

Small Group Study

OUR VISION

To know God and enjoy Him forever.

OUR MISSION

To build a Christian community by making fully devoted disciples of non-religious and nominally religious people



DISCUSSION

Questions of Faith: Signs of the End Times

NOTE TO SMALL GROUP LEADER

(You might have your small group members read the article at the end of this study prior to your group meeting. It will help promote a rich discussion.)

SCRIPTURE

Have volunteers read the following scriptures:

Genesis 6:5-13 (NLT)

5 The LORD observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. 6 So the LORD was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart. 7 And the LORD said, "I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them." 8 But Noah found favor with the LORD.

9 This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on earth at the time, and he walked in close fellowship with God. 10 Noah was the father of three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

11 Now God saw that the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence. 12 God observed all this corruption in the world, for everyone on earth was corrupt. 13 So God said to Noah, "I have decided to destroy all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth!"

Matthew 24:3-51 (NLT)

3 Later, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives. His disciples came to him privately and said, "Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?"

ICE BREAKER

Use ONE of the questions to help people open up and to focus your meeting. It is very helpful to go around in a circle with the leader going first. (Remember if you have new members or guests you should take time to introduce everyone.)

1. Have you ever ignored a warning? What happened?
2. What are some things you want to have accomplished before the end of your life?
3. What is the strangest thing you've ever seen? Tell us about it.

4 Jesus told them, "Don't let anyone mislead you, 5 for many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah.' They will deceive many. 6 And you will hear of wars and threats of wars, but don't panic. Yes, these things must take place, but the end won't follow immediately. 7 Nation will go to war against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in many parts of the world. 8 But all this is only the first of the birth pains, with more to come.

9 "Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers. 10 And many will turn away from me and betray and hate each other. 11 And many false prophets will appear and will deceive many people. 12 Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come.

15 "The day is coming when you will see what Daniel the prophet spoke about—the sacrilegious object that causes desecration standing in the Holy Place." (Reader, pay attention!) 16 "Then those in Judea must flee to the hills. 17 A person out on the deck of a roof must not go down into the house to pack. 18 A person out in the field must not return even to get a coat. 19 How terrible it will be for pregnant women and for nursing mothers in those days. 20 And pray that your flight will not be in winter or on the Sabbath. 21 For there will be greater anguish than at any time since the world began. And it will never be so great again. 22 In fact, unless that time of calamity is shortened, not a single person will survive. But it will be shortened for the sake of God's chosen ones.

23 "Then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah,' or 'There he is,' don't believe it. 24 For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform great signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones. 25 See, I have warned you about this ahead of time.

26 "So if someone tells you, 'Look, the Messiah is out in the desert,' don't bother to go and look. Or, 'Look, he is hiding here,' don't believe it! 27 For as the lightning flashes in the east and shines to the west, so it will be when the Son of Man comes. 28 Just as the gathering of vultures shows there is a carcass nearby, so these signs indicate that the end is near.

29 "Immediately after the anguish of those days,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will give no light,
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

30 And then at last, the sign that the Son of Man is coming will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the peoples of the earth. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with the mighty blast of a trumpet, and they will gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.

32 "Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. 33 In the same way, when you see all these things, you can know his return is very near, right at the door. 34 I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these things take place. 35 Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.

36 "However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.

37 "When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. 38 In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. 39 People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.

40 "Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left.

42 "So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming. 43 Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would keep watch and not permit his house to be broken into. 44 You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected.

45 "A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them. 46 If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. 47 I tell you the truth, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns. 48 But what if the servant is evil and thinks, 'My master won't be back for a

while, 49 and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk? 50 The master will return unannounced and unexpected, 51 and he will cut the servant to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the parallels between the days of the flood and Jesus' return? Does this look anything like the days of Noah?
2. What will be the criteria for who will be taken and who will be left?
3. In looking at the world around us, do you see any "signs of the end times"? What are they?
4. Jesus tells two stories in Matthew 24 - one of a thief and house owner (v. 42-44), and one of a master and servants (v. 45-51). What is the main point of these two stories?
5. What would Jesus want us to be doing when he returns?
6. If Christ returned today, would you be ready? If not, what would you want to do to GET ready? How can you live so that you are the faithful servant, always ready for the Master's return?

God bless,
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Future Things

by Kenneth Richard Samples

"What will happen to me when I die?"

"Are we living in what the Bible refers to as the 'last days'?"

"What does Bible prophecy say about the end of the world?"

Christians today seem just as interested in future prophetic events as at any time in church history—maybe even more so. Today, books on Bible prophecy are runaway bestsellers and the topic of the "last days" is a constant preoccupation of Christian television programming. However, because of the potential sensationalistic nature of this topic, Christians need to approach this controversial area of biblical theology with care and discernment.

On numerous occasions Bible prophecy and future predictions concerning the end of the world have led the church to lose credibility. Excessively speculative approaches to this area can, and have, significantly hurt the Christian witness before a skeptical world. Unfortunately, for some nonbelievers Christians' irresponsible approach to the prophetic subjects of the Bible has made Christianity seem like a sham. Therefore, the topic of 'the Bible and the future' qualifies as an apologetics issue.

In this series I will discuss a variety of points relating to the historic Christian view concerning unfulfilled prophecy. I hope to offer helpful suggestions for navigating the controversial terrain of future things.

While Christianity is rooted in historical facts, with much to say about the importance of past events (such as the creation, the incarnation, and the atonement), it also projects to the future. The robust Christian world-and-life view answers the big questions about humanity's origin and destiny by appealing to the biblical revelation.

Historic Christians believe that Jesus Christ inaugurated his glorious kingdom with his entrance into the world through the womb of the virgin Mary (circa 6–4 B.C.), a truth celebrated at Christmas. This First Advent ("coming") changed the very course of Western civilization with the calendar of the day reflecting Anno Domini (Latin for "in the year of the/our Lord"). However, his kingdom has not yet come in its fullness because believers still anticipate the promised Second Advent. Distinguishing the first and second comings of Christ (inauguration and fulfillment) illustrates the well-known prophetic biblical and theological principle known as "already, not yet."

Many Christians today are fascinated with the subject of eschatology (the study of "future things" or "last days"). Eschatology (from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning "last," and *logos*, meaning "study of") is typically seen theologically in "individual" and "general" terms.

Two Eschatological Spheres

1. Individual Eschatology: This aspect of future exploration involves the biblical view of human death as experienced by individual people. For example, unlike the naturalistic philosophies, the Bible reveals death as being more than a mere biological phenomenon. This category of eschatology also involves discussion of the nature of the intermediate state—the period between death and the future final resurrection.

2. General Eschatology: This part of revelatory projections involves the biblical view of the final cataclysmic events of human history. These future happenings include the glorious Second Coming of Christ, the rapture of the church, the millennium, the final resurrection, the last judgment, and the eternal state.

Five Eschatological Essentials**1. Second Coming of Jesus Christ**

All historic Christian traditions affirm the literal, bodily return of Jesus Christ to the earth at his Second Advent (Matthew 25:31-32; Acts 1:10-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Titus 2:13). This personal coming (or advent) is not a mere spiritual phenomenon. Instead, Christ's physical return will impact the entire cosmos and will end human history as we now know it. The entire New Testament was written in anticipation of this wondrous event. Yet no one knows the exact time of Christ's return. In fact, setting or implying dates for this event is contrary to Scripture (Matthew 24:36). The promise of Jesus' return should not result in excessive speculation about the future. Rather, its anticipation should encourage believers to live lives of faithful gratitude to God.

2. General Resurrection of the Dead

Historic Christians avow that following Christ's Second Coming, God will resurrect the physical bodies of all the human beings who have ever lived (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). This general resurrection will involve a form of physical existence for both believers and nonbelievers. According to individual eschatology, the intermediate state (the period between death and the general resurrection) will involve a temporary disembodied existence where the souls of believers reside consciously in the presence of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Philippians 1:21, 23-24) and the souls of nonbelievers are held in divine judgment (2 Peter 2:9). After the general resurrection and final judgment, all people (both believers and nonbelievers) will enter the eternal state in a physical type condition.

3. Final Judgment of Humankind

Different theological traditions may vary over exact timing, but all historic Christians believe that after Jesus raises humanity from the dead he will proceed to judge human beings (Matthew 25:32-33; John 12:47-48; Acts 17:31). Nonbelievers will face a conscious eternity separated from God because of their rebellious sinful actions (Matthew 25:46). Believers will undergo a judgment of their works in terms of obedience (rewards), but not in terms of their destiny (2 Corinthians 5:10). Jesus Christ has already rescued his people by paying for the sins of the believers while on the cross at Calvary (Romans 5:10; 1 Peter 2:24).

4. Eternal State

The general position is that the divine events of bodily resurrection and the final judgment of humanity are then followed by the unfolding of the eternal state. Nonbelievers go away to eternal misery, while believers partake of eternal blessedness.

Because of their sin, nonbelievers are eternally excluded from the presence of God (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9) and are cast into what the Bible terrifyingly describes as the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). There they consciously suffer the just wrath of God as an eternal punishment for their sins (Matthew 25:46).

Believers in Christ, having been given glorified human bodies, will experience the final step of redemption—glorification into the moral and spiritual presence of Jesus (Romans 8:30).

5. New Creation

After incredible apocalyptic events, God will destroy this present cosmos (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12) and bring forth a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1-5). A new and glorious realm of existence without sin, pain, sorrow, and death will be made by the almighty power and infinite wisdom of God. Believers will live in the new creation, clothed in their glorified, resurrected bodies, and enjoying the intimate loving presence of God. His redeemed people will love, worship, and serve the Lord in a righteous and just kingdom that will never end.

These five points of eschatological agreement mark the profound common ground that historic Christians share even in an area that also reflects marked differences and controversy. The biblical vision of reality includes an incredibly hopeful and peaceful apocalyptic picture of the future state.

Three Major Eschatological Differences

1. Understanding of the Bible's Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic writings are a genre of literature that is believed to present revelations of the end of the world in deeply symbolic language. Through the centuries Christendom has been divided over just how to understand the Bible's apocalyptic, or prophetic, literature (primarily Daniel and Revelation).

Today, many biblical scholars remain in disagreement over interpretations of these books. They interpret the Book of Revelation through various approaches (preterist, historicist, idealist, futurist) that contribute to eschatological differences. Many scholars consider the Bible's apocalyptic elements to be the most challenging and difficult areas to understand.

Interpretive Models of Revelation:

- Preterist: first century fulfillment of real events
- Historicist: symbolic events fulfilled in Christian history
- Idealist: present fulfillment of spiritual events
- Futurist: future fulfillment of real events

2. Relationship between Israel and the Church

One of the most important areas of biblical study has to do with the question of how the Old Testament (OT) relates to the New Testament (NT). Some conservative evangelical traditions see great continuity between the testaments. However, others emphasize their apparent discontinuity.

An area that directly relates to eschatology is the question of Israel and the Christian church. Is it appropriate to make a distinction between these two groups? Some assert that there is no distinction between Israel and the church. For them, the church is the new Israel. For those who embrace the historic eschatological positions of amillennialism and postmillennialism (both to be discussed later) the church is designated as spiritual Israel.

On the other hand, advocates of premillennialism (also to be discussed) mark an important distinction between Israel and the church. Historic premillennialists make a subtle distinction (between a literal Israel and a spiritual one), whereas with dispensational premillennialists the distinction is much more pronounced. Dispensational theology has historically made a complete distinction between the two groups and even proposed two individual programs (one for Israel and another for the church).

3. Nature of the Millennium

The word millennium comes from Revelation 20:4-6 and refers to the "thousand-year reign of Christ." The various millennial perspectives have different understandings of the nature of this era. Some view this era as being a literal one thousand-year period. Others view it symbolically. Millennial perspectives also adhere to different chronological orders of such events as the great tribulation (intense period of earthly trial and suffering), the rapture (the snatching away of the church), and the second coming (the glorious second advent of Jesus Christ).

Here are four major views on the millennium held by Christians throughout the centuries. The viewpoints appeal largely to the same set of Scriptures, but interpret them differently.

a. Historic Premillennialism:

This viewpoint asserts that the second coming of Christ will take place prior to the millennium, but after the great tribulation period (Matthew 24:3, 21, 29-30). The millennial reign consists of a literal one thousand-year period. According to this view, there is no secret rapture of the church. Rather the rapture takes place at the same time as the second coming. The raptured saints usher in the coming of their Messianic King.

b. Dispensational Premillennialism:

According to this perspective, the second coming will take place prior to the millennium. Like historic premillennialism, this viewpoint sees the millennial era as literal one thousand-year period (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). However, this perspective asserts that Christ will come secretly to rapture the church prior to

the great tribulation period. Afterward, Christ will return publicly at his second coming to inaugurate his earthly millennial kingdom.

c. Postmillennialism:

Unlike the previously mentioned interpretations, this view asserts that Jesus Christ returns after the millennium (Isaiah 2:2, 4). According to this perspective, the millennium refers to a long period of peace and spiritual advancement made possible through the preaching of the gospel message. A distinctive feature of this perspective is that the Christian church is successful in winning the world for Jesus Christ and moving civilization and culture in a morally positive and peaceful direction.

d. Amillennialism:

This perspective proclaims that there is no literal earthly millennium (Revelation 20:4-6). Rather it is interpreted as being the period of time between Christ's first and second advents (the church age). Jesus' second coming takes place after the great tribulation. After Christ returns (an event that corresponds with the rapture), he engages in the works of resurrection and judgment of humankind, and then creates the new heaven and the new earth.

Differences concerning the millennium have been evident throughout Christian church history and remain an area of dispute and debate among Christians today. Therefore it is important that Christians be made aware of the different perspectives held concerning these critical future biblical events.

The nature of the millennium is the third of three broad areas of contention that reflect the essential conflicts that Christians have concerning last things. But, to underscore, it is very important to remember the broad areas of agreement that all Christians share.

Here are a few good books explaining the different evangelical Christian positions on eschatology:

Historic Premillennialism:

George Eldon Ladd, [The Blessed Hope](#).

Dispensational Premillennialism:

John F. Walvoord, [The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation](#).

Postmillennialism:

John Jefferson Davis, [Christ's Victorious Kingdom](#).

Amillennialism:

Anthony Hoekema, [The Bible and the Future](#)

For an introduction to the topic of general eschatology, see Donald G. Bloesch, [The Last Things](#) and Robert Clouse ed., [The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views](#).