

**Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Ministry Light Unit 2
Using Your Bible**

Week 2 – Interpreting Prophecy; Covenant vs. Dispensational Theology

Editors' note:

- *Italics (lower case or ALL CAPS) show what students should write in their student outline.*
- **Bold (including bold italics and bold ALL CAPS) shows what appears in the student outline.**
- Regular text is used for lecture notes; ALL CAPS are used for emphasis.

Overview

- [Introduction](#)
- [Importance of Prophecy](#)
- [The Messianic Kingdom](#)
- [Covenant and Dispensational Theology](#)
- [Key implications of Covenant and Dispensational Theology](#)
- [The Millennial Kingdom](#)
 - [Amillennialism](#)
 - [Post-Millennialism](#)
 - [Pre-Millennialism](#)
- [Key Millennial Kingdom Passages](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [Memory Verses](#)
- [Assignment](#)
- [Recommended Reading](#)

Introduction

Last week, we argued that the Bible is essentially clear (perspicuous) and explained common sense rules for sound interpretation (grammatico-historical hermeneutics). We also mentioned that there are several types of literature (genres) in the Bible and that there are additional rules that apply when interpreting a passage in a particular genre (e.g. not understanding a proverbial maxim as a timeless truth that applies in all cases).

This week we're going to take a brief look at the genre of prophecy and explore what the Bible says about the future.

Importance of Prophecy

The Old Testament prophets served as God's spokesmen and related God's message to the people of their day. In much of what they wrote, the prophets addressed the behavior and the spiritual state of God's people. But they also made predictions about the future and what would happen at the end of history. Theologians use the term "eschatology" to refer to the study of the "last things" or "end times." It is this latter part of the prophet's message that we will focus on in this lecture.

Eschatology: *the study of the last things.*

Every Christian should be familiar with what the Bible teaches about the future.

Why is this important?

- **25% of the Bible is devoted to this subject.** It must be important!
- **Paul apparently taught *young believers* about end-times.**

Even though Paul was only in Thessalonica for a few weeks before he was kicked out, he spent part of that time grounding them in this area so that he could say in 1 Thessalonians 5:12:

(1 Thessalonians 5:1) "Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well..."

He apparently considered it important to cover end-times material even with new believers.

- **Anticipating the end-times, particularly Christ's return, should influence believers' *attitudes, actions and relationships.***

(1 Peter 4:7-11) "The end of all things is near. Therefore *be clear minded and self-controlled* so that you can *pray*. Above all, *love each other deeply*, because love covers over a multitude of sins. *Offer hospitality* to one another without grumbling. Each one should *use whatever gift he has received to serve others*, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one *speaking the very words of God*. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

Peter is saying that the imminent approach of the 'end of all things' should sober us and make loving and serving other people a top priority in our lives.

Knowing what the Bible teaches about end-times provides us with an eternal perspective, hope, and motivation to pursue growth and serve others.

- **It builds our faith and gives us hope.**

When we see key parts of biblical prophecy being fulfilled, it reminds us that God is really there, he is working his sovereign plan in history, and the predictions in the Bible will come true. A well-known example is the regathering of Israel. But we will look at other predictions about the end-times that are coming true in our day.

Knowing this motivates us to serve the Lord with hope. We can read the end of the book and see that we're on the winning side!

- **It provides us with opportunities to talk about our faith.**

Periodically, Hollywood produces movies dealing with the end-times. LaHaye and Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels demonstrated the widespread interest in this topic. Also, every few years, current events incite a fresh cultural fascination with the end-times, such as happened most recently in the days leading up to the year 2000 and after September 11. As you interact with people in our culture, your knowledge of the end-times will provide opportunities to introduce the Bible's point of view and share your faith.

- **Many will be misled and confused before and during the end-times – let's not be among them!**

(Matthew 24:4, 23-25) Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you... 23 At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible. 25 See, I have told you ahead of time."

What Has God Revealed About the Future?

Imagine if the scriptures gave no revelation about the future of God's plan...

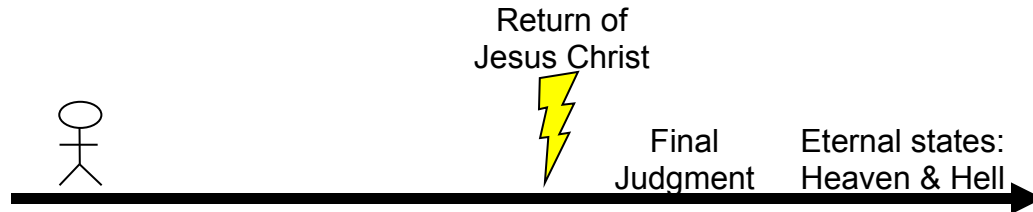


We would be left with many questions: will the world get better, or worse? Will God ever intervene? Will there ever be an end to the world? Many people live with no answers to these questions.

Thankfully, over the centuries, God has progressively revealed much information about the course of human history and the plan of God.

All orthodox Christians agree on these essentials:

- *The literal return of Jesus Christ*
- *Final judgment*
- *The eternal states of heaven & hell*



But theologians often disagree on many other end-times details. Their differences arise from how they interpret prophetic passages in the Bible. Last week, we covered hermeneutical rules to use when interpreting the Bible. This week, we will apply those rules to interpreting prophetic passages about the future.

The Messianic Kingdom

Much of the eschatological material in the Old Testament looks forward to a future age of glory and blessing for Israel and the entire world in a kingdom ruled by the Messiah.

Messianic Kingdom: A future period of human history in which God intervenes in history, vanquishes his enemies, and reigns over the world through the Messiah and his people Israel.

Discussion: Read each of these passages and ask students to draw on their homework and to note similarities between them.

Psalm 2:1-12 (Instructors: You may want to review Joel 3:1-21. Psalm 2 emphasizes the Messiah's role in setting up God's kingdom.)

- The nations of the world oppose the Lord (vs. 1-3).
- God puts king Messiah on his throne (vs. 6-7).
- This king destroys the nations and rules the world (vs. 8-9).
- The kings and judges of the world are urged to end their rebellion, worship God and do homage to the Son because he is coming soon (vs. 10-12).

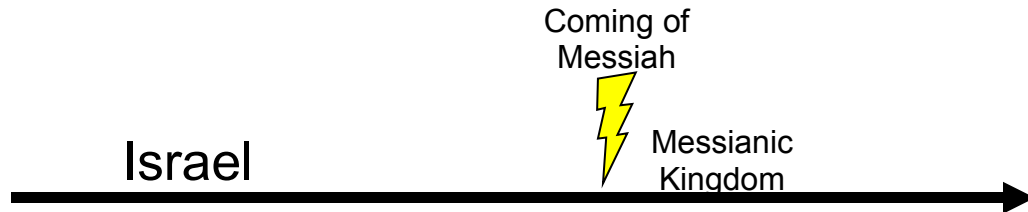
Isaiah 11:1-10

- A just and righteous ruler will arrive (vs. 1-4a). Students should be able to identify who it is.
- He slays the wicked of the earth (vs. 4b-5).
- This ushers in a period of peace; people will know the Lord (vs. 5-9).
- The nations of the world will rally to him (v. 10).

Zechariah 14:1-11

- The nations of the world surround Jerusalem and attack it (v. 2).
- God fights and defeats them (vs. 3-9).
- He will install himself as king over the entire earth (v. 9).
- This ushers in a time of peace and security (vs. 10-11).

Discussion: Ask students to try to come up with a rough sequence of events that each of these passages has in common. After the discussion, point out that, at minimum, these passages relate the sequence of events depicted below:



It seems, even to a casual reader of the Old Testament, that the future is bright for Israel. All of these passages depict the arrival of a ruler, the Messiah, who vanquishes God’s enemies and becomes king of the world. This is why the Jews of Jesus’ day were so eager to make him their king—they longed for the day when King Messiah would conquer their oppressors and usher in an era of peace, prosperity and joy.

But many theologians don’t see the flow of biblical history this way. They would reject our timeline above and adopt a different interpretation of the passages we have just read. Consider **Matthew Henry’s comments on Zechariah 14:**

v. 2 “but the rest of the people won’t be cut off from the city”

“Many of the Jews shall receive the gospel, and so shall prevent their being cut off from the city of God, his church upon earth...”

v. 4 “and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west”

“The Gentiles (will be) made one with the Jews by the breaking down of this middle wall of partition (Eph. 2:14). A great mountain of the ceremonial law was in the way of the Jews’

conversion, yet before Christ and his gospel it was made plain . . . The mountain being divided, one-half towards the north and the other half towards the south, there shall be a very great valley (means) a broad way of communication between Jerusalem and the Gentile world, by which the Gentiles shall have free admission into the gospel ...”

v. 5 “you will flee by the valley of my mountains”

“The valley of the mountains is the gospel-church, to which are added of the Jews daily such as should be saved ...”¹

Matthew Henry doesn’t think Zechariah 14 is about the future of the nation of Israel or a messianic kingdom. He sees the predictions in this passage as being spiritually fulfilled in the church.

As you can see, Christians differ on the way they interpret Old Testament passages about the messianic kingdom. Before we can develop an accurate picture of end-times events, we must first settle the question of HOW to interpret these passages.

Should Old Testament prophecies about the messianic kingdom be interpreted literally or figuratively?

How Christians answer this question depends on the way they view the flow of Biblical history. In the next section, we will consider two very different ways of looking at the unfolding events in the Bible—covenant and dispensational theology.

Covenant and Dispensational Theology

The terms "Covenant Theology" and "Dispensational Theology" refer to two different ways of interpreting the biblical record of salvation history—God’s unfolding plan to be reconciled to human beings and restore his rule.

We will demonstrate how these two views lead to very divergent descriptions of the end-times. And while we’re covering this material, we will weigh out which approach is best supported by the biblical data.

Covenant Theology²

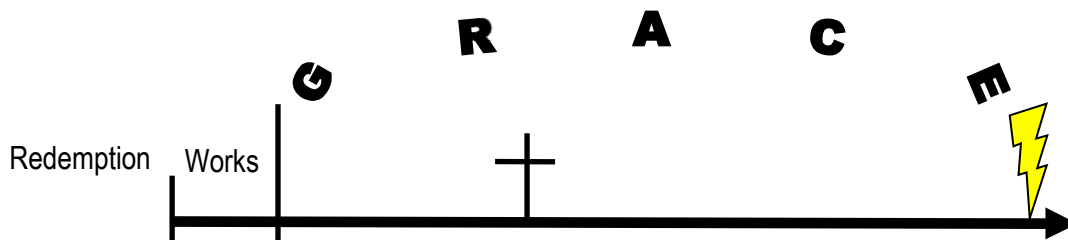
¹ Matthew Henry, *One Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961) p. 1191.

² For a good summary of Covenant Theology, see Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953). Covenant of redemption: p. 151 ff. Covenant of

Covenant Theology is typical of Reformed theologians. This includes the Reformed and Christian Reformed, the Presbyterian, the Anglican (or Episcopal), and to some extent, the Lutheran. Classical Roman Catholicism also recognizes the same approximate divisions of scriptural history, while differing on the question of man's responsibility in the covenant of grace. Taken together then, the Covenantal view must be considered by far the predominant view.

"Covenants" are contracts between two parties. Covenant Theology normally speaks of three main covenants in salvation history. While both Covenantalists and Dispensationalists acknowledge the important role of covenants in salvation history, covenant theology tends to emphasize the UNITY of God's working with mankind.

Instructors: Quickly move through the covenants and dispensations below. This is just an FYI for students.



1. The Covenant of Redemption (before creation):

- **The Son promises the Father to render perfect obedience (unto death) for our sins.**
- **The Father promises to the Son:**
 - **all the Son's needs will be met;**
 - **the Holy Spirit will be given to the church;**
 - **salvation in all of its phases will be given to all believers;**
 - **the Son will be exalted and glorified.**

2. The Covenant of Works (from creation until the fall):

- **Man's conditions: Adam must obey God's commands.**
- **God's response: God rewards obedience with eternal life, and punishes disobedience with death.**

3. The Covenant of Grace (from the fall until the second advent):

works: p. 130 ff. Covenant of grace: p. 157 ff.

- **Man's conditions: saving faith in God's promise, issuing in obedience to God's commands.**
- **God's response: salvation in all of its phases to the believer through the substitutionary work of his Son.**

Comments:

- One of the strengths of the Covenantal position is that it stresses that people have always been saved by grace through faith.
- While covenantalists recognize different “stages”³ in the covenant of grace, they tend to minimize some of the important differences in the way God works within that period. The Old Testament predicted that God would institute a New Covenant between himself and his people (Jer 31:31-32). This New Covenant involved a new way of interacting with the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:39) and a new relationship between the believer and the Law (Heb 8:13).

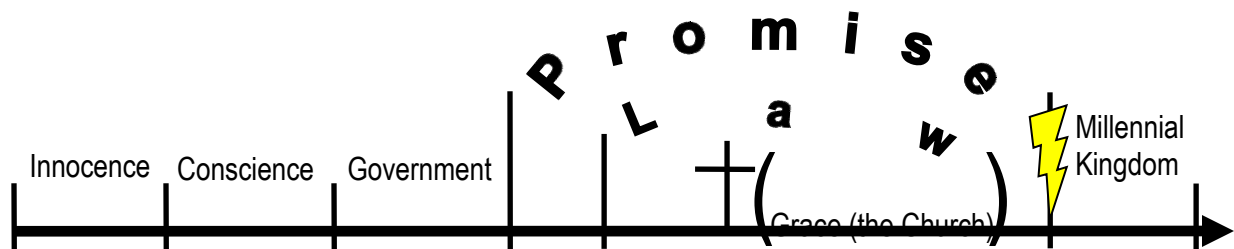
Dispensational Theology⁴

The Dispensational view is of more recent origin, arising from the evangelical awakening in America and England. Through the work of Jesse Penn-Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, T. Austin Sparks, J. N. Darby (who is given credit for formally bringing the view to light), Dwight Moody, C. I. Scofield (who included it in the Scofield Bible), Watchman Nee, Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Walvoord, and Hal Lindsey, this view has become widespread and popular today. It is the view of most Pentecostals, Brethren, many Baptists, and most independent Bible churches.

"Dispensations" (Greek: oikonomia) refer to economies, or different ways in which God works with man in salvation history (see Eph. 1:10; 3:2; 1 Tim. 1:4). In the classic Dispensational scheme, each dispensation begins with an offer by God and ends with failure by man and a period of divine judgment. Dispensational theology tends to emphasize the DIVERSITY of ways in which God works with mankind.

³ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴ For Dispensational Theology, see the study notes in the *Scofield Reference Bible*.



1. Innocence, or Untested Holiness (Genesis 1-3):

- **Offer:** God offers man eternal life for obedience.
- **Judgment:** Man rebels, and is expelled from the Garden of Eden.

2. Conscience (Genesis 4-6):

- **Offer:** God offers to govern man through his conscience.
- **Judgment:** Man sears his conscience, and God brings the universal flood.

3. Government (Genesis 7-11):

- **Offer:** God offers to govern man through civil government (Genesis 9:6).
- **Judgment:** Man corrupts civil government, and God brings the confusion of tongues and scatters man.

4. Promise (Genesis 12 -- Millennial Kingdom):

- **Offer:** God promises to bless Abraham and his descendants, and all nations through them.
- **Judgment:** Jacob's sons apostatize and God brings them into slavery in Egypt.

5. Law (Exodus 20 -- Millennial Kingdom):

- **Offer:** God promises to grant Israel the promises he made to Abraham conditional to their obedience to his Law.
- **Judgment:** Israel apostatizes, undergoes exile and dispersion, and is finally purified through the Great Tribulation.

6. Grace or the Church Age (Pentecost -- Rapture):

- **Offer:** God TEMPORARILY suspends working through Israel as his chosen nation and offers to work through all believers in Jesus.
- **Judgment:** The church apostatizes and is judged in the Great Tribulation after true believers are rescued through the Rapture.

7. Millennial Kingdom (Revelation 20):

- **Offer: God fulfills all of his promises to national Israel after the Second Coming of Jesus.**
- **Judgment: Satan ignites a rebellion against Jesus, which God terminates and then judges all men at the Great White Throne.**

Comments:

- Some of the early dispensations seem to be forced. Paul seems to lump everything from Adam to Moses together (Rom. 5:14).
- Some Dispensationalists have also given this view a bad name by getting overly dogmatic about how certain passages must be fulfilled (LINDSEY SAYING REV. 9:7-10 REFERS TO MILITARY HELICOPTERS), setting dates for Christ's return ("88 REASONS WHY CHRIST MUST RETURN BY 1988"), etc.
- This approach has a negative cast (judgments ending each dispensation) when in fact God is progressively accomplishing his redemptive plan.
- Some dispensationalists overlook pressing social issues because they believe the world is getting worse and worse and that our role is primarily to rescue the lost (e.g. painting a sinking ship).

Is Xenos Covenantal or Dispensational?

We believe that Dispensationalism is superior to Covenantalism in several key areas. But we do not accept Scofield's form of Dispensationalism outlined above. We identify ourselves more with progressive dispensationalists (e.g. Darrell Bock, Christianity Today. September 12, 1994. p. 26-29), who have moved away from rigid distinctions between dispensations. We acknowledge the unity of God's working through history and through Israel, but we see significant differences in the way God has interacted with man during different periods of biblical history, especially under the Old and New Covenants.

Key implications of Covenant and Dispensational Theology

Having a Covenantal or Dispensational outlook has a profound impact on many areas of Christian theology...

	COVENANTALISM	DISPENSATIONALISM
SOTERIOLOGY	Emphasizes UNITY in the way God has worked with man during the covenant of grace.	Emphasizes DIFFERENCES in the way God has worked with man during different dispensations.
GOD'S DEALINGS WITH MAN	As a result of this emphasis on unity, Covenantalists correctly emphasize that people have always been saved by grace through faith .	Most dispensationalists, like Covenantalists, argue that people have always been saved by grace through faith.
ECCLESIOLOGY	Covenantalists define the church as all believers during all of history. Therefore, as in Roman Catholicism, they often feel free to use Old Testament material in church structure, which leads to things like infant baptism, religious calendars, ritualism, etc. At different times in history, some Covenantalists have equated their nations and city states with God's people (e.g. New England Puritans).	Because Dispensationalists see the Church Age as a distinct period in salvation history (beginning on Pentecost), they usually call for a more radical break with Old Testament worship and structures.
SANCTIFICATION	Many Covenantalists place more emphasis on the Law in sanctification	Dispensationalists tend to stress grace in this area
PNEUMATOLOGY	Some Covenantalists believe the Holy Spirit indwelt believers in the Old Covenant.	Dispensationalists say the Holy Spirit indwelt believers <i>only after</i> Jesus' death on the cross.
ESCHATOLOGY	They see no future role for the nation of Israel.	In the future, God will again work through the nation of Israel and establish a worldwide theocracy.
HERMENEUTICS	Because they no longer see a role for national Israel, Covenantalists must employ a <i>figurative hermeneutic</i> when reading passages about the messianic kingdom (i.e. they argue that these texts symbolize some present experience of Christians or some future non-historical reality).	Because they believe the nation of Israel will play a role in the end-times, Dispensationalists use a <i>literal hermeneutic</i> when reading Old Testament promises about Israel. They believe the passages are intended primarily for Israel and that God will fulfill these promises in the future.

Summary:

How do covenantalists and dispensationalists answer the question we raised earlier...

Should Old Testament prophecies about the messianic kingdom be interpreted literally or figuratively?

Covenant Theology	<i>OT promises to Israel...</i>	<i>...are being... ...will be...</i>	<i>...figuratively fulfilled... OR ...figuratively fulfilled...</i>	<i>...in the Church. ...in the eternal state.</i>
Dispensational Theology	<i>OT promises to Israel...</i>	<i>...will be...</i>	<i>...literally fulfilled...</i>	<i>...for Israel.</i>

The Millennial Kingdom

The “Millennial Kingdom” is a term that comes from Revelation 20:1-10. This passage describes a period lasting for 1000 years (a millennium) where Jesus Christ rules with believers who have been martyred for following Jesus.

Revelation 20:1-10 And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. (2) And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for A THOUSAND YEARS, (3) and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. (4) I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (5) (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the THOUSAND YEARS were ended.) This is the first resurrection. (6) Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for A THOUSAND YEARS. (7) When the THOUSAND YEARS are over, Satan will be released from his prison (8) and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. (9) They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. (10) And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Discussion: In your homework, we asked you to read Revelation 19:11 – 21:8. You were supposed to note the events described and the order in which they occur. What order of events were you able to discern?

- Rev. 19:11-19: The armies of the earth are assembled to make war against Jesus.
- Rev. 19:20-21: Jesus vanquishes his enemies (the nations and their armies, the beast, and the false prophet).
- Rev. 20:1-6: Satan is thrown into an abyss. Jesus establishes his kingdom and reigns for 1000 years
- Rev. 20:7-10: Satan is release from the Abyss and leads a rebellion which God crushes.
- Rev. 20:11-15: The dead are judged by their deeds
- Rev. 21:1-8: A new heaven and a new earth appears

How is this order of events similar to the order of events that we studied in the messianic kingdom passages? Just as in Psalm 2, Isaiah 11, and Zechariah 14, the kingdom in Revelation 20 follows the messiah's decisive victory over his enemies. This has led many interpreters to equate the MILLENNIAL (thousand year long) kingdom described here with the MESSIANIC kingdom described in the Old Testament.

For the rest of this lecture, we will consider how to interpret this passage. Does it describe a literal, thousand year kingdom, ruled by Jesus Christ after his return? Can we fill in details about the MILLENNIAL Kingdom with a literal interpretation of Old Testament passages about the MESSIANIC Kingdom? Or is John describing something else? The way theologians answer this question is shaped by whether or not they are covenantalists or dispensationalists.

Three views of the MILLENNIAL KINGDOM:

Historically, there have been three main millennial views, Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Premillennialism. The prefixes “PRE” and “POST” refer to when Christ will return in relation to the millennium. The prefix “A” means “no.”

POST-millennialists: Jesus will return *AFTER* the millennium.

PRE-millennialists: Jesus will return *PRIOR TO* the millennium.

A-millennialists: There is *NO* literal 1000 year kingdom.

Both POST- and A-millennialists interpret the millennial kingdom described in Revelation 20:1-6 figuratively. They believe the events described there and Old Testament prophecies about the Messianic Kingdom are being spiritually fulfilled in the church.

Dispensational PRE-millennialists believe that Jesus will rule the physical earth in a literal, thousand-year-long kingdom that will begin after he returns. They believe that Old Testament prophecies about the messianic kingdom will be literally fulfilled during this time.

Let's look more closely at each view.

Amillennialism (Covenant Theology)

Timeline:



Definition: Literally “no millennium.” *The millennial kingdom will not literally appear.*

Role of Israel:

Israel no longer has any special place in the plan of God. This is the case because Israel rejected her Messiah. The Amillennial position is that the messianic/millennial kingdom will never appear in any literal way.⁵

View of the Church:

The church inherits promises originally given to Israel (see Romans 2:28,29; Philippians 3:3; Galatians 6:16). Christians are the true people of God who worship in the spirit of God. The Old Testament millennial kingdom promises are being fulfilled by the church in a spiritualized rather than literal way.

View of the Millennial Kingdom:

These events described in Revelation 20:1-6 occur during the church age. Satan is already bound (see John 12:31) as predicted in Revelation 20:2. The kingdom is now "in our midst" (Luke 17:21). In other words, we're living during the time described in this passage. Often, the Amillennialist believes in a final intensification

⁵ Anthony Hokema is a good example of this view. He asserts that “the New Testament does not predict a future restoration of Israel as a nation but finds the promises to Israel fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the forgiveness of sins which one can obtain through Christ.” Robert G. Clouse, Ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1977) p. 112.

of evil (although not usually of seven literal years) preceding the Second Coming of Christ.

History:

This view has its roots in the early church fathers (Origen and Augustine) and became popular after Constantine "Christianized" the Roman Empire. They were predisposed to view the millennial kingdom as synonymous to the Holy Roman Empire, and their allegorical method of interpretation opened the door for this kind of understanding. Anti-Semitism was also a factor driving this interpretation⁶, although present-day Amillennialists are not anti-Semitic. It was accepted as the official position at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, at which time belief in a literal millennium was condemned as superstitious. The Reformers accepted the amillennialist framework without essential change. Today, it is the dominant view in those sections of the Protestant and Catholic Church that take biblical eschatology seriously.

Post-Millennialism (Covenant Theology)

Timeline:



Definition:

Jesus will return AFTER the millennial kingdom appears.
According to postmillennial theologian Loriane Boettner, “the world is eventually to be Christianized...the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the millennium.”⁷

Role of Israel:

Israel no longer has any special place in the plan of God.

View of the Church:

The church has inherited a “spiritualized” fulfillment of Israel's kingdom promises.

⁶ See David A. Rausch, *A Legacy of Hatred: Why Christians must Not Forget the Holocaust* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984) pp. 18-27.

⁷ Laraine Boettner in Robert G. Clouse, Ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1977) p. ?.

View of the Millennial Kingdom:

The church will gradually “Christianize” the world and usher in the millennial kingdom. In the post-millennial view, the Church will progressively "Christianize" the world (meaning Christianity will hold influence over society) ushering in a period of peace and prosperity. This is the so-called millennial kingdom, but it is not 1000 years and does not literally fulfill the Old Testament passages about the messianic kingdom.

History:

Postmillennialism is not widely held today. This view finds important theological precedent in the early and medieval Roman Catholic church, when they identified themselves with the kingdom of God. It was also popular during the 18th and 19th centuries, corresponding to the ascendancy of optimistic humanism. Subsequent historical events (WW I, WW II, Cold War, rise of Marxism, etc.) have dashed hopes for a period of world peace apart from God's supernatural intervention.

Critique of Post- & Amillennialism

Both critiques center on the importance of a consistently literal hermeneutic for eschatological passages.

1. Post- and amillennialists interpret the Old Testament prophecies of the Jesus first coming *literally*, but they interpret the Old Testament prophecies of his second coming *figuratively*.

Many examples could be cited of Old Testament prophecies about the first coming of messiah that have been literally fulfilled. Most notable among them is Isaiah 53.⁸ In this passage, the purpose for Jesus' death and the circumstances surrounding his death are outlined in straight-forward, literal detail. If predictions of Jesus' first coming have literally come true, why should we shift to a figurative hermeneutic when interpreting passages about his second coming?

This question is especially relevant when the first AND second comings of the messiah are discussed in the same prophecy.

(Micah 5:1-5) "Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; they have laid siege against us; with a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek. 2 " But as for you,

⁸ Some commentators, like G.E. Ladd, say that Isaiah did not have the messiah in mind. But Rabbi X,Y,Z writing prior to the time of Christ saw this as messianic passage. It's also clear that servant is not the people of Israel but an individual who dies on their behalf.

Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." 3 Therefore, He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel. 4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. 5 And this One will be our peace."

This passage predicts that the messiah will come from Bethlehem (vs. 2 - his first coming). But it also says he will deliver Israel and extend his rule to the ends of the earth and bring peace (vs. 2, 4, 5 – a reference to the second coming). If we take the prediction of the first coming literally (Jesus was born in Bethlehem), why wouldn't we take predictions of his second coming literally?

2. Figurative interpretations either put the interpreter in authority over the text or render the text unintelligible.

Dispensationalists interpret passages about the messianic kingdom literally, but Amillennialists and Postmillennialists use a figurative approach.

Earlier we read Matthew Henry's figurative interpretation of Zechariah 14:1-7. By taking a sentence like "the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west" and relating it to "a great mountain of the ceremonial law... being divided... a broad way of communication between Jerusalem and the Gentile world..." Henry is placing himself in authority over the text. Nothing in this passage would guide us to make the associations that he does. Today, most amillennialists would not be this free with the passage. They would instead argue we can't really know for sure what this text is describing. But even this conclusion leaves vast portions of scripture virtually unintelligible and therefore useless!

3. Elements within the prophetic passages themselves often suggest they should be interpreted literally.

If Zechariah 14 should be taken figuratively, for example, then why does Zechariah compare the events he is describing to an earthquake that actually occurred in history (v. 5)?

4. Both the Old and New Testaments explicitly state that God will fulfill all of his promises to Israel.

Old Testament

(Jer. 31:35-37) "(35) This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD Almighty is his name: (36) "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the LORD, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." (37) This is what the LORD says: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done," declares the LORD."**

God will no more revoke his covenant with Israel than he will revoke his decree to make the sun and moon shine. In other words, this covenant is in force for as long as this world lasts.

(Isa. 54:9-17) "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. (10) Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (11) "O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. (12) I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. (13) All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace. (14) In righteousness you will be established: Tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear. Terror will be far removed; it will not come near you. (15) If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing; whoever attacks you will surrender to you. (16) See, it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its work. And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc; (17) no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the

heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me," declares the LORD.

Like we saw in Zechariah 14, Isaiah compares a past, historical event (the flood) to a future time when he will establish Jerusalem in safety. In the same way that God intends to keep his covenant with Noah (to never to destroy the world again by flood), he will be faithful to keep his covenant promises to Israel.

See also Ezekiel 36:22-38; 37: 1-14; 39: 28-29; Joel 2: 28-3:21.

New Testament

(Matthew 19:27,28) Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (28) Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

A- and postmillennialists say that the promises to Israel of an earthly kingdom has been spiritually fulfilled in the church.

Jesus says there will be a renewal of all things and that Messiah ("the Son of Man") will sit on this throne. Jesus assumes a literal fulfillment of the millennial kingdom with a distinct Jewish character ("twelve thrones" "twelve tribes of Israel"), just as the Old Testament describes it.

(Rom. 9:3-5) For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. (4) Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. (5) Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

Notice that Paul uses the present tense ("is" and "are") rather than the past tense ("was" and "were") to describe Jews' covenant privileges. This is

because God's promises to Israel are still intact and in the process of being fulfilled.

(Romans 11:25-29*) I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

Paul is emphatic and clear that God will never revoke his calling of Israel or their role in the millennial kingdom.

See also Matthew 24:20ff.; Luke 21:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:4ff; Revelation 7:3-8; 11:2 for excellent evidence to support this view.

Pre-Millennialism (Dispensational)

If we accept God's promises to establish a messianic kingdom will be literally fulfilled, the following timeline emerges:

Timeline:



Definition:

Jesus will return PRIOR to the millennial kingdom. He will return to judge the wicked and establish a literal 1000 year reign on earth (the Millennial Kingdom). This view holds that the present age (the church age) is preceding the literal theocratic rule of Christ on earth as foretold in the Old Testament and affirmed in the New Testament.

Role of Israel:

God's promises to Israel will be literally and completely fulfilled. There is a role for national Israel at the end of history. Not surprisingly, we've seen the re-establishment of Israel as a nation in the 20th century!

View of the church:

The Church partakes partially in the promises given to Israel (by virtue of the fact that we are "spiritual Israel"; Gal. 6:16). But this partial fulfillment does not negate the full and literal fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

View of the Millennial Kingdom:

After Jesus returns, he will rule the world from Jerusalem for 1000 years. This Millennial kingdom is the messianic kingdom promised in the Old Testament.

History:

The early post-apostolic church, as evidenced by the writings of early church leaders, was pre-millennial. However, as G. E. Ladd (a historic premillennialist⁹) and amillennialists have repeatedly pointed out, their end-times scenario was not well developed. Even if this point is granted, it still cannot be argued that they were amillennial. After going into eclipse after the time of Augustine (along with a literal hermeneutic), this view reappeared in the early 19th century in connection with the Plymouth Brethren and the rise of Dispensationalism. Since then, it has been popularized by authors such as C. I. Scofield, L. S. Chafer, John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, and Hal Lindsey.

Pre-Millennial interpretation of the Messianic Kingdom passages:

- *Dispensational Pre-Millennialists use a literal hermeneutic.* They claim that prophecies concerning the second coming of Christ can be and should be interpreted according to the same hermeneutical restrictions as applied to the predictions of the first coming.
- *Pre-Millennialists have developed a more detailed picture of the end-times.* As a result of this literal interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, Pre-Millennialism has a much more detailed doctrine of millennial kingdom. While it agrees that

⁹ Historic premillennialists like Ladd affirm that Jesus will return prior the millennial kingdom, but resist a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies regarding the messianic kingdom. They "affirm the future salvation of Israel and remain open to God's future as to the details." George Eldon Ladd in Robert G. Clouse, ed. *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 28.

God's kingdom has a present aspect, it insists the kingdom in its fullness will come only at Christ's future bodily return.

Critique of Pre-Millennialism (Dispensational)

1. There are clear instances in which the New Testament authors say that the Church has received a spiritual (non-literal) fulfillment of promises originally intended for the nation of Israel. (Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:16ff.; Jeremiah 31:31-34 in Hebrews 10:16,17)

Dispensationalist response: *This does not prove that there is no literal fulfillment of those same passages.* These are examples of *partial* fulfillment, and that the partial fulfillment pointed out in the Church Age does not negate the literal fulfillment at the 2nd coming (recall Rom. 9-11). We will take a closer look at this phenomenon next week.

2. Premillennialists have difficulty presenting a consistent interpretation of all predictive prophecies.

The differing premillennial views of Ezekiel 37 & 38 are often cited.

Dispensationalist response: *Yes, it's hard. But at least we try.* The large number of prophecies involved are difficult to harmonize and it is unlikely that we will fully understand how they all fit together until the end of history (Dan. 12:4,8-10). For this reason, we should stick with the main and clear features of the end-times and avoid dogmatism about many of the details.

That said, Old Testament prophecies about Israel's future can provide useful information. Our hermeneutic should default to a literal interpretation of the text and only add spiritual meaning in those cases where New Testament revelation reveals it.

We should do our best, using sound hermeneutical principles, to present a consistent interpretation of all the predictive prophecies rather than ignoring them altogether!

3. Amillennialists hold that the millennium cannot be literal, since it involves animal sacrifice (see Ezekiel 40-48), which allegedly contradicts the argument of Hebrews.

Dispensationalist response: *These sacrifices could be commemorative of Jesus Christ's sacrifice,* just as the Last Supper is for the Church. Thus, animal sacrifice functions as a

foreshadowing of Christ's death under the Old Covenant, while it functions as a commemoration under the New Covenant.

Key Millennial Kingdom Passages

Now that we understand these theologies, and the importance of a literal hermeneutic, let's return to the Old Testament passages (focusing on Isaiah) on the Messianic/Millennial Kingdom. Consider these passages, and write down in your Bible's margin the key characteristics of this period.

Instructors: If you're rushed for time, skip reading these passages and quickly cover the bullet points below.

(Isaiah 11:3-5) He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will never judge by appearance, false evidence, or hearsay. (4) He will defend the poor and the exploited. He will rule against the wicked and destroy them with the breath of his mouth. (5) He will be clothed with fairness and truth.

- **Righteousness and justice will prevail.** (Isa. 32:1. *See also* Ps. 72:2, 12-13; Isa. 9:7; 11:3-5; 32:16; Jer. 23:5-6; Jer. 33:15, 16).

(Isaiah 11:6-9) In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard and the goat will be at peace. Calves and yearlings will be safe among lions, and a little child will lead them all. (7) The cattle will graze among bears. Cubs and calves will lie down together. And lions will eat grass as the livestock do. (8) Babies will crawl safely among poisonous snakes. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes and pull it out unharmed. (9) Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.

- **There will be a restoration of harmony in creation** (Isa 11:6-9 *pp* Isa 65:25).

(Isaiah 11:9) And as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.

- **The world will be filled with people who acknowledge the Lord** (Jer 3:17 *See also* Isa 2:2-3 Isaiah 11:9 Mic 4:1-2; Isa 19:23-25; Zec 14:16).

(Isaiah 60:1-5) “Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all the nations to see! For the glory of the LORD is shining upon you. (2) Darkness as black as night will cover all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the LORD will shine over you. (3) All nations will come to your light. Mighty kings will come to see your radiance. (4) “Look and see, for everyone is coming home! Your sons are coming from distant lands; your little daughters will be carried home. (5) Your eyes will shine, and your hearts will thrill with joy, for

merchants from around the world will come to you. They will bring you the wealth of many lands.”

- **God’s people will be renewed and restored in their land** (Jer. 3:18; Mic. 4:6-8 *See also* Isa. 60:1-3; Joel 3:16-17; Am. 9:11; Ob. 17-21; Ac. 1:6; Zec. 3:9 God’s people seek him in repentance: Hos. 3:5; Jer. 50:4-5; Eze 11:19-20; Eze. 36:28).

(Isaiah 32:17-18) And this righteousness will bring peace. Quietness and confidence will fill the land forever. ¹⁸ My people will live in safety, quietly at home. They will be at rest.

- **It will be a time of peace and security** (Isa. 32:17-18. *See also* Mic. 4:3-4; Isa. 2:4; Isa. 65:20-23; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:15-16; Ez. 34:25-29; Zec. 9:9-10).

(Isaiah 44:3) And I will pour out my Spirit and my blessings on your children.

- **There will be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit** (Joel 2:28-29. *See also* Isa. 11:2; 32:15; 44:3; 59:21; Eze. 36:27).

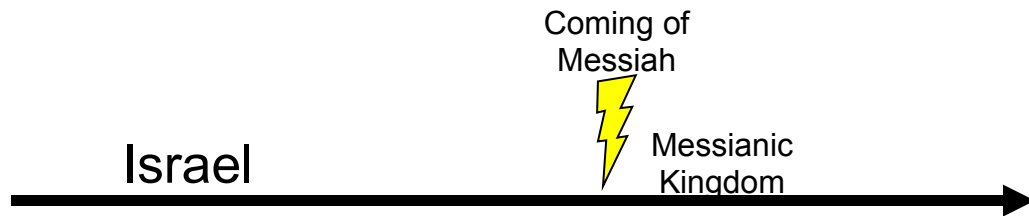
Realize that the above passages are only a small minority of the biblical material on this subject. There are *hundreds* of passages in the Old Testament alone devoted to this kingdom, which (along with Messiah) is the hope of Israel.

Christ came proclaiming “the kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15) And as people come to Christ and the church grows, his kingdom is extending into the world. But he also told us to pray, “your kingdom come.” Like Jesus, we should long for the day when God sets up his kingdom on earth!

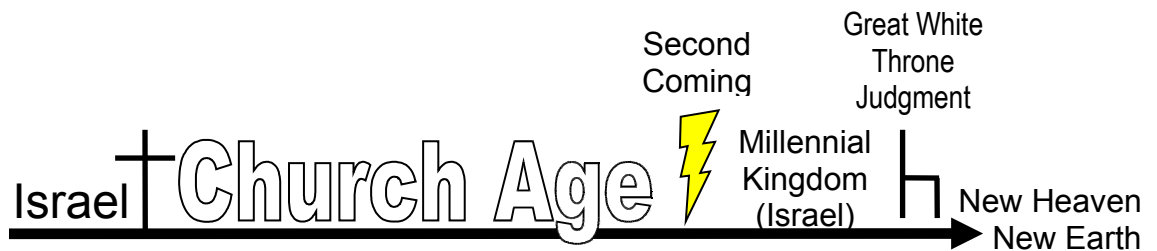
Conclusion

We are adopting a DISPENSATIONAL (with the qualifications made above) view that affirms that God will honor his promises to nation of Israel. The verses above, taken in their literal sense, promise a coming age of peace, joy and prosperity for Israel and the entire world in a kingdom ruled by the Messiah. We are also adopting a PREMILLENNIAL view of the Millennial Kingdom described in Revelation 20. Jesus will return PRIOR TO the millennial kingdom to set up his rule on earth. This 1000-year kingdom is one and the same with the messianic kingdom promised in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ (Messiah) is the promised king who will usher in a time of peace and righteousness. For the rest of the course and on the exam, we will refer to this period of history as the “Millennial Kingdom.”

Now we can build on our timeline from the beginning of the lecture...



...and add Jesus' crucifixion, the "church age" (the period we now live in), and the events described in Revelation 19:11-21:8 (Jesus' return, his victory over his enemies, the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom, the final judgment, and the new heaven and new earth.



Memory Verses

Jeremiah 31:31-37 – God's promise of the New Covenant for Israel (not just for the Church) will be fulfilled.**

Romans 11:28,29* – God's promises to national Israel are irrevocable.

Assignment

Complete the *Epistles Inductive Overview Assignment*.

Recommended Reading

Pentecost, J. Dwight. *Things To Come*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958.

Walvoord, John F. *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation*. Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1971.

Clouse, Robert G. (Ed.) *The Meaning of the Millennium*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977.