

## **What does Eschatology have to do with Redemption? (And why should I care?)**

### **Introduction**

Last week we came to the end of the six “stories” or narratives in the first half of Daniel. Anyone who reads Daniel can see right away that the apocalyptic visions in chapters 7-12 are very different from the historical narratives in chapters 1-6. These are two very different genres of literature. And yet we also see that chapter seven (the first vision) is very tightly bound up together with the “stories” in chapters 2-6 (structure of Daniel). Since chapters eight to twelve grow out of chapter seven, these chapters, too, are bound up with the stories in chapters 1-6. Chapter seven, then, with its vision of the “Ancient of Days” and one like a “Son of Man” (which we’ll come to next week) is like a central “hinge” in the book of Daniel that binds the whole thing together. In Daniel the narrative stories are a really important part of rightly understanding *and applying* all the apocalyptic visions because they’re the practical examples in history of what the apocalyptic visions declare will happen in the future. The past gives us insight and understanding into the meaning of the future. The same God who is at work in the past is also the one who holds and guides the future. We see the essential unity of the entire book not only in this internal structure, but also in the way that it’s bookended by the themes of the exile and regathering of God’s people – of death and resurrection. The whole book of Daniel is very tightly “packed” and bound together.

The main reason I’m reviewing this here is to remind us that the famous stories in the first half of Daniel are not a random collection of stories intended to teach us moral lessons or even to give us a collection of “practical applications.” These stories can only be rightly understood and applied when they’re read in the light of the whole theme of Daniel (the Sovereignty of God in Death and Resurrection) and therefore also when they’re read in the light of where Daniel fits in the whole big picture—of redemptive history. This isn’t just the key to reading the stories in Daniel, it’s the key to reading the whole Bible. So with that in mind, let’s think for a minute about what we mean by “redemptive history.”

### **I. What is Redemptive History? (And why should I care?)**

Redemptive history is the gradual unfolding of God’s eternal plan of redemption (before the foundation of the world) in time. We see this redemptive history especially built around a *progressive* series of covenants – a covenant with Noah and his seed, a covenant with Abraham and his seed (or seeds – both a carnal and a spiritual seed), a covenant with Israel (the carnal and typological seed of Abraham) mediated through Moses, a covenant with David and his seed, and finally a New Covenant made with the spiritual Israel (the “true” seed of Abraham) that was mediated through Jesus. We don’t have time to unpack all of these covenants now (and all of the different redemptive acts that surrounded these covenants), but can you at least see that there’s a movement and progression here – that this “history of redemption is *going somewhere* and *moving towards a goal*? In other words, Redemptive History is the polar opposite of a story that’s running in circles or just going on and on into nothingness. Redemptive history *by its very*

*nature* is moving irresistibly and inexorably (unstoppably and relentlessly) toward a finish, a climax, a fulfillment, a goal – *a telos* (cf. Lk. 22:37; Rom. 6:21-22; 1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:9). The whole *point* of redemptive history *is* its goal. And so what we see is that redemptive history is also, by its very nature, *eschatological*. *Eschatos* is a Greek word that refers to something coming *finally*, or *at the end*, or *last of all*. So *eschatology* is the word we use to refer to the “last things,” or the “end times.” But we have to be really careful here. The “end” doesn’t just come out of nowhere. It’s the fulfillment of the whole history of redemption. The “last day” isn’t arbitrary (“today would be a good day”), it’s the goal toward which all of redemptive history has been irresistibly, inexorably moving. In other words, we can never separate the end from the present, because the whole point of the present *is* the end. The whole point of redemptive history is the goal toward which it’s moving.

- John 6:39–40 (cf. 6:44, 54; 12:48) — This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last [*eschatos/eschatological*] day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last [*eschatos/eschatological*] day.
- 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 — Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last [*eschatos/eschatological*] trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.
- 1 Peter 1:5 — …who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last [*eschatos/eschatological*] time.

Are you seeing the intimate connection and the unbreakable bond between redemption and eschatology? Redemptive history *by its very nature* is moving irresistibly and inexorably toward a finish, a climax, a fulfillment, a goal – *a telos*. In fact we could say that it’s this eschatological goal that’s even now determining the whole movement of history (the future is exerting its power over the present). Therefore redemptive history is by its very nature—at its core, at its deepest root—*eschatological*. The history of redemption *is* nothing less than the history of hope, of being forward-looking, of waiting eagerly and with anticipation for the *eschaton* – for that last, eternal “day” to be finally ushered in. We are necessarily a forward-*looking* people because the whole history of redemption is inexorably forward-*moving*.

So are we feeling at all convicted yet? Are you getting the very unsettling sense that maybe we haven’t been nearly as eschatologically *minded* or as eschatologically *oriented* or eschatologically *defined* as we ought to be?

## **II. Which came first: Redemptive History or Eschatology? (And why should I care?)**

Let’s ask ourselves a question, now, that might be helpful: “Which one is older – redemptive history or eschatology?” In other words, which one came first – redemptive history or eschatology? Immediately after our fall into sin, in Genesis chapter three, we read:

- Genesis 3:15 — “I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring [the people of the devil] and her offspring [the elect people of God]

culminating in the Messiah]; he [the Messiah] shall bruise your head, and you [the devil] shall bruise his heel.”

Here was the Gospel being preaching to Adam and Eve for the very first time by God Himself. This *Gospel* that was preached to them was a *promise* that they were called to believe so that they might be saved by grace through faith alone. And what was this promise they were called to believe? It was the promise of the entire history of salvation *culminating* in the Messiah and ultimately in the resurrection on that last, eternal day (cf. Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 15:25-28, 53-57). Can you see, here, how redemption has never—even for a single moment—existed in the vacuum of the “present”? From the very beginning it’s always been impossible to even think of redemption without also thinking of that future goal toward which the present is inexorably *moving*.

So which one is older, redemptive history or eschatology? Which one came first? We know that redemptive history didn’t come first because redemptive history can *only* exist where there’s eschatology. It can’t exist apart from eschatology. And so the reality is that it’s eschatology that existed even before redemption – even before the fall ever happened.

□ Genesis 2:15–17 — The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

If there was the *potential* in the garden for Adam to fall into disobedience and die, so also there was the *potential* in the garden for Adam to be *confirmed in obedience and therefore to inherit a truly “eternal” life*. This *hope* and *promise* that was set before Adam in the garden was symbolized first of all by the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24; cf. Exod. 25:31-40; Rev. 2:7; 22:1-2, 14, 19). It was also symbolized by God’s blessing the seventh day and making it holy because on that day He rested from all His work that He had done in creation (cf. Gen. 2:1-3). In blessing and sanctifying the seventh day God was giving to Adam a weekly reminder that the *goal* of his creation was to enter fully into God’s eternal day of rest (cf. Heb. 3:7-4:11). This was a higher and even more blessed state than the one in which Adam was created.

So even before there was any need for redemption, there was already eschatology. Eschatology isn’t just a “by-product” of redemption as though it was less important than redemption. Even before sin had ever entered the world—even in the paradise of Eden—history was already designed with a goal and an “end” in mind – a *telos* toward which it was always *moving*, always *looking forward*. Eschatology didn’t begin with redemptive history after the fall; but it did take on an infinitely deeper and richer and fuller significance and meaning *in Christ*. If eschatology is even older than redemption, then this reminds us again that redemption is by its very nature—at its core, at its deepest root—*eschatological*. We are *necessarily* a forward-looking people because the whole history of redemption *and even of the creation itself* is inexorably forward-moving. This is what we learn by reading the Bible. In fact every single page of the Bible is “shot through” and permeated with this single, all-encompassing eschatological theme.

Are we feeling at all convicted yet? Are we getting the very unsettling sense that maybe we haven't been nearly as eschatologically *minded* or as eschatologically *oriented* or as eschatologically *defined* as we ought to be?

### **III. What is liberal “Christianity” (And why should I care?)**

In the early 1900's liberalism invaded Christianity. Do you want to know what a simple definition of liberal Christianity is? Liberal Christianity is “redemption” without eschatology. It's a “Christianity” that's lost its essential, future-oriented “other-worldliness.” In other words, it's a Christianity that's lost its supernaturalism in order to be a “relevant” and “practical” Christianity that's centered around our earthly experience of the here and now. We still want Christianity and redemption, we just want it to be “relevant” (about me, here, right now).

Liberal Christianity still looks to the future, but instead of our present being shaped and defined by that future goal toward which it's inexorably moving (that's supernaturalism; that's true biblical eschatology), it's the future, in liberal Christianity, that's being shaped and defined by our present. So in liberal Christianity redemption is what enables *us* to bring in the kingdom of God. And what does this look like? It looks like “social justice.” It looks like social and political and economic programs and reform. At the end of WWI, it looked like “Christian” reconstruction. Former President Woodrow Wilson was a professing Christian and even an elder in the Presbyterian church that was at that time being split apart by liberalism.

“In... 1918 [at the close of WWI] Wilson articulated his vision of a ‘league of nations to insure peace and justice’ ... Wilson stated that ‘Christian principles’ were the ‘solid foundation’ of the coming League of Nations, which would enable social gospel believers to “Christianize the world.” (Ruotsila; quoted by Olinger, 219)

“[Wilson] created the League of Nations in part because he thought it would be the [means] of America’s redemptive work in the world.” (Wilson biographer Arthur Link; quoted by Olinger, 219)

So once again, what is liberal Christianity? Liberal Christianity is “redemption” without eschatology. It's the social justice “Gospel.” It's a “Christianity” that's lost its essential, future-oriented “other-worldliness.” It's a “Christianity” that's lost its supernaturalism in order to be a “relevant” and “practical” “Christianity” that's centered around our earthly experience of the here and now.

### **IV. What is our “conservative” version of liberal “Christianity” (And why should I care?)**

OK, so what do we care about all of this? What does this have to do with us? We haven't embraced liberal Christianity, but is it possible that liberalism has in some subtle but very powerful and even pervasive ways infected our own practice of Christianity? I think we can especially see the impact of liberalism even in our conservative churches today in modern-day preaching and the modern-day emphasis on “relevance” and “practical application.”

I was taught in my undergraduate (dispensational) homiletics course that every good sermon needs a good introduction. And what is a “good” introduction? It’s something that convinces the people I’m preaching to (you) that the passage I’m about to preach on will be *relevant* to you in your daily lives. That kind of sounds good doesn’t it? But how is it that God’s people need to be convinced of the relevancy of God’s Word? Isn’t the true relevancy of God’s Word already fully established for us by the simple fact that it is ***God’s Word***? We might think that sounds self-evident, but I would submit to you that for many conservative Christians it’s not at all self-evident. **Because we are no longer an eschatologically oriented people, the relevancy of God’s word must now be repeatedly proved and demonstrated to us in the light of our preoccupation with the present.** In other words, the modern-day “introduction” to the sermon is very often just a symptom of the fact that we’ve divorced redemption from eschatology – the present from the future. In our own subtle way even as “conservative” reformed Christians we’ve “de-supernaturalized” Christianity in order to make Christianity *mainly* about my present existence in the here and now. The typical sermon “introduction,” while in itself not sinful or wrong, is nevertheless often a symptom of this deeply rooted sickness.

I was taught in homiletics that every good sermon needs to be well organized with clear main points and subpoints. In fact, I was taught that for every main point the subpoints should always include an “illustration” as well as a “practical application.” The problem with this is that a natural reading of the text very rarely supports the idea of a certain number of main points with subpoints that include each time an illustration and a “practical application.” This may be an extreme example, but can you see once again the deeper problem that this kind of thing is a symptom of? **The deeper, root problem is the divorce of redemption from eschatology so that our definition of what’s relevant and practical is now wholly determined by my existence today in the here and now.** It’s the conservative version of liberalism.

Why is the exhortation to long for the hallowing of God’s name so intensely “relevant” and “practical” *in and of itself* (cf. sermon on Daniel 4)? The answer is because we’re an eschatologically oriented—and even an eschatologically *defined*—people. In other words, we don’t need to *make* this exhortation “practical” by showing what this means for the kinds of TV shows or movies we’re allowed to watch. It already is, *in and of itself*, intensely practical. Nevertheless, as an eschatologically oriented people who feel how intensely practical this exhortation is *in and of itself*, we will naturally want to be discerning in our own individual and unique experiences the significance of this exhortation for our “*present*” as it’s *moving* inexorably toward its eschatological goal. So I appreciated how one person shared with me after the sermon recently that they were convicted about watching a movie where God’s name was taken in vain. It wouldn’t necessarily have been wrong for me to make this application in the sermon, but neither was it in any way necessary to make the sermon any more “relevant” or “practical” than it already was. The challenge for us is that we will only be able to see the truth of this to the extent that we are eschatologically oriented – to the extent that we have not reduced the “relevance” of Christianity primarily to what it means for my existence in the here and now. And the reason this is such a challenge for us is that we have all, to *some* extent, embraced the “conservative” version of liberalism.

Geerhardus Vos was a wonderful Presbyterian theologian and a humble, godly man who died in 1949. I quote here from his biographer:

- “Jay Adams is not... complimentary of Vos’s preaching... he believes that Vos’s sermons lacked a proper application... He writes, ‘Conservative biblical-theological preachers, sailing in the wake of Geerhardus Vos, tend to ignore (or even oppose) the use of application in a sermon... Vos’s *Grace and Glory* is an interesting and helpful volume, but what you find there are not sermons but excellent essays. Yet, there were students [at Westminster Seminary] who took this book as exemplary of what preaching ought to be.’ In a word, Adams sees Vos’s sermons as being Christ-centered, but not practical, and, thus, not really sermons at all.” (210-211)

Do you see the problem here? How is it possible to conclude that something is Christ-centered, but not practical? It’s only possible when we have in some way divorced redemption from eschatology – when we have in some way divorced the future from the present, thereby “de-supernaturalizing” our Christianity. When, however, we become the eschatologically-oriented—the eschatologically defined—people that we’re called to be, then we will see that any and every sermon that culminates *appropriately* in the Lord’s Supper has been, *by definition*, a preeminently practical sermon. This is not to say that the sermons I preach always end as *appropriately* in the Lord’s Supper as they should, but it is to say that this is the standard to which I know I will ultimately be held accountable.

### **Conclusion: How we are called to an existence that is eschatologically oriented**

How have we tried to be “redemptively”-minded without being equally “eschatologically-minded” (or eschatologically *oriented*)? How have we tried to be Christians saved by grace in the present without being equally Christians who are inexorably moving toward a finish, a climax, a fulfillment, a goal, a *telos* in another world – in the world to come? Can you see what we’ve all been guilty of doing to some extent or another? We’ve all been guilty of *separating* redemption from eschatology – of separating between the present that we’re living in now and the future toward which this present is inexorably moving. The result of doing this is a “this-worldliness” and an “earthly-mindedness” ***even when it comes to our redemption and our salvation.*** In other words, the “application” of salvation to me, now, in my “present” existence is what mainly matters. The “relevance” of redemption to me, now, in my “present” existence is the main point. And so our understanding of what it means to be “Christian” loses its essential, future-oriented “other-worldliness.” When I say “other-worldly” I don’t mean spooky and mystical and ethereal, I’m just referring to that eschatological “world to come” (cf. Heb. 2:5; 6:5). Maybe another way I could say this is that our idea of being “Christian” loses its supernaturalism and becomes *centered* instead around my earthly experience of the here and now. But here’s the ironic thing: “It’s precisely our ‘otherworldliness’ that makes *all* of Scripture so intensely and preeminently practical.” Therefore, the more truly other-worldly we are—the more eschatologically oriented we are—the more relevant and practical we will find the Scriptures to be. Geerhardus Vos writes this: “The gauge of health in the Christian is the degree of his gravitation to the future, eternal world.” (Vos; quoted by Olinger, 223) While on the one

hand I couldn't agree more, on the other hand, I'm deeply convicted at how "unhealthy" I still am and how far short I still fall. Remember what Paul wrote to the church in Colossae:

- Colossians 3:1–5 — If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you...

Summing up Vos's conviction, his biographer writes this:

- "The chief comfort of the eternal state is the sure hope of unceasing communion with God. The Christian who knows this to be true and has realized this communion in principle knows that eschatology is not abstract speculation but the profoundest and *most practical* of all thought complexes... Life in its eschatological import is bound *to God* in its production, and has a telic character directing it *to God* as its singular goal. In heaven, there will be no question regarding how one will spend time. The Lord God is there in his inexhaustible fullness, and in his presence there can be neither surfeit [excess; too much] nor tedium [listlessness; boredom]." (Olinger, 183-184)

If this will be the *practical* nature of life in the eschaton (in the eternal state), then what should we think is the definition of "practical" today – in this "present" that's moving inexorably toward its eschatological goal of unceasing communion with God? The more truly other-worldly we are—the more eschatologically oriented we are—the more relevant and practical we will find the Scriptures to be. "The gauge of health in the Christian is [always] the degree of his gravitation to the future, eternal world." And so we read in the Scriptures:

- Hebrews 9:27–28 (cf. Gal. 5:5–6) — Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are *eagerly waiting* for him.
- Romans 8:22–25 (cf. 1 Jn. 3:2–3) — We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
- 1 Peter 1:13–16 (cf. Rom. 13:11–14) — Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."
- Philippians 3:20–21 — Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

The whole *point* of redemptive history *is its goal*. Therefore, redemptive history is by its very nature—at its core, at its deepest root—*eschatological*. The history of redemption *is* nothing less than the history of hope, of being forward-looking, of waiting eagerly and with anticipation for the *eschaton* – for that last, eternal “day” to be finally ushered in. Therefore, we are called to be *preeminently* an eschatologically oriented people—a people *gravitating* always more and more to that future *eternal* world—**to the glory of God.**