

“ESCHATOLOGY”

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Dr. Gilbert W. Stafford**

Professor of Christian Theology, Anderson University School of Theology

INTRODUCTION

The word “eschatology” means the study of last things. In the Greek New Testament the word eschatos is used to refer to the last days (Acts 2:17, II Timothy 3:1, Hebrews 1:2, James 5:3, I Peter 1:20, II Peter 3:3), the last hour (John 2:18), the last time (I Peter 1:15), and the last day (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48), but it is important to note also that Jesus our Lord is himself referred to as the eschatos. I Corinthians 15:45 refers to him as the last Adam, and Revelation 1:17 and 2:8 refer to him as the first and the last. In 22:12-13 Jesus says, “I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last [eschatos], the beginning and the end.” (The New Revised Standard Version is used throughout unless otherwise indicated.)

Eschatology that is faithful to the New Testament is always centered first and foremost on the person and work of Jesus Christ who *is* the eschatos.

Taking that as our point of departure, we will in this presentation look first of all at what Scripture teaches about the Kingdom and our Lord. Then, we will review the simple eschatology of the New Testament as it is expressed in I Thessalonians 4 and 5 and in II Peter 3:1-13. Following that, we will focus on two particular passages having to do with the end times, Matthew 24 and Revelation 20. But first, let us review what Scripture teaches about the Kingdom and our Lord.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1) The promise of the Kingdom was given in the Old Testament to David and the prophet Nathan (see II Samuel 5-7).

2) The fulfillment of this promise, however, was conditional on Israel’s obedience to God (e.g., I Kings 9:1-9 and 11:6-13).

3) Since Israel was disobedient, the promise, therefore, was not fulfilled (e.g., Daniel 9:4-19).

4) And so, in light of the great disappointment regarding the fulfillment of the promise, the prophets developed four themes regarding the future fulfillment of the Kingdom promise. They are:

- A new kind of citizen whose heart beats with the heart of God (e.g., Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26; Isaiah 53)
- A new kind of king whose ways are the ways of God (e.g., Micah 5:2; Isaiah 11:1-3; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Daniel 7:13-14)
- A new kind of environment in which people can live in peace (e.g., Isaiah 11: 6-9; 35:1-10; Zechariah 8:4-5)
- A new kind of victory over evil, accomplished by God in God’s way, not the world’s, (e.g., Joel 2:1-2)

5) But the question Israel faced was when all of this would take place? The answer came, however, with the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. A community of faith emerged around him made up of people—primarily Jewish—who were convinced that in him the divine answer had come:

Yes, he was the new citizen whose heart beat with the heart of God. He was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. By his stripes we are healed (e.g., John 1:29; Acts 8:32-33; I Peter 2: 24. Also relevant are such passages as Matthew 5-7, 25; John 10:30; 13:1-17; Philippians 2:7-8; and Hebrews 4:15b).

And yes, he was the new kind of king whose ways are the ways of God. He is the Messiah king, the Christ, the divinely anointed one who reigns as Lord of all. Peter said it for all of us: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

And yes, he was the new environment in which people could live in peace.

- He is the jubilee when God’s norms are reestablished (Luke 4:16-17)
- He is the bread of life (John 6:35)
- He is the water of life (7:37)
- He is the light of the world (8:12)
- He is the gate to salvation (10:9)
- He is eternal life (10:28)
- In him is every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3)
- In him we are adopted as God’s children (1:4-5)
- In him we have redemption and forgiveness (1:7)
- In him we know the mystery of the divine will (1:9)
- In him we have the joy of the divine inheritance (1:11)
- In him we are “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13)
- In him we have the knowledge of hope and of “the immeasurable greatness of his power (1:18-19)
- In him we are part and parcel of a reconciled humanity (2: 14-16)
- In him we have ready access to the Father (2:18)
- In him we are members of the household of God (2:19)
- In him we are part and parcel of the holy temple of the Lord (2:21-22)
- In him we are heirs of all that God has promised (3:6)
- In him we have the blessing of God being at work within us accomplishing “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (3:20)
- In Christ, we have the perfect and eternal great high priest who offers himself as the perfect sacrifice thus “obtaining eternal redemption” (see Hebrews 9:11-12).

It is the Apostle Paul who enunciates so well this grand truth about Jesus Christ being the fulfillment of the promise for a new environment: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (II Corinthians 5:17).

According to the New Testament, Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of a new kind of citizen, a new kind of king, and a new kind of environment, but there is more.

Christ is the new kind of victory over evil, accomplished by God in God’s way, not the world’s. He does it through his Kingdom life and ministry, and through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Even before the crucifixion, according to Luke 10:17-18, “The seventy [who had been sent out as emissaries of the Kingdom] returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.’” (See, also, such passages as Ephesians 1:20-23 and Revelation 20: 1-6.)

And so, that first century disciple community saw in Jesus of Nazareth the fulfillment of all of these Old Testament promises. That group of people had what we might call a major paradigm shift: It was not, as many thought, that a group of new citizens over here had a new divine king over there who brought to them a new environment external to both citizens and king, and who would in the course of time be victorious over evil. It was not a matter of four separate fulfillments. That’s the way people in general expected it to happen. But, surprise of all surprises, it did not happen that way. The new citizen whose heart beats with the heart of God IS the new king whose ways are the ways of God and THIS SAME PERSON IS the new environment of divine peace AND THIS SAME PERSON IS IN AND OF HIMSELF the new kind of victory over evil. The suffering servant is one and the same as the Messiah; and this suffering Messiah is one and the same as the new environment; and this suffering Messiah in whose spiritual environment we live is none other than Christ the Victor over all evil. Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of all of the Kingdom promises all in one. As Jesus said after casting out demons, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20). What does that mean? It means that the Suffering Servant is here; the Messiah is here; the Environment of Peace is here; the Victor is here. It was this revolutionary conviction that distinguished Jews who became followers of Jesus from those who did not.

THE SIMPLE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

I Thessalonians is widely regarded as the earliest writing in the New Testament. Chapter 4:13-5:11 contains a simple eschatology:

- Our Lord will descend from heaven “with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet” (4:16);
- When he appears he will raise the dead in Christ (4:16);
- Those who are still alive will be “caught up in the clouds to join with them to meet the Lord in the air” (4:17);
- We will be with the Lord forever (4:17; 5:10);
- Our Lord’s appearance will take those who reject the Lord, by surprise, and they will suffer the divine No (5:2-3);

- Before the Lord's appearance, those who are "children of light and children of the day" live holy lives in sober expectancy of the anytime appearance of the Lord (5:4-10).

Second Peter 3:1-13 is another example of a simple eschatology that speaks about the dissolving of the cosmic order, as we know it and the establishment of a new cosmic order. Jesus does not return to this cosmic order, but rather with his appearance a whole new cosmic order is established, spoken of as "new heavens and a new earth" (verse 13) or what Jesus in John 14:3 refers to when he says, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." It is what Revelation 7:9 describes as the great multitude before the throne and before the Lamb, and 19:1 simply refers to it as heaven.

END TIME EVENTS

Matthew is often referred to as the Gospel of the Kingdom. Chapter 24 is an account of Jesus discussing end time events with his disciples. (Parallel passages are found in Mark 13 and Luke 21.) It deals with the tension between two kinds of Judaism: on the one hand, a temple-centered, elitist Judaism of external religiosity, and on the other hand, a Kingdom-centered, humble Judaism of internally motivated love of God and neighbor. One sees this tension, for example, in the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, on the back of a donkey. While the common people and the children cry out "Hosanna" (21:9,15) the chief priests are angry about it. And then later in the temple, he drives out the moneychangers but heals the blind and lame (21:12-14). Chapter 23 is full of denunciations of temple-centered, elitist Judaism of external religiosity. In verse 38 he declares the divine desolation of the temple.

This brings us to chapter 24 where Jesus himself departs from the temple as an act of judgment on what it represents, followed by a declaration that it will be destroyed (verses 1-2).

Sitting with his disciples as they look out toward the temple, Jesus answers their questions as to the sign of his final coming and of the end of the age (24:3). He makes it clear that it will not be a secret coming (24:23-26). Instead, it will be as public as lightning in the sky (24:27).

But what is going to happen?

1) The temple, which was at the center of external religiosity, would be destroyed (24:15). This actually took place in 70 AD.

2) "Great suffering [tribulation], such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be" (24:21) will take place. Within the context of Matthew's Gospel, this great and unique tribulation is rightly understood as being directly related to the destruction of the Temple.

Let's reflect on this tribulation. When the Temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587-86 BC, it was replaced by a second temple in 516-15, only some 70 years later. However, this second temple of Jesus' day, destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans, has not been rebuilt, even though it is now over 1900 years later. Anguished by this, Jewish people from all over the world make their way to the foundational remains of that old temple to mourn their loss and to yearn for its replacement. These foundational remains are often referred to appropriately as the Wailing Wall. But complicating the whole matter beyond

comprehension is the fact that the site of the temple is now the location of Islamic holy places, one of which is the Dome of the Rock. This piece of real estate is the most hotly contested property in the world. In fact, it is a flash point that is at the center of the tumultuous political and religious situation in the Middle East today, and, indeed, in world politics and religious life. We read and hear about the tumult of this area every day. Day in and day out, year in and year out, what happens in Israel affects world politics. The whole world is affected by the chaotic circumstances in the Middle East. This great and unique tribulation that began with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD has been with us for over 1900 years, and the end is nowhere in sight. We continue to live in this time of great and unique tribulation. But, according to 24:21 “Immediately after the tribulation of those days”—the days that we are now in and have been ever since 70 AD—the natural order as we know it will come to an end and the Lord will appear to gather people of the Kingdom to himself and to visit the divine No on those who are antagonistic to the Kingdom.

So, according to Matthew, the first thing to take place is the destruction of the temple. The second is the great and unique tribulation that ensues as a result of the destruction of the temple.

3) But along with this great and unique tribulation is the continuation of the evidences of the fallen world: false messiahs, wars and rumors of war, famines, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy, false prophets, the increase of lawlessness, and spiritual coldness (24:5-12).

4) In the midst of all of this, however, the preaching of the Gospel will go forward throughout the world. “And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come” (24:14).

To summarize, then, the happenings between Christ’s first advent and his second are:

- Temple destruction
- The tribulation resulting from that destruction
- Continuation of natural, political, spiritual, and religious upheavals
- But most significantly, the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

And, according to 24:34, the generation being addressed by Jesus would see all these things. Indeed, they did see it all: they saw the destruction of the temple; they saw the beginning of the great and unique tribulation that started then and will continue until the Lord appears; they saw the continuation of natural, political, spiritual, and religious upheavals; and they saw the spread of the Gospel empowered by the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit.

THE SIGN OF THE LORD’S COMING

At the end of this period that we are now in, the cosmic order as we now know it will come to an end (24:29) and our Lord will appear to gather people of the Kingdom to himself and to visit the divine No on those who have rejected the Kingdom (24:30-31).

While temple destruction, the great tribulation, general upheaval, evangelization will take place prior to the Lord’s coming, none of them is the sign of

his coming. Neither is the ending of the cosmic order that takes place immediately after the things just mentioned. The one absolutely definitive sign above and beyond all these things will be none other than the appearance for all to see of the essence of the Son of Man himself. Whatever form that sign takes (exactly what it is lies in the mysterious knowledge of God alone), Scripture teaches that it will be so clearly associated with our Lord that no one will be able to avoid its meaning. As 24:30 says: “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

There will be no time to prepare for the appearance of our Lord. The end of the cosmic order as we know it, the appearance of the sign of the Son of Man and his coming itself are all one divine event. It is not a linear series of events, but one event with multiple dimensions: the end of the cosmic order, the sign of Christ, the appearance of Christ, the mourning of those who have rejected the Gospel of the Kingdom, and the gathering of those who have accepted it. At this end-time event, people who live in harmony with the Kingdom introduced by Jesus will be gathered to their Lord, all others will be left to suffer the divine No. “Two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left” (24:40). This judgment is reiterated in 25:31-46 spoken of as the separation of the sheep and the goats. This separation is on the basis of whether persons have lived according to the values of the Kingdom. Matthew’s message is uncomplicated: “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

IN THE MEANTIME

Since we live between the first and the second advent of Christ, what do we do?

This is what we do:

- 1) We devote ourselves to living the life of the Kingdom of God.
- 2) We participate in the divine mandate to take the Gospel of the Kingdom to the entire world.
- 3) We live in expectancy of the anytime appearance of our Lord.
- 4) We live in the confidence that Satan is bound and cannot destroy the faithful church. To this matter let us give additional attention.

Revelation 20:1-10 speaks of this comforting and reassuring truth about the binding of Satan, but first a word about the Book of Revelation. According to 1:1, it is about the one revelation of Jesus Christ. The book, therefore, is a multiple dimensional word picture of the all-encompassing work of our Lord that points back to what he did at his first advent, what he will do at his second advent, and his relation to the church and the world between the two. The only way John could describe this one revelation was to do so in a sequential manner in which one thing is said, followed by another, and then another. But that does not mean that the revelation itself is sequential anymore than my telling you in a sequential manner about my simultaneous view of this room. It is the only way I *can* describe this one total experience. Reporting something sequentially does not mean that the experience itself is sequential. And so, John speaks in a sequential manner about one revelation of the all-encompassing work of our Lord, a work rooted in what he

has already done and a work that will be brought to consummation when he returns at the end of the age.

When we come, for instance, to the last chapters of the book, we have several dimensions of this one revelation of the all-encompassing work of Christ. In 19:1-10, the emphasis is on the saving and keeping Lord here and now. In 19:11-16, it is on the reigning Lord here and now. In 19:17-21 it is on the victorious Lord here and now. In 20:1-6, it is on the superintending Lord here and now.

In 20:2 Christ's work is spoken of in terms of an angel, or messenger, coming from heaven, who "seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." In Revelation, numbers are used as symbols. In this case, it means an indefinite period of time between the victorious work of Christ at the time of the first advent and the second. In order to understand the nature of this binding of Satan, one needs to consider what the *release* of Satan means when 20:7-8 says that "when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle." Verse 9: "They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city."

When our Lord returns, many things will happen simultaneously. This means that we are not to think in terms of a succession of events but as one cosmic event with multiple dimensions. One of the dimensions of that end time event is the release of Satan so that God can make a public spectacle of him. He is released in order to do what Satan has always wanted to do, namely, destroy the people of God. Satan, therefore, garners all of his cohorts and surrounds the camp of the saints for the purpose of destroying them.

With that in mind, then, we have a key for understanding what the *binding* of Satan is about during this indefinite period of time between the first and second advents of Christ. Satan is bound in the sense that God will not allow Satan to destroy the faithful church. This was good news, indeed, to the persecuted and spiritually challenged church to which this book is addressed, and it is good news in all ages and places. The truth is that even though Satan gives us fits, Satan cannot destroy the faithful church.

In this connection it is of interest that Ephesians 1:22 teaches the same kind of thing when in reference to Christ it says that God has "put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things for the church." In other words, God is superintending all things so that the faithful church can get on with its mission. Satan cannot destroy the faithful church because Christ is Victor, and Satan is bound.

At the time of the appearance of the Lord, then, Satan will be loosed in order for God to make a public spectacle of his defeat. Satan, therefore, will garner his forces (Gog, that is, evil rulers, and Magog, that is, evil people) to do what previously he could not do. God, however, demonstrates in the cosmic arena that Christ is the Victor and that Satan is defeated, when, according to 20:9, "fire came down from heaven and consumed" Satan and all his cohorts.

A FEW BASIC QUESTIONS

A short question and answer section might be helpful:

What is the rapture? This is a word that some use to translate the Greek word in I Thessalonians 4:17 which the King James Version translates as being “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air, and to be with him forever. If used rightly, then, it refers to what happens at the time of the promised appearance of the Lord when the saints are caught up to be with him forever.

What is the great tribulation? In Matthew 24 it refers to the ongoing turmoil surrounding the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. In Revelation 7: 14 it refers to the trials, persecutions, sufferings, and even martyrdom of the saints who have been faithful to the end.

What is the millennium? Mentioned only once in Scripture, it refers to the indefinite period of time between the first and second coming of our Lord. It is a period of spiritual blessedness and hope for the disciple community during which the church lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When will the third temple be built? It has already been “built.” In John 2:19, Jesus says: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Verse 21 explains, “He was speaking of the temple of his body.” According to Matthew 12:6 “something greater than the temple is here.” And those of us who are in Christ are part and parcel of the divine temple, so that Paul refers to believers as the temple (I Corinthians 3:16-17; also see II Corinthians 6:16). Ephesians 2:21 says that in Christ “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” And according to Hebrews 9:11-12, we have a perfect high priest and a perfect sacrifice. The good news is that even before the second temple was destroyed in 70 AD the “third” temple was already in place.

Is modern Israel the fulfillment of biblical prophecy? No, Jesus the Christ is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The modern state of Israel is a secular state, not the people of God spoken of in Scripture. As Paul says in Romans 2:29, “A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal.” (See also Luke 3:7-9; John 8:31-59; and Ephesians 3:1-6)

What is the binding of Satan? It is God’s prohibition on Satan that keeps him from destroying the faithful church.

Where is Satan now, and where will he be at the end of the age when the Lord appears? Satan is now at work throughout the world but is bound in that he cannot destroy the faithful church. Regarding the end of the age, one of the multiple dimensions of this single eschatological event will be that Satan will be released—so so that God can make a public spectacle of him—to gather his cohorts together to destroy the camp of the saints, but instead will be thrown into God’s eternal condemnation, “the lake of fire and sulfur” (Revelation 20:10).

When will the Lord come again? He will come when God determines that the mandate to spread the Gospel of the Kingdom has been fulfilled.

CONCLUSION

The promises of the Kingdom were given in the Old Testament.

All of them were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The disciple community lives between the first advent and the second advent of Christ. This whole end time period during which we are now living is characterized by Scripture in these five ways:

- 1) It is the time for evangelism.**
- 2) It is the time of the great tribulation spoken of in Matthew 24:21 and Revelation 7:14.**
- 3) It is the millennium of the Holy Spirit during which the church has a foretaste of the blessings to come in heaven.**
- 4) It is the time for signs of the Kingdom (Kingdom healings, Kingdom suffering, Kingdom living).**
- 5) It is the time during which Satan is bound; that is to say, Satan cannot destroy the faithful church.**

We live on the edge of time all the time. Jesus is coming, and it may happen at any moment. I want to be ready.

The prayer of the ready church is “Maranatha.” The ready church prays, “Come, Lord, come. With wholehearted love for you, we long for your coming.”