future with confidence and hope.

God has given us help in understanding prophecy

You are not alone in the interpretive process. When you put your faith in Christ, he sends his Spirit to dwell in you (1 John 2:20, 27). It is the Holy Spirit who helps us by illuminating the Scriptures to us so that we can understand them. As Paul writes:

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God (1 Cor 2:11-12).

With the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we can understand all that is written in Scripture. Nothing is beyond our grasp if we are prayerful and diligent in our study.

God has given us His Scriptures

Paul tells us that “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16). Every chapter and verse of Scripture is of divine origin; none of it is the product of human invention (2 Pet 1:21). It is “more fully confirmed” (2 Pet 1:19) than even the greatest audio-visual experience and “you will do well to pay attention as to a light shining in a dark place” (2 Pet 1:19). This is as true of the prophetic portions of Scripture as any other part of Scripture. We must not be apathetic towards Biblical prophecy; it is vital to our faith and necessary for our sanctification (John 17:17). We should regard prophecy as a gift from God for our blessing and benefit.

SOME PRINCIPLES

Interpret Literally

Because we believe in the inerrancy, infallibility, and perspicuity of Scripture, we approach it humbly and seek to understand the text on its own terms. We want to understand what the author intended by what he wrote and avoid the error of imposing our own interpretation onto the text. Thus, we rely on a literal, grammatico-historical hermeneutic:

- **Literal:** seek the plain meaning of the text. We should interpret the words and grammar of a passage as they would have been normally understood at the time the text was written. This is opposed to seeking a “meaning behind the meaning,” an allegorical or figurative meaning. This does not mean we ignore figures of speech or literary genre; rather, they are identified and interpreted accordingly.
- **Grammatical:** the interpreter must study the grammar of the passage—its words and their connections—to ascertain what the author was intending to communicate. This process will include:
 - *Genre Study* – Studying the genre of a text and its particularities. Is it prose or poetry? Narrative or epistle? What figures of speech are common to this genre? These questions will determine how we interpret the text.
 - *Lexical Study* – Studying the lexica, the words themselves. Why did the author choose the words that he did? What do they mean and what is their significance?
 - *Syntactical Study* – Studying the connections between words and sentences. Things like word order and sentence structure are key in conveying meaning and emphasis.

- **Historical:** interpretation must establish the historical setting—its audience, circumstances, and cultural background—in which the text was written, while also taking into account antecedent (prior) revelation.

In essence, these three principles put the original author front and center—his language, his culture, his historical context, his world. In this way, his intention comes to the fore. These three guidelines will provide boundaries that ensure we arrive at the proper meaning of the passage. By anchoring us to the original intention of the author, they protect us from veering into subjective interpretations that reflect more about us than about God.

This hermeneutic must be applied consistently to all portions of Scripture, including prophetic passages. Too often, interpreters are willing to spiritualize or allegorize prophetic passages in a way they would never do to an historical passage or an epistle. We must take the inspired author at his word and not seek a deeper or hidden meaning.

This is not to say that a literal hermeneutic ignores figures of speech, which are plentiful in prophetic passages. As Benware writes, “Literal interpretation is not. . . a rigid ‘letterism’ or ‘mechanical understanding of language’ that ignores symbols and figures of speech in Bible prophecy.”¹ Rather, a literal hermeneutic provides protective guardrails that keep us from veering astray from the true meaning of a text:

What we have discovered is that a normative principle must be a general principle, but a general principle cannot legislate a particular sense or senses. Rather, a general principle can only specify general limits to a textual sense. Thus our definition of literal would be appropriately designated as a system of limits. This system specifies the general maxim. . . that any sort of text is consistently interpreted in its own context. As an example, ‘serpent’ as a word normally means ‘animal’ and only an animal. But this normal usage and sense does not legislate that ‘serpent’ in Genesis 3:14 must mean merely an animal. On the other hand, a literal system begins with recognizing ‘serpent’ as an animal. Then it looks to the immediate or extended context for other clues to the meaning. This serpent speaks (3:1-5), and speaks as the enemy of God. Thus in a literal system, this serpent is more than an animal; it is God’s enemy. . . The value of this literal system is that it specifies a normative role for the textual contexts in interpretation and a

¹ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 24.

normative practice of interpretation. It thereby excludes ideas extrinsic to the text.²

The significance of that final sentence can hardly be overstated. A literal hermeneutic protects us from smuggling in a foreign meaning or interpretation into the text and helps us ascertain what God intended.

Interpret Comparatively

God did not give all prophetic material at one time to one person; rather, God has revealed the “last things” progressively, to many different authors living at various times and place. Thus, in order to piece together the full picture of what is to come, we will need to compare prophecy with prophecy. For any given subject, whether the rapture, the millennial kingdom, or the final judgments, there will several puzzle pieces spread throughout Scripture that we must bring together to form a complete picture. Each piece reinforces and clarifies the other pieces, and only when we have them all can we avoid drawing erroneous conclusions.

Interpret Temporally

As the prophets recorded the revelation given to them regarding the future, they often did so unaware that there would be an interval of time between prophetic fulfillments. “In such passages, the sacred writer, as he foresaw these events in his day, viewed them in the distance of time like peaks of a mountain range, without realizing that valleys of time lay between them. This is true especially concerning events in the first and second advents of Christ.”³

As an example of this phenomenon, we can look at Zechariah 9:9-10 which reads:

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your king is coming to you;

righteous and having salvation is he,

humble and mounted on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

² Elliott Johnson, “Premillennialism Introduced: Hermeneutics,” in *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 17.

³ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 94.

and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Verse 9 was fulfilled during Christ's first advent at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Verse 10, however, is yet to be fulfilled and will take place at Christ's second advent. Thus, these two events are separated by at least 2000 years, a fact Zechariah was not likely aware of. This and other examples remind us that, often, the key to understanding how and when prophetic events will find their fulfillment is by taking into consideration these time intervals.

Interpret Biblically

Prophecy is often full of symbols and figures of speech that must be interpreted rightly, and the best tool for this is Scripture itself (the Rule of Faith). In keeping with our literal, grammatico-historical hermeneutic, we must carefully consider the context of any prophetic text we are studying and seek to find the interpretation of a symbol or figure of speech there, as opposed to our own or someone else's imagination. The meaning may be found:

- In the immediate context: some symbols are interpreted in the text itself.
 - Rev 17:1, 15 – Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters”. . . And the angel said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.”
 - Ezek 37:1, 11 – The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. . . Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.
- In the larger context: some symbols used by an earlier author of Scripture is interpreted by a later author of Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

- See the book of Revelation where “a count of the significant allusions which are traceable both by verbal resemblance and by contextual connection to the Hebrew canon number three hundred and forty-eight. Of these approximately ninety-five are repeated, so that the actual number of different Old Testament passages that are mentioned are nearly two hundred and fifty, or an average of more than ten for each chapter of Revelation.”⁴
- Rev 12:14 with Exodus 19:4 & Isaiah 40:28-31
- In the historical & cultural context: some symbols related to the time, place, and culture in which the author lived.
 - For example, the “white stone” in Rev 2:17 and the “pillar” in 3:12 come from the cultural context of John the apostle’s day.

As we seek to develop our eschatology, we must keep these realities about Scripture and these hermeneutical principles in mind so that we honor the Lord in our interpretation, and so the prophecies of Scripture can have their intended impact in our lives.

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 42.