

End Times Part 2: The Millennium

So in yesterday's podcast I gave you the overview of what the Bible teaches about end times. It's all about the coming kingdom of God where the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of Christ, all disobedience is done away with, and the entire universe is dominated by nothing but willing, glad, eager, submission to the wonderful, eternal, reigning King. Eschatology is all about that.

Now, probably the biggest debate among Christians about end times has to do with the Millennium - the thousand-year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20. And here's why that's a really big deal:

If you read through the Prophets - basically the 2nd half of the Old Testament (Isaiah through the end), the message is this: "Israel, if you don't repent, God is going to bring devastating judgment. But after that he will bring glorious restoration." And they give lots of descriptions of that glorious restoration. And the New Testament descriptions of what will happen in the end times come mostly from those promises of restoration.

They promised a time when all God's people would be regathered, there would be no more war, no more trouble. Israel's enemies would no longer be a problem. It would be a time of righteousness and obedience to God, etc.

So when is the fulfillment of all those promises?

There are three main views.

- 1) They were fulfilled in OT times, when the people came back from exile.
- 2) They are being fulfilled now, in the church age
- 3) They will be fulfilled in the future, after Jesus comes back, during a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth

Now, all three of those views would say that some of the promises won't be fulfilled until the eternal state, but that just gives you a general idea.

If you want the seminary labels for those views, the idea that the promises were fulfilled in the past is a preterist idea. The idea that the promises are mostly fulfilled during the church age is called amillennialism (or a similar view is called postmillennialism). And the idea of a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth after Jesus returns, and the promises being fulfilled during that time is called Premillennialism.

So which one of those 3 options is the right one? Well, the reason the debate goes on is **because** each one has some strong arguments.

The first view seems to make the best sense at first. God tells Israel, "I'm going to punish you and send you off to exile for 70 years and then restore you back to the land." Then 70 years later, guess what? King Cyrus tells the Jews, "You can go back to Israel." So they go back and rebuild the Temple. So isn't that the fulfillment?

It's definitely part of the fulfillment, but there's a problem. When Israel came back from exile, some promises were fulfilled, but most of them weren't even close to being fulfilled. God promised that they would all be regathered in the land of Israel, and Israel's enemies would never, ever bother them again, and the people would be righteous and holy, and the nations would all come streaming from around the world to come and see the glories of God's people.

That didn't happen. Some Jews came back, and they built a little temple that was very unimpressive compared to the previous one, and Israel has had problems with their enemies ever since – including the holocaust. And today, for the most part, Jewish people are not faithful to God.

How about the second view – that the promises made to Israel are fulfilled in a spiritual way in the church? This reason this view exists is because there are a whole lot of statements in the NT that apply those OT promises made to Israel about restoration to the church.

The most obvious one is the New Covenant. In Jer.31 God promised to make a new covenant with Israel in which all the people would know God personally, and the NT teaches in numerous places that that promise is fulfilled in the church. And that's just one of many examples. Another big one is that Gentiles would be included in the restoration of Israel, which the NT writers say is fulfilled in the fact that so many Gentiles are included in the church.

But this view has some problems too. If you read the various promises of restoration in the OT Prophets, there are a lot of them that just don't really work as descriptions of the church or the eternal state. If you want to see that for yourself, just read through the book of Zechariah, and ask yourself when the various restoration promises are fulfilled.

For example, in 8:23, where he's talking about how all the nations will come streaming to Jerusalem to seek Israel's God, and he says this: **"In those days 10 men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'."** It's hard to see how that is fulfilled in the church.

Also, the promises that Israel will have military dominance over her enemies. The church doesn't have military dominance over its enemies, and in the eternal state there will be no enemies.

Plus, the New Testament teaches that God still plans to honor the promises made to the patriarchs by eventually bringing salvation to Jewish people who are currently enemies of the gospel. That's in Romans 11. And in Romans 3 Paul teaches that there is an advantage to being ethnically Jewish even in the church age.

And that brings us to the Premillennial view - the idea that the promises will be fulfilled to ethnic Israel during a 1000-year physical reign of Christ on the earth after the 2nd coming. The greatest strength of this view is it comes from the most natural reading of Revelation 20, which says that after Jesus returns Satan will be bound for 1000 years and then set free briefly at the end of the thousand years.

That 3rd view is the one I hold, however, it also has some weaknesses. It's still difficult to understand how some of the promises will be fulfilled – especially the ones that mention animal sacrifices in the Temple. Jesus' death on the cross abolished the animal sacrifice system, and so would be hard to reconcile that system being reinstated in the Millennium on the one hand with what we read in the book of Hebrews about why that system was abolished on the other hand.

So that just gives you a quick summary of the major views, but I would like to offer a suggestion. I don't think it's wise to pick one of those 3 views and then interpret everything in the Bible through the lens of that view. The reason all 3 views remained to this day is because there are some strong arguments for each one. And I think that's because there is some truth in each one.

I believe that many of the promises of restoration were fulfilled when the Jews came back from captivity in Old Testament times. And I believe that many of the promises are fulfilled in the church. And I believe many will be fulfilled in the future millennial reign of Christ after the 2nd coming, and I believe that many will be fulfilled in the eternal state.

And I also believe that there might be a period of time in the future that we don't even know about. God may not have revealed every single thing about the future to us. In fact, it seems likely to me that he did not.

So when you read about promises in Scripture, it's fine to take the ones that the New Testament says are fulfilled in the church as being fulfilled in the church, either partially fulfilled or completely fulfilled. But promises that the New Testament does not apply to the church, just assume they will be fulfilled at some future time. It's not important to pin down exactly when. If that were important, God would have made it clear in the Bible. But he didn't give us the details of exactly when, because he wants our focus not to be

on the timing, but on the fact that God will keep his promises. Just believe that they will happen, and let God worry about when.

If you take that approach, then you have all the strengths of all 3 views, without any of the weaknesses.

And one final thought (and I think this is the most important thing to understand about end times prophecy): keep in mind the purpose of prophecy. 1 Thessalonians 4 says the reason we're told what we are told about the rapture is so that we can encourage one another. Do you feel encouraged by typical discussions about the rapture?

When Jesus spoke of the end times, he said one major purpose is to warn us so that we will not be deceived, and we will be prepared for suffering.

Whenever you see reasons like that for end times prophecy, pay close attention to those, because those are the purpose. And if those things don't happen, we miss the purpose, even if we come up with an amazing chart that maps out all the details in the exact order of events.

So instead of arguing about sequence and timing, how about we encourage one another by continually reminding ourselves of God's faithfulness and goodness and the glories of the kingdom that Jesus promised to bring about where evil will be eradicated, and we will enjoy fellowship with our God forever?