

# The SBJT Forum

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Brian Vickers, Keith A. Mathison, A. B. Candy, Todd Miles, Thomas R. Schreiner, David Mathewson and Hershael W. York have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

## **SBJT: What is a practical application of biblical eschatology?**

**Brian Vickers:** Biblical eschatology is by design entirely practical. (I am using the word "eschatology" in the popular sense as typically applied to texts associated with "end times."

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Eschatology proper, as it applies to the entire Bible, is not limited to texts about the end of the age.) If there is one thing that eschatological texts have in common, it is this: living today in light of tomorrow. The surprising thing is that even though this common thread runs through all these sorts of texts, the practical impact the future is meant to have on our lives today gets comparatively little attention—compared, that is, to topics such as the millennium, the rapture, and the identification of particular times, characters, and events such as those found in Revelation. Perhaps this is because the practical application found in

eschatological texts cannot match the thrill of debating the millennium or the rapture. Though such issues have their place, we should not allow them to eclipse more biblically prominent themes. The fact is that we too often miss one of the main reasons the biblical authors have so much to say about the future—they want us to know how, and why, we should live today. A great example is 1 Corinthians 15.

In 1 Cor 15:58 Paul draws an inference—a "here's why this is important for you" conclusion—from verses 50-57 in particular and the entire chapter in general. Christians are familiar with this chapter for Paul's summary of the gospel (vv. 3-4); his memorable, and quotable, comments: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (v. 19) and, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (v. 32); perhaps for the Adam-Christ parallel (vv. 21-22, 45); and certainly for his discussion of perishable and imperishable, natural and spiritual, and mortal and immortal bodies (see vv. 42-54). There are images and ideas in this

chapter that simultaneously fuel and exhaust our imaginations. What will a heavenly body look like? How old is an immortal body? What is a spiritual body? When, exactly, will we hear the trumpet sound of verse 52? The ultimate answer to these and other similar questions raised from this chapter is, “We don’t know for certain.” The point of this chapter is that we know for certain that these things *will* happen. The *what, when, and how* of chapter fifteen is not the issue; it’s the *is* and *will* that should get our attention.

At the beginning of the chapter Paul rehearses the gospel, the apostolic message that Christ died for sins, was buried, and rose again. The resurrection, like Christ’s death and burial, is grounded in Scripture (vv. 3-4). The recitation of the gospel—which must include the resurrection—is the prelude to Paul’s response to one of the several questions raised in Corinth. Apparently there were some in Corinth claiming that there is no bodily resurrection. For Paul, this is nothing less than a denial of the bodily resurrection of Christ, and if Christ was not raised then faith in him is useless, sins are not forgiven, those already dead are lost, and if hope only extends to this life then the whole thing is a sad joke (vv. 17-18). In other words, without the resurrection there is no gospel. Just as Christ was raised, so believers must know that they will be raised. He is the “first-fruits” of the resurrection—the guarantee of what is to come (v. 20). Paul presents Christ, the second Adam, as the king who rose from the dead and who will destroy death once for all (v. 26). In the meantime, Paul wants his readers to understand that their earthly bodies, like seeds planted in the ground, will be raised, transformed from perishable to imperishable, from natural to spiritual in the image of the Christ (vv. 42-29). Then, in apocalyptic style, he describes the dramatic events of the final resurrection. The message of the gospel will be fulfilled, the dead will be raised and transformed. What was mortal will become immortal (vv. 50-54). Not only *will* this happen, it *must* happen. Paul begins the chapter by showing that Scripture was fulfilled

in the cross and resurrection, and he ends the chapter by showing that the final resurrection is also the fulfillment of Scripture. The words of Isaiah, “Death as been swallowed up in victory” (Isa 25:8), will come true, and the exultation of Hosea, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (Hos 13:14), confirmed (vv. 54-55). Through the victory believers have in union with Christ, death brought on by sin empowered by the law will finally be defeated (vv. 56-57). Because Christ died and rose again in fulfillment of Scripture, so those united to him will die and rise again in fulfillment of Scripture.

The rhetorical pace of the paragraph, building up to the powerful crescendo of verse 57 (try reading the paragraph out loud and the effect will be evident) may leave us reading verse 58 as a kind of after-thought. In comparison to what proceeds it, verse 58 may seem a bit anti-climactic. If it does, that may be a sign that we are not plugged into the main thrust of such texts in the Bible. In light of everything he says in chapter 15, Paul brings his readers down to earth to transform and give meaning to life in the present. We are not meant to think merely about the future; we are meant to believe the future guaranteed by the past, so that we can live today. “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

The Christian lives at an intersection of past, present, and future. Though we often tend either to the past or the future, Paul, like the other biblical writers, is concerned for today *in connection with* the past and future. Here he tells believers that, because their future is guaranteed by Christ’s resurrection, they can be like a rock standing in the midst of a storm, living with the light of the resurrection shining upon them. Their work, in this light, is not meaningless toil but is done “in the Lord.” Though we use the phrase, “the work or the Lord” typically to mean some specific Christian ministry this is not what Paul means. If Paul is speaking here only to ministers then this verse

is significant for perhaps 1 percent of the entire church from Pentecost to the last day. Besides, 1 Corinthians is not a letter addressed to a minister's conference. Nor is it likely that "work" means only things such as preaching, evangelism, and missions. Certainly those things are included, but "work" here is inclusive of all the work believers do.

When Adam sinned, God cursed both him and the earth so that rather than freely eating the fruit of Eden, Adam would provide for himself only through toil and sweat until he died and returned to the ground from which he was made (Gen 1:17-19). Christ, the second Adam, defeated the curse so that those who are made in the dusty image of Adam would "bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49). In the meantime work is transformed from futility to significance "in the Lord." Not, of course, that the effects of the Fall are now wiped away; but because we are in union with the second Adam and will one day rise from the earth as he did, our work is not meaningless toil. In this light, the mundane "dailyness" of life takes on new meaning. The reality of what is to come is manifested as we go about the work the Lord has given us to do while we await the resurrection.

The Christian working five or six days a week for years on end to make ends meet is not chasing wind but is working "in the Lord." The Christian mother raising her children with all the routine of everyday life can be encouraged to know that her work matters in the sight of God. The missionary working for years with seemingly no fruit for his work can labor on as the glorious light of the resurrection penetrates even the darkest corner of the world.

Space does not permit a full treatment of similar texts, but the same basic theme is found in virtually all passages that direct our thoughts to the consummation of the age. In 1 Thessalonians 4, a text often associated with various views of a "rapture," Paul bookends the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead in Christ, and the gathering of living Christians who "will be caught

up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (v. 17) with encouragement for the present. He begins in verse 13 with, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope," then ends with, "Therefore encourage each other with these words" (v. 18). The Thessalonians had questions about the state of believers who had died, and Paul writes to them so that they might be comforted in the present as they look forward to a certain resurrection when Christ returns. Certainly the meaning of the verses between verses 13 and 18 is vital, but we should not let our fascination cause us to miss Paul's pastoral concern.

In 2 Thessalonians Paul writes to comfort persecuted believers. He promises that God "will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well" (1:6-7). He goes on to affirm the judgment of those who reject the gospel "on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you" (v. 10). Again, Paul's concern is pastoral and focused on what the future means for the Thessalonians. In view of what is to come, he prays "that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith" (v.11). This present concern for the future continues as Paul speaks of the coming of "the lawless one" in chapter 2. The identity of the "lawless one" is, to say the least, difficult to discern. Added to this difficulty is the meaning of restraining power that holds back lawlessness (vv. 6-7). The multitude of interpretations of this text attest to the difficulties found here. And while we must strive to understand this text, and however many the interpretations may be, we should be able to agree on what is clear: Paul tells the Thessalonians about this future event so that they will persevere in the present. The chapter begins with Paul exhorting them not to be "alarmed" by

prophecies or messages or letters that claim to be written by him and his companions (v. 2). He reminds them of what they have already heard from him regarding these things, and he warns them not to “let anyone deceive you in any way” (v. 3). The chapter ends with Paul giving thanks to God for his choice of the Thessalonians and the saving work of the Spirit through believing the gospel (v. 13). God called them through the gospel so “that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and therefore Paul exhorts them “stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (vv. 14-15). The saving work of God in election, through the gift of his Spirit, to the final defeat of evil at the coming of Jesus is their anchor in the present.

2 Peter is filled with apocalyptic language concerning the second coming of Jesus and the simultaneous defeat of evil. False prophets and false teaching will come just as they did in the past, but God will judge and destroy them. Peter describes the great day of the Lord when “the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (3:10). Then he brings it down to a present, earthly application: “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (vv.11-12a). The hope of a new heaven and earth “in which righteousness dwells” (v.13), should lead to transformed lives on this earth, and since believers have this hope before them they are to “make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (v.14). By facing the future, reminded of God’s actions on their behalf, Christian lives are changed today.

If we go back and read the Old Testament prophets we will find that the idea of the future, grounded in the past, and changing the present is not an invention of the New Testament authors. This down-to-earth eschatology permeates the

whole Bible. This same perspective pervades those parts of the New Testament so closely associated with eschatology—namely Revelation, and the Olivet Discourse of the Synoptic Gospels. Persecution, opposition, and evil will not have the last word. God will act decisively in Christ and save his people. However much speculation surrounds biblical eschatology, one thing is clear: the future applies today.

**SBJT: Many people associate eschatology with events occurring only at the end of history. What is a more balanced way of thinking of eschatology?**

**Keith A. Mathison:** Like many Christians, I became interested in eschatology soon after my conversion to Christ. The first church I attended was a Southern Baptist church where the pastor happened also to be a dispensationalist with a fascination for the end times. He regularly preached through the Book of Revelation, and I fed on a steady diet of Hal Lindsey, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and Dwight Pentecost. When I attended Dallas Theological Seminary during the first Gulf War, talk of the second coming of Christ was heard continually. Although my interest in the subject has continued, my study of it has convinced me that we do not do justice to the biblical doctrine of eschatology if we believe it is related only to the end of history.

The theological term “eschatology” is derived from a combination of two Greek words: *eschatos* (“last”) and *logos* (“word”). It has been traditionally defined, then, as the “doctrine of the last things” as that relates both to the individual human being (e.g., death, the intermediate state) and to cosmic history (e.g., the return of Christ, the general resurrection, the final judgment, heaven, and hell). Based on this etymological definition,

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most studies of eschatology have tended to focus on future events at the end of the individual's life or at the end of history.

Such an understanding of eschatology, however, presents a truncated view of the subject. The events that occur at the end of history are the culmination of God's redemptive plan, but the culmination of God's plan is inseparable from the preceding stages in the unfolding of that plan. We cannot fully understand the second coming of Christ apart from the first coming of Christ. We cannot fully understand the first coming of Christ if we do not understand God's preparations throughout history for that first coming. Eschatology is an unfolding revelation of God's promises and their fulfillments from Eden to the New Heavens and Earth.

In order to understand biblical eschatology, we must begin not with the Book of Revelation, but with the Book of Genesis. In Genesis, we are first introduced to the major eschatological themes of kingdom and covenant, blessing and cursing, promise and fulfillment. From the earliest chapters of Genesis we are given glimpses of a coming Messiah who will crush the head of the Serpent and redeem his people. We see the spread of sin and death throughout God's creation, but with the call of Abraham we are introduced to God's plan for the restoration of blessing to mankind.

In the remainder of the Pentateuch, we not only see the beginning of the fulfillment of some of the promises to Abraham as God redeems Israel from slavery in Egypt, we also see additional promises concerning "the latter days" (Num 24:14; Deut 31:28–29; cf. Gen 49:1), a time when God will send a king from the tribe of Judah. On a less explicit level, the ceremonial laws concerning the priesthood and the sacrifices are also eschatological in that they are a shadow of the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The historical books provide a narrative of Israel's conquest of the land, possession of it, exile from it, and eventual restoration to it. These books reveal God moving his redemptive plan forward

with the establishment of an earthly king and kingdom that foreshadows the kingdom of Christ. Central to the eschatological thrust of these books is the establishment of the Davidic covenant. When we turn to biblical poetry, we notice that many of the Psalms express the eschatological hopes of Israel for the coming Messianic king who will fulfill the Davidic covenant perfectly (e.g., Psalm 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 61, 72, 89, 110, 132).

Turning to the prophetic books, we see pre-exilic prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah warning of impending judgment to come upon Israel due to her breaking of God's covenant, but these prophets also look beyond judgment to a coming time of restoration. The exilic prophets, such as Ezekiel and Daniel, continue this theme, focusing even more intently on the coming time of restoration. The post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi make it clear to the people of Israel that although restoration has come to a certain degree, it has not come in the fullest. There is more and greater to come.

It is on this note that we open the pages of the New Testament and read of the birth of Jesus, the Son of Abraham and the Son of David. Immediately, we see the connection to what has gone before. Jesus is identified as the one who fulfills the Old Testament promises to Abraham and David. He is the one who will bring blessing to the nations of the earth. He is the one who will establish God's kingdom on earth. The way he will do this, however, is something that the people of Israel did not quite understand.

Israel's entire history was an almost unbroken story of rebellion, and when Christ came that rebellion culminated in the rejection of the Messiah. God used Israel's hardness to send His only-begotten Son to the cross, where through death Jesus crushed the head of the serpent. Here he offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people. Here he was crushed for our iniquities. Then, three days later, he rose from the dead. He ascended to the right hand of God the Father, inaugurating the long-awaited kingdom. Like the



establishment of David's kingdom, however, the establishment of Christ's kingdom would involve more than one decisive event.

Christ inaugurated his kingdom at the time of his first advent. During the present age, the kingdom gradually expands like a mustard seed growing into a tree, but its expansion is not without suffering. It is bloody hand-to-hand spiritual warfare as the defeated forces of evil fight tooth and nail against the inevitable. At the second coming, the kingdom will be consummated in its fullness with the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. With the establishment of the new heavens and earth, sin and its curse will finally be wiped away, and we shall worship our Lord forever. Biblical eschatology, as we see, takes into account *all* of the stages in God's forward-looking work of redemption.

**SBJT: There is a lot of confusion regarding the meaning of the expression, "the last days." What does the New Testament teach about "the last days" and about how we should live in light of them?**

**A. B. Caneday:** Confusion persists concerning what it means to *live in the last days*. As with Christ's first followers until after his resurrection, many today hold misdirected fascination concerning the "last days." Not until Jesus' resurrection from the dead did his first disciples have the proper bearings for living in the last days. Previously they drew a tight correlation between the end of life as they knew it and the end of all things. They supposed that destruction of the temple in Jerusalem would signal the end of all things (Mark 13:1-4; Luke 21:5-7). Likewise, today, despite Jesus' corrective responses to questions his first disciples asked—"Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"—many remain preoccupied with looking for signs that the end is imminent. This is because many Christians suppose that living in the "last days" is determined by proximity or nearness to Christ's second com-

ing. This confusion persists despite several uses of "last days" or synonyms in the New Testament to indicate that Christ's first coming, not nearness to his second advent, signals that we are living in the last days.

The Old Testament prophets spoke of *the last days* as lying in the dim and distant future (Jer 23:20; 49:39; Ezek 38:16; Hos 3:5; Micah 4:1). New Testament writers, however, portray *the last days* as already commenced. Several New Testament passages use the expression, "the last days" or an equivalent (e.g., Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1; Jas 5:3). Perhaps no passage provides more definitional significance for "the last days" than Heb 1:1-2. This passage unambiguously indicates that Christ's incarnate revelatory word inaugurates "these last days" by contrasting two time periods in which God spoke: *of old* by the prophets and *in these last days* by his Son. Likewise, other similar expressions—whether "the last hour" (1 John 2:18), "the end of the ages" (1 Pet 1:20); "latter times" (1 Tim 4:1); or "last time" (Jude 18)—all have Christ's first advent as their beginning point of reference. So, it is evident that because Jesus' advent fulfills Scripture's expectation of the coming Messiah his advent also marks the end of one era governed by the old covenant and the inauguration of the new era with the arrival of the new covenant.

It is noteworthy that the New Testament distinguishes between the *last days* (plural) and the *last day* (singular). The *last days* entail the expansive timeframe inaugurated by Christ's first coming that comes to a conclusion on the *last day*. The *last day* is the day of resurrection and of judgment, conceived of as the *final day* of the last days according to John's Gospel (John 6:39, 40, 54; 11:24; 12:48).

This, then, is the New Testament's eschatological frame of reference. This inaugurated last days frame of reference enables us to understand how

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the present and future dimensions of salvation are two distinguishable aspects of one indivisible whole. Scripture requires that we view salvation as eschatological, as belonging to the last day which commences the age to come (cf. Rom 13:8; 1 Thess 5:9; Heb 1:14; 1 Pet 1:5). The same is true of eternal life (cf. Mark 10:29-30; 10:17; Rom 2:6-7; Gal 6:8).

So, in a singular statement Jesus assures all who look to the Son and believe in him that he will raise them up “on the last day” (resurrection unto life eternal), and he underscores eternal life as a present possession (John 6:54; cf. 6:39, 40, 44, 46). Eternal life is our present possession because resurrection, which properly belongs to the last day and to the powers of the coming age (Heb 6:5), is already at work in this present age. Jesus makes this clear when he announces, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.... He has passed from death to life” (5:24). To pass from death to life means that resurrection power belonging to the coming age has already invaded the present. Jesus further explains when he says, “Indeed, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (5:25). Present resurrection unto life is but a foretaste of resurrection unto life in the last day, as Jesus goes on to explain, “Do not be amazed at this, for the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good unto the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil unto the resurrection of condemnation” (5:28-29).

But how has resurrection and judgment already invaded this present evil age? Jesus clarifies the indivisible and unitary relationship between the *not yet* but future resurrection and the *already* present resurrection in his riddle: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even though he dies, shall live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26). Likewise, Jesus underscores the indivisible and unitary relationship between the *not yet* but

future judgment and the *already* present judgment when he says, “The one who believes in him [the Son] is not condemned, but the one who does not believe already stands condemned because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. This is the judgment: Light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil” (3:18-19). As resurrection properly belongs to the last day, so does judgment. Nevertheless, just as Jesus Christ *already* gives life to the dead who hear his voice ahead of the day of resurrection, so also, ahead of the day of judgment Jesus announces the verdict of the last day, that those who do not believe in the Son *already* stand condemned while those who believe in him *already* stand not condemned (i.e., justified; 3:18).

Rightly understood then, the gospel is God’s gracious proclamation of his last day verdict in the present era ahead of the last day. The cross of Christ Jesus is the advance portrayal of judgment’s condemnation on the last day. Likewise, the tomb, vacated by the resurrected Christ, is the advance portrayal of resurrection’s justification unto life on the last day. Christ Jesus already stood condemned for others, not for himself, and he was raised from the dead which constitutes his justification and appointment to be Son of God (1 Tim 3:16; Rom 1:4). Therefore, justification and resurrection unto life *already* belong to all who believe in the Son of God. Thus, all the blessings and powers of the *coming age* that we *already* know and enjoy are anchored in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Judgment, condemning Christ upon the cross, and resurrection, vindicating him by raising him from the tomb, constitute the invasion of God’s last day acts into the present age, and he makes us partakers of these.

Christ’s crucifixion and his resurrection establish the frame of reference for the *last days* in which we live as we await the dawn of the *last day*. He who appeared once for all time at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself will appear a second time to save all who eagerly

await his coming (Heb 9:26-28). Here is the frame of reference, then, that enables us, in concert with New Testament writers, to affirm the immanence of the imminent, the presence of the future, or the *already* possession of what is *not yet* fully ours. Because of his first coming we already live in the *last days* as we eagerly await Christ's appearing on the *last day*.

**SBJT: What ought to be the priority in teaching or preaching on eschatology?**

**Todd Miles:** One would think, based on the popular literature, that the priority of teaching or preaching eschatological issues in the church ought to be to confuse and concern the Christian, embarrass the church of Jesus Christ, and generate book and merchandise sales to those caught up in end-times speculation and hysteria. Of course, that which is descriptive ought not to be confused with that which is prescriptive. Scripture presents a priority in teaching and preaching on the end-times that provides a much needed correction.

At the outset, let me emphasize that I recognize that one can hardly separate prediction of the future from eschatology. Further, these predictive elements were revealed by Spirit-inspired prophets for the good of the church. Revelation 1:3 is clear: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near." That which blesses includes the prophecies of the future, even though their interpretation often leads to confusion and misinterpretation. It is not for the faithful preacher to pick and choose only those portions of Scripture with which he is comfortable, but he must preach the whole counsel of God and that includes those same Scriptures that have been abused in the past. Nevertheless, too often the teaching of eschatology misses the point for which it was given, devolving into an exercise in imaginative speculation that does not feed the soul or prepare the Christian (or unbeliever) for those things "that must soon take place." To that end, I offer the fol-

lowing four priorities in teaching and preaching on eschatology.

(1) *Jesus Christ is to be the center of biblical eschatology.* Eschatology is grounded in the biblical-theological understanding of the Kingdom of God. There are three strands to the Old Testament prophetic anticipation of the Kingdom. First, God would one day reestablish his recognized rule over the entire world (Isa 2:2-4; Amos 5:18-20; Mic 4:1-8; Zech 14:9). Second, the Spirit would one day be poured out in an unprecedented way (Isa 32:15-18; Ezek 36:26-30). Third, the Davidic heir would one day rule over the eschatological kingdom (Amos 9:11; Isa 9:7). The wonder of Jesus Christ is that he brings all three strands of the Kingdom cord together in his one person. Jesus is the Spirit-anointed Davidic heir who brings the saving rule of God to earth and pours out his Spirit on his people (Isa 9:1-8; Luke 4:17-18; Joel 2:28-32). All the eschatological promises of God, including the judgment of the living and the dead and the creation of a new heavens and a new earth are centered in the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of which Christ is the King (Col 1:13).

Because of the inaugurated nature of the Kingdom, biblical eschatology does not describe events that are all in the future. Rather, the new covenant believer has his feet simultaneously planted in the "present evil age" (Gal 1:4), and in the "last days" (Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 1:20). The eschatological age was inaugurated with the first advent of Christ and will be consummated at his return. As such, speculation over such things as the timing and nature of the millennium and rapture must give pride of place to the centrality of Jesus Christ. Due attention must be given to Jesus as Creator (Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:3), Jesus as King, Jesus as the one who raises the dead, and Jesus as the judge of both the living and the dead (John 5:25-29). The focus of biblical eschatology must be the pre-

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eminence of Jesus as the hinge upon which all of human history turns.

(2) *Eschatology ought to encourage the Christian to persevere.* Whereas the purpose of the Old Testament prophets was often to castigate the people of Israel and call them back to the covenant, the apocalyptic literature is much different. The illocutionary point of much end times biblical literature is to give hope to the Christian and call him to perseverance. This is evident from the concluding paragraph of the book of Revelation which ends with an invitation to life and an assertion of the certain return of Christ (Rev 22:6-21). Too often, eschatological teaching results not in a renewed confidence in the certain victory of Christ over all of his foes and the vindication of his people, but a confusion and fear of the horrible events that the apocalyptic literature portrays.

When I was a junior high student during the late 1970s, my Sunday School teacher presented a series on interpreting the end times in light of current events. This was at the height of the Cold War between the USA and the USSR. My teacher, armed with his copy of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, other material available to him (including a video tape of *A Thief in the Night*), proceeded to tell me of an immanent colossal battle between the forces of good (USA) and evil (USSR), to take place in Israel, which was all part of the Great Tribulation and the persecuting work of the Anti-Christ. I learned that the biblical references to Gog and Magog (Ezek 38; Rev 20) would find their fulfillment in Russia and was even taught precisely what kind of Soviet helicopters John was describing in Revelation 9 with his imagery of scorpion-like locusts. I remember nothing else, other than that I was terrified and dreaded the return of Jesus. Here is the problem: I was a Christian! Obviously, Christians who are dreading the return of Jesus are not thinking rightly. My well-meaning Sunday School teacher had taken the word of God and taught it in such a way that I walked away with a completely wrong lesson learned. If you teach on eschatology and the

result is anything other than that the Christian is encouraged to persevere and the unbeliever is warned to repent, then you have not rightly taught the Word of God.

(3) *Do not forget personal eschatology.* Eschatology covers material that is more than just the cosmic events that will usher in the consummated state. Most believers throughout church history have not and will not live to see those times. But save those relative few who are alive at the return of Christ, all people, both saved and unsaved, will die and stand before Jesus Christ and be judged. The pastoral value of teaching on what happens when a loved one dies, the intermediate state, eternal rewards, the final judgments, the horrors of hell, and the wonder of the new heavens and the new earth is inestimable. When faced with his own mortality or the death of a loved one, questions on the timing and nature of the rapture and the timing and nature of the millennium tend to slide down the scale of relative value, while questions like, "Is my mother in heaven now?" "Is she able to see me?" and "Will I ever see her again?" rise to the top. These are theological questions that require a truthful response. The pastor can prepare his congregation to minister the gospel to others during such times if he teaches and preaches faithfully on matters of personal eschatology.

(4) *Preach with conviction those things that are clear and with humility those things that are less clear.* The apocalyptic books contain descriptions of events that are yet future. Christ has yet to return to consummate his Kingdom, and one reason that there is biblical information on the end times is so that the saints might recognize the events for what they are. It is imperative that the Christian be taught on the certainty and nature of the return of Christ. These things are clearly taught in the Bible and we must be equally clear in our teaching and preaching. But the timing of the return of Christ is not so clear. In fact, there has never been a generation of Christians who did not believe that they were going to live to see

the return of Christ. All of them that are now dead were wrong. We ought to remember this and preach with great conviction on the triumphant return of Jesus to judge the living and the dead and to consummate his kingdom. We would be wise to preach with humility our convictions regarding the timing of that certain return.

**SBJT: What are some of the major themes in Revelation that we should preach for our congregations?**

**Thomas R. Schreiner:** Too often Revelation is either preached as a prophecy chart, or, if preachers are not satisfied with the prophecy chart view, they ignore it altogether. The prophecy chart view does not fit with what Revelation actually teaches, leading to all kinds of subjective and outlandish interpretations. But neglecting Revelation is scarcely an improvement, for the Lord inspired the book for our learning and edification. Four major themes of the book will be sketched in here.

First, Revelation teaches us that God is sovereign over all things. When John wrote the book, the Roman empire was persecuting Christians and some were even being put to death. Babylon, which stands for the city of Rome, was drunk from the blood of the saints (16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). Some were beheaded because of their faithfulness to Jesus (20:4). The beast, representing the Roman empire, was conducting war against the saints (11:7; 13:7; cf. 2:13). Those martyred were crying out to God for justice, asking him when he would make all things right (6:9-11). Surely in dark moments they must have wondered if God was in control, if the evil being inflicted upon them indicated that history had spun out of his hands. In response to this situation, John reminds his readers that God is the creator of all (4:1-11). One of the key words in the book is “throne” (1:4; 3:21; 4:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10; 5:6, 7, 11, 13; 6:16; 7:9, 10, 11, 15, 17; 8:3; 12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4, 5; 20:11-12; 21:3, 5; 22:1, 3), showing that the Lord rules and reigns over all. God is the alpha and omega (1:8). Indeed, believers need not fear, for

Jesus rules over the kings of the earth (1:5). It may seem as if evil reigns supreme, but even the reign of the beast has been given to it by God (13:5, 7). Indeed, God will turn evil against itself so that the beast and his friends destroy Babylon (17:15-18). Ultimately a new heavens and a new earth will dawn where God will reign in the new Jerusalem (21:1-22:5). The righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished. The judgments represented by the seals (6:1-17; 8:1-5), the trumpets (8:1-9:21; 11:15-19), and the bowls (16:1-21), and the final judgment of Babylon (17:1-19:5) and the beast and the false prophet (19:11-21) demonstrate that evil does not have the last word.

Since the Lord reigns over all and will bring in his kingdom when Jesus returns (19:11-21), we see, secondly, that believers must persevere to the end to be saved. This life is a time of testing in which believers are called upon

to be faithful. Only those who overcome will partake from the tree of life in paradise (2:7). Those who are faithful till death will receive the crown of eternal life (2:10), and those who persevere will not be harmed by the second death (2:11), which is the lake of fire (20:14; 21:8). Again and again the need to overcome and persevere to receive the final reward is emphasized (2:17, 25-26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 21:7-8). The Lord reigns and rules over evil, and he will finally triumph. Believers are,

therefore, exhorted to trust him and to refuse to compromise with the beast. Those who give their allegiance to the beast will face judgment and torment forever and ever (14:9-11).

Third, Revelation features the glory of Christ. He is the glorious Son of Man whom John sees in a vision (1:12-20). He is fully divine, for he is the first and the last (1:7; 2:8; 22:13). The beast does not rule over death and Hades, for Jesus holds the keys of both of these terrifying realities (1:18).

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The deity of Christ and his equality with God are highlighted, for John gives glory and honor to both God and the Lamb: salvation is ascribed to God and the Lamb (7:10); there is no temple in the new heavens and the new earth, for the Lord and the Lamb are the temple (21:22); the light of the new Jerusalem stems from the Lord and the Lamb (21:23; 22:5); the throne of God and the Lamb are in the heavenly city (22:5). Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16). He will rule the world with a rod of iron (12:15) and will reign forever and ever (11:15-19). He opens the seals of the book and so reigns over all of history (5:1-14).

The glory of Christ in Revelation is featured particularly in his death. He opens the seven sealed book because he is not only the Lion of the tribe of Judah but he is also the Lamb who was slain (5:5, 6, 9, 12). Believers are freed from their sins by Jesus' blood (1:5). Jesus, by virtue of his death, has purchased some from every people group for salvation (5:9). Human beings are defiled by their sin and deserve final judgment, but those who have trusted in Christ have had their robes washed in the blood of Christ, and now they stand before God in white robes (7:14). Satan has been evicted from heaven on the basis of the death of Christ (12:7-9), and believers have overcome the accusations of Satan because Jesus' blood has cleansed them from sin (12:11).

Fourth and finally, Revelation is full of worship and praise. In Revelation 4 the four living crea-

tures and the twenty four elders worship God as the creator and sovereign of all things. In chapter 5 they give praise to the Lamb who was slain and who has accomplished a great redemption (cf. 7:10-12). Hence, believers sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (15:2-4). God is praised for making all things right in bringing in his kingdom by judging evil and rewarding the righteous (11:15-19). Those belonging to the Lord

exclaim Hallelujah for his judgment of Babylon (19:1, 3, 4) and for the commencement of God's reign over all (19:5-6).

The message of Revelation is profound and deep. In the midst of suffering we are reminded that God is sovereign over all things, watching over and caring for his own. The Lord Jesus Christ is the glorious Son of Man. He is the Lamb who was slain for our sins, and he shares the same status and dignity and honor as the Father. In light of the certain victory of God and the Lamb over all evil and the great redemption purchased for us, believers are called upon to endure and persevere to the end. Only those who continue to believe and resist the allurements of this world will obtain the final prize. These great truths cause believers to break forth in praise and in worship of God and the Lamb. God will dwell with us forever and wipe every tear from our eyes (21:3-4), and then all things will be new (21:5).

#### **SBJT: What does the bible teach in regard to the Christian's future hope?**

**David Mathewson:** When most Christians contemplate the final destiny of God's people, they probably think in terms of escaping this world in exchange for "going to heaven." While not entirely inappropriate, such language may reflect a very unbiblical conception of the Christian's future hope. The book that treats this topic in the most detail should cause us to revise how we think about our ultimate destiny. The book of Revelation concludes with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, with a new Jerusalem at its center (21:1-2). More than just a stirring climax to the book, this vision should profoundly shape our understanding of our hope. One of the functions of apocalyptic visions such as Revelation is to shape the readers' perception of reality, both present and future. Revelation 21-22 provides us with a glimpse of a reality that transcends our present world, of a world that is distinctly "new." By drawing on language from the Old Testament that expressed the hopes of the prophets (Isa

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65.17-20; Isa 54.13-14; Ezek 40-48), John shapes our perception of this reality. However, though it is a reality that transcends our present experience, it is *physical* and *earthly* nonetheless. Thus the long process of establishing God's kingdom on earth and redeeming humanity from the kingdom of this world and of Satan in Revelation ends up with God's people inhabiting a new *earth*, not a new heaven. Therefore, the first thing that John encounters in this climactic vision is a new heaven and *earth* ("I saw a new heaven and a new earth"), which replace the present order (21:1). It is also the last thing that he sees (22:1-2), where this new state is described with language reminiscent of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). On the one hand, there is discontinuity with this present world and existence. Our hope is something "new" and it eclipses the old order of things (21:1: "for the first heaven and earth passed away"). Yet, on the other hand, there is continuity with this present world. It is still a new *earth*.

John anchors his vision of the future destiny of God's people in the prophetic expectations of the renewal of the world and God's people from the Old Testament. The vision of the new heaven and new earth in 21:1 itself recalls the original creative act of God from Genesis 1-2, where God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). Furthermore, John's language draws on Isa 65:17 for his vision of this new heaven and earth. The prophet Isaiah anticipates a time when God will restore his people to their land in a new creative act. Death will be mitigated, and God's people will enjoy true life and prosperity in the land. The prophet's own conception, upon which John draws, of God's ultimate redemption of his people is thoroughly earthly and corporeal. John also relies upon the prophetic model of a new exodus for his conception of eschatological salvation. The goal of the exodus from Egypt was to lead Israel into the land of their inheritance. John picks this up in his own vision of salvation (Rev 21:1-2). In fulfillment of the prophets' hope that God will act to deliver his people in an exodus-like event, John envisions

God acting to redeem and deliver his people in a new exodus where they enter their inheritance, the promised land, which is now the new earth.

Furthermore, John's vision also recalls the language of Ezekiel (40-48). Towards the end of his vision in 22:1-2 John, like Ezekiel, presents the ultimate destiny of the redeemed as a restored Garden of Eden (Ezekiel 47). The tree of life from the Garden (Gen 2:9) even grows there (Rev 22:2). The new creation/Jerusalem is even a place where the redeemed nations bring their accomplishments and achievements into it (21:23-4; Isa 60). So John draws on the most physical, earthly portraits from his OT predecessors for his own vision of the ultimate destiny of God's people. In line with them, John roots his vision of eschatological salvation in a restored, physical creation in order to shape his readers' perception of their ultimate destiny. The final destiny of God's redeemed people, though more than, is not less than a material, earthly one.

Yet Christians are still prone to talk about the goal of redemption as "going to heaven." The language is unobjectionable if it does not carry overtones of some purely spiritual, disembodied existence. But sometimes our language reflects and affects our thinking. Heaven is a place where we go to escape the disappointments and pain of life in this world. We will exchange one type of existence for a completely different one. Perhaps we carry around in our mind images, fueled by popular media, of what that purely spiritual, heavenly existence will be like (disembodied spirits whose landscape is the clouds). However, personally I cannot think of a more uninspiring or boring existence! But Revelation reminds us otherwise by reshaping our understanding of our ultimate destiny. By landing the perfected community of God's people on a new earth, John reminds us that "heaven is not our home." In his book *The God I Don't Understand* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) Christopher J. H. Wright said that if he were asked the typical evangelistic lead-in question, "If you were to die tonight, are you sure you will go to heaven?" he would respond, "Yes. But



I don't expect to stay there." God created us as physical beings who long for physical existence, but one shorn of all the disappointment and pain and sin that plague this present world (Rev 21:4).

So the long history of God's purpose for redeeming his people culminates the way it began: life as a physical, earthly existence, albeit a transformed and renewed one, with God and the Lamb dwelling in the midst of their people (21:3, 22). If we as Christians are called upon to refuse to place our hope in this world, its structures, wealth and pleasures, then we need an attractive alternative. Revelation's vision of a new *earth* provides Christians just that. But this vision should not only shape our view of the future, but our perspective on the present. Revelation's vision of a new creation does not call us to abandon the present world. Rather, in anticipation of God's purposes for creation it calls us to be about transforming this present world for the good. In line with God's intention to bring about a new creation, our lives and activities in the present should offer a foretaste in a world gone wrong of the new creation that God will one day establish, a hope truly worth waiting for.

**SBJT: As a pastor, what do you think is most important to remember about eschatology, especially when it come to the reality of death?**

**Hershael W. York:** I am seated beside a bed in a nursing home. They call it a rehabilitation center, and for a few fortunate residents, it might be,

but for most this is clearly their last stop on earth. They require constant care, far more than exhausted family members can give them. They must be stretched and turned, bathed and diapered between doses of medicine and regular feedings, not very much unlike the way their lives began years earlier.

Perched vigilantly in my chair, I gaze into the face of the man lying in the bed beside me. Though he is

sleeping, his trembling hands flail about violently, as if he is beating back some unseen enemy. His constant motion wakes himself every thirty seconds or so, so that he cannot rest. He jerks and snorts, and when his eyes open he searches for me, to see if I am still there. Sleep itself is wearing him out, sucking his body deeper into a quicksand from which he cannot extricate himself. He hardly looks anymore like the man who mentored me, disciplined me, baptized me, taught me Bible stories, carried me on his shoulders, fathered me.

He has been brought here after a perforated ulcer, after surgery, after his system has gone septic, after the hospital can no longer help. The unwelcome agent in his blood stream is overwhelming his body. For seventy-nine years he had never been admitted to a hospital, but the healthy man I knew six weeks earlier has been replaced by this shriveled, featherless bird who cannot stretch a naked wing and fly.

We had rehearsed this moment. Many times through the years, we talked about eschatology. He was a convinced dispensationalist; I was and am a historic premillennialist. I would tease him about the inconsistency of his rejection of a gap in Genesis 1:1 on hermeneutical grounds, but his insistence on placing one between Daniel's sixty-ninth and seventieth week. He would respond that I didn't know what to do with Israel and the Jews and Romans 11. Banter like this between us was never tense, never uneasy, always joyful and light. He was glad that I was my own man and didn't believe something just because he did, that I was able to think through issues and not feel obligated to land where he was.

The eschatology that mattered the most to us, however, and from which we took the greatest comfort was *personal* eschatology, the biblical teaching on what happens to us at the end of our earthly lives. Repeatedly our phone conversations and discussions turned to what awaits us at and beyond death, especially as he grew older. My father had a rock solid confidence in his Savior's ability to see him through the valley of death's

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*shadow*. With no hint of fear or remorse he would speak of the end of life and tell me that once death was both inevitable and imminent, he did not want his physical life to be prolonged. To be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord, so, he would say, “Don’t deny me my promotion.” Christ had turned what for most is the object of fear into a promotion for my father! As a result he made me give him my word that I would not artificially prolong his life and keep him out of heaven when the end was near and unavoidable.

Sitting by his bed, all those prior conversations comforted my sisters, my mother, and me. When, a few days later, he became incommunicative, I watched my mother caress his arm with her slender, elegant fingers and whisper in his ear, “It looks like the Lord is not going to raise you up again to preach His Word. You go on home, and I’ll meet you later.” Though the nurse told us that it would be days before he died, he was in the presence of his Savior within ninety minutes of my mother’s unselfish release.

Many times I have been with other families at that moment. Nothing in life compares to the sacredness of death. But never did the verses I had shared, the doctrines I had taught, and the prayers I had prayed mean as much or feel as real or as relevant as at the moment when I saw my father breathe for the last time. Because of Christ’s promises and the reality of heaven, the resurrection, and eternal glory our sorrow was overwhelmed by our confidence and joy. Jesus had done for my father what He promised him He would do. He took him home at the end of a faithful life.

Whenever I have been with a family in the holy hush of a loved one leaving, I have seen how the promises of God minister to them and to the one who is dying. The comfort deepens and matures *after* the loved one dies, too, as the promise that Jesus will return and bring with him those who are asleep (1 Thess 4:14) becomes a treasured truth and future hope.

I often think we have missed the purpose of

eschatology. We are not encouraged to be *convinced* of a system but to be *comforted* by a promise. Paul told the Thessalonians that he didn’t want them to be uninformed so they wouldn’t grieve like those who have no hope (1 Thess 4:13), and they were to use his words to comfort and encourage one another (1 Thess 4:18). The reason Paul explains the resurrection of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15 is because it ensures *our* resurrection. The entire book of Revelation was written to a persecuted and suffering church to hearten and cheer her with the good news that the Bridegroom is returning. In spite of whatever trouble we may be enduring, we have the assurance that Jesus reigns and will vanquish all enemies—especially *death!*

When I, as a pastor, hold the hand of a parent whose child cannot breathe and is dying in an incubator, eschatology matters desperately—but not necessarily a system or school of eschatology as we often debate and discuss. That grieving mother needs to know that Jesus has taken the sting out of death, that He is one day returning and is going to right the wrongs and defeat our enemy. That father beside her needs to have confidence in a big God who is absolutely in control and will one day send His Son to gather to Himself the very people He has redeemed from the sin that escorted death into this world.

Eschatological investigation and systemization has its place. We might find profit in studying the way events surrounding Christ’s return will unfold or the nature of the tribulation period. But when everything in life but life itself has been stripped away, when believing families huddle in grief beside a dying father, the reality of the resurrection of Christ matters far more than the identity of the 144,000. The things that the Scriptures most plainly teach are the very things we most urgently need. I do not know if my historic premillennial beliefs are more correct than my father’s dispensationalism, but this I know: my Redeemer lives!