

The sermon series on Revelation 21-22 has gotten a lot of you asking questions about eschatology. I also just started teaching the college/young adult Bible study on eschatology. Thus, in keeping with that drift, I figured I should make a few book recommendations on eschatology.

For those of you not up on the lingo, “eschatology” means “the study of the last things.” Basically, Christian eschatology concerns God’s overarching plan for history, centered around the kingdom of God, as well as the end of history, with the final coming of Christ, the resurrection of the body, the last judgment, and the eternal states of the righteous and the wicked.

The best overall introduction to eschatology in my opinion is *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* by Keith Mathison. This readily available book pretty much covers it all, in roughly 250 well-written pages. Mathison deals with questions of biblical interpretation, the church’s traditional understanding(s) of biblical eschatology, and a wide range of biblical texts from the OT and the NT. He gives a very coherent and compelling case for the view that God’s kingdom will grow to fill the earth before Jesus returns. He also answers objections to this viewpoint and critiques other approaches which are more popular in the evangelical church at the moment.

Mathison’s book argues for a preterist interpretation of a number of NT prophecies, but also makes a solid argument against the heresy of hyper-preterism, which claims *all* biblical prophecies have been fulfilled. Preterism is from the Latin word for “past tense” and indicates that a prophetic prediction has already come to pass. For example, all Christians are preterists with regard to Isaiah’s “Immanuel prophecies” in chapters 7 and 9 because we believe they have already been fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus. In theological conversation, the label “preterism” usually stands for the view that prophetic time texts in the NT should be taken seriously, at face value. Thus, when Jesus predicted the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed *in a generation*, and then gave all the signs leading up to it, he meant that all those things would happen within a roughly forty year period (see Mt. 24:1-34; verse 34 is the critical time text). Of course, we know they did come to pass: Jesus predicted that not one stone of the temple would be left standing in 30 AD, and in 70 AD, the Romans destroyed the entire city of Jerusalem. Preterism says the fulfillment of these kinds of prophecies lies in our past, not our future. Matthew 24 (at least up to verse 34) has already come to full realization in history.

Hyper-preterism is the heretical view that says there is no further prophecy left to be fulfilled. There is no future resurrection of the body and no final coming of Christ to earth. Obviously, this view violates both a number of biblical texts (such as 1 Thessalonians 4) as well as the ancient ecumenical creeds which we confess each week. Mathison’s book includes an appendix that provides a short but devastating refutation of hyper-preterism. He has also edited a collection of essays entitled *When Shall These Things Be?* which gives more full blown arguments against hyper-preterism.

Overall, Mathison’s book *Postmillennialism* is very helpful, even if it doesn’t answer all your questions, or creates a host of new questions for you. If you haven’t done any reading in this area, his book is a great primer to this whole topic. The book is a 1999 publication of Presbyterian and Reformed. I highly recommend it.

Another book well worth reading is David Chilton’s *Paradise Restored*. Chilton provides an excellent introductory guide to reading the Bible, including biblical symbolism and prophecy. He shows the basic trajectory of the biblical story is from promise made to promise fulfilled – and the

fulfillment of God's promises gives us a very optimistic vision for the future of God's world. Chilton takes the same basic view as Mathison: Jesus came to redeem the world; thus, the Great Commission will eventually succeed, however long it takes. Chilton works his way through basic biblical images and themes beginning in the Garden of Eden and culminating with a study of the book of Revelation. He argues that God is committed to rescuing his creation from the clutches of sin, Satan, and death. God's intention is to save a great multitude of sinners through the blood of Christ, so that it can be truly said at the last that the "world" was redeemed.

Chilton's book also does a masterful job of bringing out many of the cultural fruits of the gospel. Chilton argues that the gospel is the only basis of any stable civilization. He points to the fruits of Christian faith throughout history in economics, literature, architecture, politics, and other realms of culture. He makes the times point that the fruits of Western civilization (such as democracy/representative government) cannot be exported apart from the root that made them possible (namely the gospel).

Chilton's book does have some weakness. Occasionally his triumphalism comes off a bit arrogant, and I do not think he does justice to the Bible's suffering theme. Of course, the fact that the church will suffer in no way undermines his case for an eschatology of victory for the church. The people of God suffer and serve their way to dominion, just as Jesus did. The cross is always the pathway to glory. Persecution is never a sign of the church's defeat, but of her impending victory.

A fascinating look at the impact of this kind of eschatology on missions and culture is found in Iain Murray's study *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*. While most evangelicals today have a rather pessimistic view of the prospects of the kingdom of God in history, given to them by popular end times fiction and tv preachers, their heroes held to a quite different view. Murray shows that the leaders of the early Protestant missions movement and revivals were almost to a man driven by the same kind of "postmillennial hope" that Mathison and Chilton argue for biblically and theologically. The list of pastors, theologians, missionaries, and leaders Murray profiles, as he weaves together his story of the beginnings of Protestant world missions, reads like a "who's who" of 18th and 19th century evangelicalism: Charles Spurgeon, William Carey, John Eliot, the Hodges, the Bonars, the Duffs, David Livingstone, John Howe, George Whitefield, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, John Welch, John Owen, and others. Murray's book is splendid mix of history, biography, missiology, and theology.

There are countless other books on this topic worth consulting. For those of you who want to go further, I would recommend Roderick Campbell's *Israel and the New Covenant* (sadly out of print), Ken Gentry's *He Shall Have Dominion*, John Jefferson Davis' *Christ's Victorious Kingdom*, Jay Adams' *The Time Is at Hand*, Marcellus Kik's *An Eschatology of Victory*, Gary DeMar's *Last Day's Madness*, Jonathan Seriah's *The End of All Things*, and John Piper's *Let the Nations Be Glad!*

Admittedly, an eschatology oriented to the victory of God's kingdom in history may seem strange to many of us; indeed, it may even seem impossible in light of current events. But we're called to look at the world through the eyes of the biblical promises, not the nightly news. Indeed, encouragement is as near as the hymnal on your shelf. In one great hymn after another, we sing of the expansive growth of God's kingdom in the world, as the gospel goes forth with power

through the faithful ministry of the church. Sometime look carefully at the words to “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” “Joy to the World,” “Lift High the Cross,” “What Wondrous Love Is This,” “How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place,” etc. The triumph of the gospel is a constant theme in the songs of the church.

Obviously, within the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy (established by the ecumenical creeds, under the authority of Scripture), there is plenty of room for fellow Christians to disagree with one another over questions of eschatology. This is an intramural debate among brethren. There is no solid Christian consensus on these matters at present. But the viewpoint described in these books (and hymns) should be carefully weighed against the teaching of the Scriptures. I think you’ll find it is both soundly biblical and immensely practical.