

WHAT CAN WE KNOW FOR CERTAIN ABOUT ESCHATOLOGY?

By Rev. Fred Klett

There is much confusion and controversy these days regarding eschatology. Perhaps you don't even know what eschatology is! Eschatology is popularly thought of as the study of "last things", that is, the second coming, the resurrection, the millennium, etc. Some have defined eschatology in a broader sense to include the Bible's perspective on the meaning of the first coming, as well, within the framework of redemptive history¹. This is a much more Biblical approach.

Does Jesus return pre-mil, post-mil, pre, mid or post-trib? Is there a 1,000 year millennium yet to come, or is this number symbolic? Was the Church Age prophesied in the Old Testament, or is it a mystery not mentioned, as some claim? Does the rebirth of national Israel have significance? Before any of these specifics can be considered, we must resolve more basic issues.

Many dogmatically hold to a position on these specific questions and castigate their own brothers and sisters in the Lord who think differently even though they may be very hard pressed to substantiate their position on the basis of Scripture! Many make dogmatic assertions about these issues based upon what they have been told rather than what they have seen for themselves from the Bible. Others try to study these matters and despair at the conflicting theories held by equally devout and committed evangelical Christian teachers!

What can we clearly know about eschatology...and how can we be sure of what is true when differing opinions all claim they are following the scriptures? I suggest we start with the very basics: What does scripture plainly teach about the Second Coming? Let me suggest several principles which can serve as a guide through this maze of opinion.

First, a basic principle of scriptural interpretation is to take what is clear and interpret what is more perplexing in that light. Start with the easier passages and work towards those which are more difficult.

In a chapter speaking of last things Peter said of Paul's writings, "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16) Obviously, everything in the Bible is not equally understandable. God said, "Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles..." (Numbers 12:6-8). So when we deal with prophetic dreams and visions in the Bible there may be riddles to solve! We therefor need to start with clear doctrinal passages about last things and work towards prophecies which contain dreams and visions.

There may be some passages which are in dispute as to which category to place them in, but this means we should start with those passages which are indisputably teaching in a straightforward way about last things and not in dreams and visions.

Another related principle is to interpret scripture in context. This means a passage must be interpreted in the light of the section of the book it is in, the book of the Bible itself, other books by the same Biblical author, the place it occupies in the history of redemption, and

¹ See Richard Gaffin's forward to The Pauline Eschatology, by Geerhardus Vos, (C) 1979 Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI

finally its linguistic, literary, and cultural setting.

We must learn to understand the Scriptures as a whole and grasp what the "Big Picture" is as far as what God has been doing in creation and redemption. Interpretation of a particular passage must be in accord with what God has revealed in the rest of the Bible, and with His overall purposes revealed in Scripture. "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" for it "never had its origin in the will of man" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Third, this process calls for prayer. We must submit to the Holy Spirit as we approach scripture, and this means asking God for wisdom and an open and submissive mind, willing to change in conformity to the Word.

No interpretation of prophecy should be at odds with God's overall purposes revealed in the rest of the Bible. The Word of God is a unity. So often we approach scripture with pre-conceived notions as to its meaning². We need to pray that we can shake off old incorrect interpretations.

Finally, we must be in submission to the apostles our Lord has appointed over us. We are under apostolic authority when we approach scripture.

We must base our approach to Old Testament prophecy on how the New Testament has interpreted it. We know the New Testament writings are the infallible Word of God, so however they interpret the Old Testament, we must submit -- even if it goes against some cherished long-held beliefs! Are you willing to consider throwing out all your beliefs about last things if they are not in accord with apostolic interpretation?

Lets then apply these principles and see what we can discover.

Some Basic and Clear Passages (Read them for yourself.)

² I'll give an example. Consider this passage in Hebrews: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:15). How many times have you heard this verse used to preach against having an attitude of bitterness? But consider the fact that this verse refers to two specific Torah passages and you see it quite differently. One is the section describing how Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, the other, seen below, specifically speaks of the bitter root.

"Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way." This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. The Lord will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. The Lord will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law." (Deut. 29:18-21)

The root of bitterness is someone who takes the covenant lightly, who is indifferent to the promises of God, and so falls short of the grace of God. The passage is not talking about a bitter attitude at all, rather a complacent one! Yet how many times has this passage been misinterpreted?

Acts 1:11 teaches us that Jesus will return in the same manner as He went up into heaven. He ascended, and so too He will descend again. He will not come again as a baby, or be some other person.

1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us Jesus will come down from heaven with a loud command. The dead in Christ will rise first, and then those alive will be caught up with them in the clouds.

Acts 17:31 states Jesus will judge the world. His resurrection proves this.

2 Peter 3:10-13 teaches us that the world will be destroyed by fire and a new heaven and earth will come.

Beyond controversy we see that the very same Jesus of Nazareth will return right out of the sky to judge the world, raise the dead, transform those still living at His return, and bring the full expression of His redemption. Start here and leave everything else up for grabs!

A Key Passage To Consider: 1 Corinthians 15

1 Corinthians 15 is a key chapter to consider when it comes to eschatology. First, it is not a dream or vision, but direct doctrinal teaching. Second, it is the longest passage of clearly doctrinal teaching pertaining to matters of eschatology. Beyond dispute, the resurrection of the dead is a central part of any consideration of "last things". This is what Paul has in focus in this chapter. Third, Paul is really getting down to basics with the erring Corinthians. There a few difficult verses, or perhaps I should say, one, verse 29. But by and large the chapter is clear and straightforward. It deserves our full consideration.

Let's focus on verses 20-28 and 50-57, as these are the sections which relate most to the current debate about last things.

In verses 20-28 we see several things clearly:

1. Jesus' resurrection is connected to the future resurrection of believers. He is the firstfruits. He has secured redemption for His people.
2. When He returns He will bring the resurrection of those who belong to Him.
3. He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. He will then hand over His Kingdom to the Father. This is called "the end".
4. The last enemy to be defeated will be death.

This last point is a crucial one. The last enemy is death. After death is defeated there can be no other enemies to defeat. It is "the end". Death is the final enemy to be defeated³. So we have very clear and straightforward apostolic teaching on the last enemy of God to be defeated. **After the defeat of this last enemy there can be no sin, no rebellion, indeed, no one will ever again die. The last enemy is death.**

³ Of course, Jesus defeated death at his resurrection. But that was the accomplishment of redemption, here we are speaking about the final application of the redemption he accomplished.

When does this defeat of death occur? This is a critical question to answer in regard to eschatology. If we know the answer to this question, we know what comes last, because after the defeat of death, the last enemy, Jesus hands the kingdom over to the Father. This "the end". Death is defeated after he has destroyed all dominion authority and power. **There can be no further rebellion expressed against God after the defeat of death.** Again, when does this defeat of death, the final enemy, occur? Paul tells us in the same chapter.

Verses 50-57 reveal that death is defeated or "swallowed up on victory" when Jesus returns to raise the dead and transform those still living. This is the exact same order Paul gave in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 when he spoke of that last trumpet. First comes the resurrection, then comes the "rapture" if you like that word. What could be clearer? Jesus will raise the departed saints and then transform those who are still alive. This is when death is "swallowed up in victory".

So the last enemy of God is death, and death will be finally defeated when the saints are raised and raptured. After this there can be no dying, no rebellion, no Anti-Christ, no mark of the beast, no persecution of the saints, no plagues, etc. It is "the end". Death is the last enemy, there can be NO enemies after this resurrection/rapture event and no dying. **All of those other things must happen before the resurrection-rapture event, and in no way afterwards! This is the clear teaching of the word of God, plainly set forth in a passage explicitly teaching doctrine about the last things.**

Can anyone show the error of my logic here without making obscure and convoluted arguments attempting to rationalize a previously cherished end times theory? Isn't what we have seen in 1 Corinthians 15 abundantly clear? **So we can know for certain that when Jesus returns, at the last trumpet, the dead in Christ will rise, and with still living believers, will receive their imperishable and immortal resurrection bodies. There will be no death and no other enemies of God to defeat after this.**

So, based on 1 Corinthians 15, we have established this indisputable teaching of Scripture: **None of the events associated with the end times can come after the resurrection -rapture event, other than the final judgement and the re-creation of the world.** So the world wide proclamation of the gospel, the dominion of Messiah over the nations (described in Psalm 2), the tribulation, the anti-christ, and the millennium all must come before the resurrection-rapture event and not after!

If it is held the "tribulation" period comes **after** this event, it must be a tribulation during which there is **no death** and there are **no enemies of God to defeat**. If there is a literal millennium **after** this resurrection-rapture, it must be one during which there is **no death** and there are **no enemies of God left to defeat**. Clearly, for these ideas to have any meaning they must come **before** the resurrection-rapture event.

This may rattle you, this may fly in the face of what you have been taught about the end times, this may contradict someone's complicated chart or fanciful scenario, but show me, based on the clear teaching of 1 Corinthians 15 verses 20-28 and 50-57, how it is possible to conclude otherwise. Are you willing to submit to clear apostolic teaching and appoint to the scrap heap anything which contradicts it?

APPENDIX: The sequence of events learned from 1 Corinthians 15 when compared with other passages:

1. Jesus is raised from the dead (verse 20).

2. Jesus reigns until all enemies put under his feet (verse 25).
3. Jesus returns at the Last Trumpet and brings the resurrection-rapture (verse 23 and 52). Death, the **last enemy** is defeated **at** the resurrection-rapture event (verse 54 tells us **when** verse 26 occurs).
4. The end comes when the triumphant Kingdom is delivered to the Father (verse 24).

When is the 1,000 year reign of Messiah described in Revelation chapter 19? It must be before #3 and therefor is that described in #2, since at the end of the thousand years Satan is released and a terrible battle takes place. There can be no such battle after #3. When is the last judgement of Revelation 19:12-13? It must be part of the complex of events coming with #3, since the dead are raised before the stand before the throne of judgement.

So, based on this key passage of 1 Corinthians 15, we see that the millennium comes *after* the resurrection and ascension of Messiah and *before* the resurrection-rapture event. His rule must go forward until he has conquered all his enemies, the *last* being death at the resurrection-rapture event. Then the Last Judgement comes and the New Heavens and New Earth (2 Peter 3:10-13) is brought about. This is the final state.

We have therefore established a basic eschatological framework to build upon. Clearly, what we see in 1 Corinthians 15 deals a death blow to what is called the "pre-millennial" position. From here we can go on to other questions such as how we understand Old Testament prophecy relating to Messiah's kingdom, to what extent it is to be understood "spiritually", to what extent it is experienced in this age, and to what extent it applies to the final state. These remaining questions encompass the issues debated between those of the A-mil and Post-mil positions, but such matters must be dealt with elsewhere.