

end times

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW

Christians, from the very first disciples who witnessed Jesus ascend to heaven, have been wondering when and how He will return.

Some of us, especially in seasons of hardship, long for His return today, right now, this minute.

Then there are other times in life where we can find ourselves hoping Jesus doesn't return until certain things happen. Some of us want to get married and have children before Jesus comes back. Others of us long for friends and family members to receive the gift of salvation before Jesus returns. Or, we long to fulfill a purpose we truly believe God has assigned to us.

And then there are feelings mixed in with the question of when He will return ... anticipation of the promises of no more death, no more suffering, no more tears, no more hardships and heartbreaks. But there is also fear, uncertainty and confusion around what we will go through between now and then. Around our dinner tables right now, there have been lots of questions about the end times. Could this worldwide pandemic be evidence that the return of Jesus is closer than ever?

We thought if we are getting these questions from our kids, friends and family, then maybe you are, too.

That's why we created this resource so you can be equipped to know what the Bible says and have the confidence to know where to turn in God's Word when questions arise. The term for the study of end times is "Eschatology," which means: The study of theology dealing with death, judgment and the final destiny of humanity and creation. Eschatology comes from the Greek word *Eschatos* — which is literally translated as "last." That is where we get "the study of last things or end times."

The purpose of this resource is to present to you the various ways people look at the Scriptures discussing end times and show you where to go in the Bible as you wrestle through where you land within the various camps of thought.

To set up our discussion, let's start with the two big questions the Bible answers with definite clarity, **"When will Jesus return?"** and **"How will Jesus return?"**

The Bible is very clear that the answer to "When will Jesus return?" is not known by any person. We will not know the exact time. (Mark 13:32) In fact, not only do we not know, but the angels themselves do not know these details. (Matthew 24:36) So, as we study the doctrine of "Eschatology," we enter with both assurance and the unknown. It is crucial that we embrace both of these realities

because it positions us in a posture of humility. Every time we face an assurance, we respond in gratitude. Every time we face an unknown, we respond in humility and gratefulness that while we may not know, God does. So, as we look at some different Scriptures and explore possible ways to interpret these verses, let's first and foremost embrace the assurance that Christ will return and right every wrong in the world with His perfect rule. Also, let's commit our hearts to a posture of humility as we explore something that not even the angels know the answers to.

The second big question is regarding the "how" of His return.

For this question, we have a little more clarity that's filled with good news! Jesus will return not as a suffering servant who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (a sign and symbol of peace), but as the conquering King that Revelation 19:11-16 portrays. Jesus will ride on a white stallion (a sign and symbol of a king riding into war), a declaration of war and judgment on sin and the wicked unrighteousness of the world. We know that Jesus will return the same way He left. (Acts 1:10-11) We also know that when Jesus does come back, it will be sudden and an unexpected surprise. (Matthew 24:44) The imagery we receive from Scripture is that the final return will be like a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:2; Matthew 24:43; Revelation 16:15)

Now that we've given you the Scripture references for those first two questions, let's look at the three most popular views of the Millennium, which means "one thousand years." You'll see why this is important as we reference the Scriptures below.

Three views of the Millennium: Revelation 20:1-6

The first place we start with our study of Eschatology and end times is Revelation 20:1-6. This passage describes a period of time that will take place at the end of human history. In Revelation 20:2b, we come across the only reference in the Bible to a 1,000-year reign also known as the Millennium. Theologians and scholars since the first-century church have worked hard to interpret the meaning of the 1,000 years and the events that surround it. The result is the development of three major positions or views. Each position has strengths, and each position has admitted challenges that we should consider. These three positions are pre-millennialism, post-millennialism and amillennialism.

three views of the millennium: revelation 20:1-6¹

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Before we get started, let's get some orientation by defining some of the key words that we will be using.

Millennium or 1,000 years — Refers to a period of time (literal or symbolic) where Jesus will reign and rule on the earth.

Tribulation — The tribulation refers to a time of distress and persecution for the church. Sometimes referred to as “the great tribulation” where there is an intense seven-year period of hardship for the people of God.

Rapture — Refers to a time when the people of God will be “caught up” with Jesus. Traditionally, the rapture involves leaving the earth and going to heaven.

¹For further study on these views see:

Ford, J. Massyngbaerde. “Millennium.” Edited by David Noel Freedman. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Dodd, Brian J. “Millennium.” Edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999.

pre-millennium

Christ comes physically and bodily back to the earth and reigns on earth for a period of 1,000 years. Most pre-Millennials believe the 1,000 years to be literal. This position can be further divided into two major camps.

HISTORIC PRE-MILLENNIALISM

The very early first-century Church fathers held this view. At the end of the present age, the world will experience a great tribulation. After the tribulation, Christ will return, the Anti-Christ will be judged and the righteous will be resurrected to reign with Christ on earth for 1,000 years.

THOSE THAT HELD TO THIS VIEW

Irenaeus

Papyrus

Justin Martyr

Tertullian

DISPENSATIONAL PRE-MILLENNIALISM

Strong separation between Israel and the Church. The nation of Israel has a prominent role in the Millennium.

Rapture takes place before the tribulation period to rescue and retrieve the saints of Christ (dead and alive) away to be with Him in heaven (Pre-Tribulation Rapture).

STRONG ASPECTS OF THIS POSITION

In Revelation 20, John sees the angel throw the devil into the abyss.

The argument is a sequence and it seems to make logical sense that starts with Revelation 19.

Revelation 19 – Jesus defeats the enemy

Revelation 20 – The enemy is placed in the abyss

Revelation 12 – Satan is cast down to the earth (battle with Michael), but he is still active on earth. The argument is that Revelation 12 is an image of what takes place now. Revelation 20 is a separate, distinct event that doesn't seem to have happened yet and will happen later.

Right now, Satan wields limited power and is deceiving the nations and humanity. Satan is still causing havoc and hurt.

The first resurrection with the martyrs. The Greek word for resurrection typically means a “physical” resurrection. What other option could there be?

CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER

What does the Bible teach about the rapture within the biblical and cultural context of those passages? See section on Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

Old Testament texts that are used to defend Pre-Millennialism (Isaiah 60 and Ezekiel 40-48) are not at all mentioned or alluded to in Revelation 20. But, they are all over the place in Revelation 21-22 speaking of the new creation?

The literal interpretation of these OT passages are fulfilled in the millennium like the literal rebuilding of the temple. But John says that there is no temple in the new heaven and earth in Revelation 21 and 22.

post-millennium

Christ will come and reign after the 1,000 years.

TYPICALLY, 1,000 YEARS NOT TRANSLATED LITERALLY

Millennium began at the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus

The world is getting better because of the gospel's advance

This view is a minority view in the larger landscape of theology of today

THOSE THAT HELD TO THIS VIEW

Puritans

Jonathan Edwards

Charles Hodge

B.B Warfield

CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER

Things seem to get worse not better in the course of human history. Dr. Tom Schreiner refers to this as a time of “declension.” (2 Timothy 3:1; Matthew 24:3-14; 2 Peter 3:3-4)

Revelation 19:11-21 – Post-millennials take this passage to mean the gospel is proclaiming in this current age. But the most natural translation is that this passage refers to the second coming of Jesus.

amillennium

Belief in a “realized” or “inaugurated” millennium that is already but not yet. The 1,000 years is symbolic and began at the resurrection of Christ. Christ is reigning in heaven with the fallen faithful saints now. Therefore, for this position there is no rapture. Rather, the rescue of God’s people will come in one act with the final coming of Jesus. The culmination of the 1,000 years (symbolic) happens when Jesus comes back.

POSITION HELD BY LATER CHURCH FATHERS AND CHURCH LEADERS

Origen

Martin Luther

Augustine

John Calvin

Thomas Aquinas

CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER

Revelation 19 and 20 seem to be sequential, so how can symbolism work in this instance?

A symbolic interpretation seems confusing. How do we know what is symbolic and what is not? When do we apply symbolism, and is there ever anything that is literal?

What about 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 where the people are caught up in the air with Jesus? Doesn’t this point to a rapture that takes people away? Also, Matthew 24:36-44?

STRONG POINTS

Nowhere else in Scripture do we read about the 1,000 years. The most simple and straightforward interpretation is that the resurrection and reign of Christ is happening at the same time (Think *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*).

Old Testament texts that defend pre-millennialism (Isaiah 60, Ezekial 40-48) are not mentioned or alluded to at all in Revelation 20. But when we read Revelation 21 and 22, we see these allusions everywhere! But, Revelation 21 and 22 deals with the new heavens and new earth. These chapters deal with recreation and renewal.

Revelation 19 and Revelation 20 – We have recapitulation (it retells the same events from different perspectives).

The judgments in Ezekiel 38 and 39 are the same judgments told from different angles (Dr. Block in his commentary on Ezekiel). So, we see the same type of apocalyptic literature featured in Revelation 19 and 20.

Matthew 12 – Jesus says He has come to “bind the strong man.” This is in reference to Satan.

The binding of Satan is in reference to what was taking place in the OT when Satan blinded the nations. In the Old Testament covenant, the people of God were the Israelites and the nations were in darkness. After the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, Satan is bound and stripped of his power to stop the gospel proclamation that is to go out to the ends of the earth.

Anastasis, the Greek word for “Resurrection” – Resurrection always refers to physical resurrection through the New Testament (N.T. Wright). But, in Revelation 20:5b, it doesn’t (N.T. Wright and Tom Schreiner agree on this). It is spiritual. Terms take their meanings in context (Dr. Tom Schreiner). The first resurrection is a spiritual coming to life that took place on the cross where dead humanity comes to life (spiritual life in Christ). So, we have the presence of a spiritual and physical reality. The “first resurrection” is spiritual. The second resurrection is physical. The first resurrection implies a second. John talks about the second death. This means there must be a first death! Therefore, the first death is spiritual and the second death is physical with spiritual implications.²

²N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 474–475.

what about the rapture?

Today, the idea of a rapture became very familiar through the books and movies in the *Left Behind* series. The authors of the books are theological advocates of the dispensational pre-tribulational pre-millennialism and therefore the concept of the rapture plays a key role in the story structure. The Rapture is based on Scriptures like Matthew 24:36-42 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 where Christ “takes” or “rescues” His children from a coming tribulation. The post and amillennial views do not see evidence of a “rapture” that comes prior to the final judgment. Rather, simply a rapture that comes together with the final judgment.

**A text without a context
is simply a “pre-text.” –
Dr. Ben Witherington III**

What Dr. Witherington is saying is something that we really need to consider. In each Scripture that is used to describe or push for a “rapture,” we really need to think through the context of the writing and the imagery, allusion, and unfolding story of Scripture from the Old Testament into the New Testament.

M A T T H E W 24

The context of Mathew 24 is important for us to begin to understand the words of Jesus. First, Jesus is well aware that the day is soon coming where His body will be broken on the cross and He will raise up after three days, overcoming sin and death and leaving behind an empty grave stripped of power. As Jesus gives a description of the physical temple and the outcome of the temple, there is also anticipation of a spiritual reality that will take place through Christ and His bodily resurrection. In verses 2-14, Jesus describes days that are coming where things get increasingly difficult and hard for the people of God. This includes wars and pestilence, famines and earthquakes — but these are only the “beginning of the birth pains” (Matthew 24:8).

In verse 15, Jesus zeroes us into a near-future reality that is a shadow and indication of the end days being upon earth. Jesus talks about the “abomination of desolation” and refers to the prophet Daniel (Daniel 9:22-24). This will be a horrific moment for the Israelites who will witness the desecration of the temple. Then, Jesus says in those days:

*Let the ones on the housetop not go into the house to grab their stuff
Don't grab your cloak
Sorrow for the women who are pregnant or are nursing*

However, ultimately this tribulation will be cut short for the sake of the people of God (v. 22). It's interesting to look back at history and actually see that what Jesus is doing is recollecting one horrific moment that already occurred in 168 B.C. when the horrific and evil Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the temple and sacrificed a pig (an unclean and detestable animal for the Jews) on the altar in the Holy of Holies! However, what Jesus seems to be doing is saying that something that Daniel prophesied would take place (Antiochus) was actually a precursor to further destruction to the temple. This is exactly what took place in A.D. 70 when the general Titus completely destroyed and ransacked the temple. The historian Josephus notes that not one stone was left on another in fulfillment of the words of Jesus who described this very outcome. Further, Josephus also points out that the Christian Jews that saw the Roman army coming in fact jumped from rooftop to rooftop and were able to escape.³ In a spectacular account, Josephus says a great many Jews died in A.D. 70, but few Jewish Christians were killed. Why? Because they remembered the words of Jesus and sprang into action to be saved from a great tribulation. So, the verses in Matthew 24:15-22 actually came into completion and fulfillment at A.D. 70.

Based on this, it seems that Jesus is teaching us that the tribulation is actually upon us. Things are continually going to get worse until Jesus comes back to right all the wrongs that are taking place right now (the birth pains) and that Romans 8:22 refers to the groaning of the earth which we experience right now.

In verses 29-50, Jesus turns His attention to the final return. Two important notes here. First, in verse 36, it is clear that the time is unknown to all people, including spiritual beings (angels, demons). Only the Father knows the time of the return. One other often-missed context is the phraseology of, *"For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man"* (verse 37). So, the context of the return of Christ is set within the context and imagery of the time of Noah. When we look at the story of Noah, we see a few important distinctions.

1. The story of Noah is ultimately about judgment and God's mercy to humanity that He executes through re-creation. The flood wipes out evil and the enemies of God and yet Noah and his family are saved and remain on the new "re-created" earth!

³Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 344.

2. So, the principle we find here is that it is good to stay on earth, because earth has been re-created and cleansed. Humanity in Genesis was created to take care of and steward the earth and to increase the glory of God through dominion and dynasty unto the ends of the earth.

With this context in mind, when we read the words of Jesus, we actually see that it is good to stay on the new re-created earth! With each example of the two people and the one that remains, it is good for the one that remains! The one that is gone is actually judged!

This is even further reinforced by the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. The bridegroom came not to take his wife and leave, but to come and meet his wife and enter into their new home together! Therefore, we find that the larger story of re-creation teaches that Jesus comes back to establish a new heaven and new earth that was anticipated in the Old Testament in Isaiah 65:17! We do not leave earth, but Christ comes back and re-creates a new earth and reigns and rules, and we are with Jesus to enjoy His Kingship. (Matthew 19:28)

1 T H E S S A L O N I A N S 4 : 1 6 - 1 8

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, the context of the church in Thessalonica is very important. The church had just lost some of its brothers and sisters and in mourning were concerned about what would happen to these lost loved ones in light of the expected return of Christ. Would they experience the victorious return of Jesus? To this, Paul responds to give encouragement that those that had faith in Jesus and died would not miss out at the victorious return! In fact, they would be the first to rise and be reunited with Christ.

With this context in mind, we also want to recognize the deeply rooted stories of ancient Israel that are in the mind of the Apostle Paul. First, Paul seems to be drawing from the story of Moses who went up on Mount Sinai and came down from the mountain with his face lit up. (Exodus 34:29) This was an image to prepare the Israelites of the even more glorious return of the greater Moses, King Jesus, who would appear in the air. This takes us to Daniel 7:13 where Daniel sees “the son of man” in the air in the midst of the clouds. The rest of Daniel 7:13-14 places the context of “the son of man” as authoritative and where the nations serve him, where *“his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*

It seems clear that Paul has in mind the final coming of Jesus where He calls His people to Himself. The question we have to ask now is, where is Jesus going? He came out of the clouds/heavens and is returning to earth. The most natural reading would be that Jesus comes not to take His people and leave but to come and return to the earth to reign and rule in victory. This is the final return of the King. One of the clearest indications of this is the important Greek word used to describe those that “meet” Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:17b). The Greek word used here is “apentesin,” and it is only used in this form three other times. (Matthew 25:1, 6; Acts 28:15)

When we look at the context of this word in these verses, we find that those that come to “meet” the individual come out to “escort” the person who is arriving back into the house or city! They do not go out to leave. In fact, those that were ready went into the house to attend the marriage feast. (Matthew 25:10) The same idea is true of Acts 28:15. Outside of the biblical use, the historian Josephus uses this word in connection with a return of a king of civic authority who comes back to the city victorious. The people would go out to meet and welcome the king and then escort him back into the city.⁴ This is exactly what took place as Jesus enters into Jerusalem, and He is welcomed into the city with palm branches and chants of Hosanna. (Matthew 21:1-11).

It seems clear that Jesus appears and then the people, “*will always be with the Lord*” (v. 17). So, where is Jesus going? He is coming back to earth to renew and re-create the new heavens and earth. This seems to indicate that the rapture is not about Jesus taking us and leaving, but about meeting Jesus as the welcome party as He re-enters humanity and finishes the work of re-creation so He can reign and rule in the new heavens and earth.

C O N C L U S I O N

As you can see throughout the study of Scripture, there are a variety of possible interpretations of what will take place in the end times and what the details could look like. We want to emphasize the “could” and leave this study with both a sense of humility and assurance knowing that while we may not know the exact details, we can know that Jesus will come back. Jesus will right all the wrongs. The beautiful garden city of Eden will return and we will enjoy presence with Jesus Himself. There will be no need for a temple in the new heavens and new earth, for the living temple and fulfillment of every covenant promise reigns and rules in perfection, King Jesus.

⁴Erik Peterson, “Ἀπάντησις,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 380.