

The Challenge

Group Discussion Series

**Challenging the Contemporary
Presuppositions of the American Church**

Session 4

**Fundamentals of End Time Prophecy as
Related to the Gospel and Covenants**

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Interpretation

Bible prophecy compiles approximately 25% of Scripture. Yet, for the most part, Protestants view end time prophecy as ambiguous, mysterious, and close kin to conspiracy theories. Catholicism barely falls short of ignoring the subject altogether.

Furthermore, it is seen as a biblical subject completely separate from salvation and discipleship. In other words, end time prophecy is seen as having no significant bearing on salvation and sanctification. To the contrary, as we shall see, that is far from the truth. This project seeks to get the ball rolling in the right direction, but eschatology (the study of end time prophecy) has vast implications regarding salvation and the Christian life. In fact, we will discuss this subject in context of the first three, Interpretation, Law/Gospel, and Discipleship.

When I first became a Christian, I loved Bible prophecy. But it was also extremely frustrating. I had been taught, like most Christians, that its genre was cryptic and full of symbolic codes of interpretation. In addition, I was functioning on many Protestant presuppositions as well.

However, once you understand that the Bible is to be interpreted grammatically, the following becomes evident: God has no intentions whatsoever of making 25% of the Bible like interpreting ancient cave symbols. Unless there is a reason otherwise, the words are to be taken literally and at face value. From there, it is a matter of piecing all of the facts together into the big picture. And understanding Bible prophecy will make us stronger Christians full of assurance, and better evangelists.

What are we thinking when we function as if we have no urgent need of 25% of the Bible? Why would God include it? To confuse us? To frustrate us? Doesn't make sense, especially in light of the following Scriptures:

Matthew 4:4 - But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

2Timothy 3:16 - All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The words "every," and "all" should speak for themselves in the context of these two passages. Prophecy must be vital and profitable for every good work and the perfecting of the saints.

In regard to interpretation, the Bible supplies its own methods, and a good example is the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:1 - Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

This crowd would have been the spiritual peasantry of that day. They were "sheep without a shepherd" (MATT 9:36) as well. The Bible describes the multitudes of that day (where Christ ministered) as confused, lost, harassed, and faint. Yet, He "taught" them. The goal of Christ was to impart wisdom they could understand. These were not people who were trained in theology. Therefore, one has to conclude that the Sermon on the Mount is to be interpreted literally, and taken at face value. Nevertheless, complicated, in-depth commentaries on this sermon abound.

There are similar examples in regard to Bible prophecy. Daniel's vision of the four beasts was interpreted for him by an angel in chapter 7. Christ interpreted John's vision for him by identifying what the stars and the candlesticks represented (Revelation 1:20). Christ interpreted the parable of the soils for the disciples by identifying what the elements of the parable represented (MATT 13:18ff.). Paul wrote that his example taken from Abraham's life should be interpreted as allegory (GAL 4:24). Unless otherwise stated by the Bible, it is to be read literally.

Fundamentals of End Time Prophecy as Related to the Gospel and Covenants

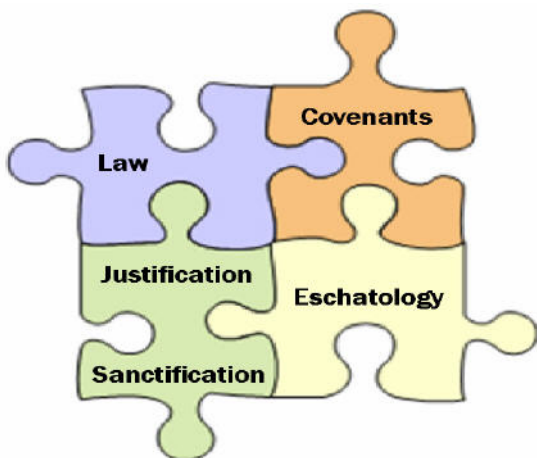
The means of justification are unconditional, but much of sanctification is conditional and depends on our obedience. Clearly, the blessings of sanctification are in the doing (James 1:25). Boldness in sanctification comes from the knowledge that sanctification cannot affect God's finished work of justification. James and Peter (JS 2:22, 23, 2PET 1:5-11) both insist that we add works to our faith without fear that it jeopardizes the finished work of justification.

What is the gospel? What is the difference between justification and sanctification? What is the relationship between law and gospel? What are the covenants about and how do they fit into God's plan?

Luke 21:25 “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, 26 people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Notice Christ doesn't say that our justification is drawing near. Redemption speaks of something already paid for that is being claimed. Part and parcel with gospels that fuse justification and sanctification together resulting in weak sanctification is the idea that there is one judgment to determine who is justified and who isn't in the end. That is one reason sanctification can be really weak—due to the introspection and fear that results from the two being fused—the idea that what we do in sanctification can affect our justification. The one resurrection idea brings with it the whole idea that our justification will be confirmed on the last day. That's unsettling to say the least. This approach has always been common in Reformed theology; eg., the father of Reformed theology, Augustine[1]. John said that he wrote the book of 1John so that

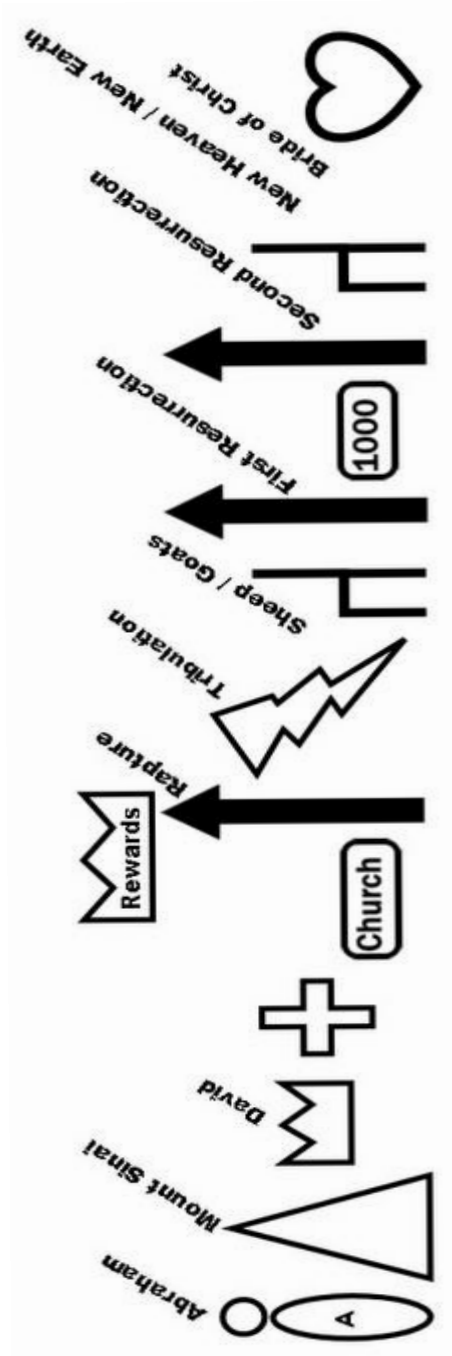
we can know for certain that we are saved (1JN 5:13). Why would we then stand in a judgment to confirm what we already know? Covenants, the issue of justification, and eschatology all fit together perfectly and confirm an unshakable light for our path ahead.



Seeing all of these elements fit together and therefore confirming what we believe is both powerful and important. If our defined difference between saved and unsaved are the following, “those under the law are enslaved to sin, cannot obey the law, are provoked to sin by the law, and will be judged by the law while those under grace are justified apart from the law, able to obey the law, and enslaved by the law,” shouldn’t there be different judgments accordingly? And if judgment is always associated with resurrection, shouldn’t there be more than one resurrection?

Many gospels are predicated on a single resurrection which goes hand in hand with the idea that our justification is confirmed in the end. This also fits with the view that the law is still the standard for justification and we must therefore live by the same faith alone that saved us. So, the one final judgment confirms that we lived our sanctified life by faith alone. Their sanctification by justification determines their covenant theology as well as their eschatology. But it’s all gospel. Don’t fall for “essential/non-essential”—every verse in the Bible is a piece of the truth puzzle. That’s why we have Matthew 4:4 and 2Timothy 3:16,17. What we believe about any given truth must fit together overall. That’s when we can have great confidence that we stand in the truth.

Now, let's have a look at our thesis for this session:



Here we have Mount Sinai, or the old covenant, Christ's death and resurrection, the last days, the tribulation period, the millennial kingdom (1000 year reign of Christ on David's throne in Jerusalem), and the new heavens and new earth. As Christians, we ultimately look for the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells (1PET 3:3). We are in the last days or what some people call the church age. The Bible never calls these days the church age, but rather the last days. The last days are marked by the first coming of Christ and will end with Christ's imminent return (HEB 1:1,2, 1COR 18:11). This will begin the seven year tribulation period, and that period will end with the beginning of the millennial reign of Christ, and that will end with the new heavens and new earth. Now, let's look at where the resurrections fit in:

The first resurrection is a resurrection of the righteous sometimes referred to as the rapture. It is imminent. At the end of the tribulation period, you have the separation of the sheep and the goats. The goats are judged and the sheep will populate the millennial kingdom. At that time, you have another resurrection of the righteous (those who died during the tribulation period). No judgment is mentioned. At the end of the millennial kingdom the nations lay siege to Israel and are destroyed by God. At that time, all of the unregenerate from all ages are resurrected and judged by the law. By the way, that's a good gospel message: coming to Christ to avoid this coming judgment.

Furthermore, the old covenant is consummated by the tribulation period, and the new covenant is completed by the new heavens and new earth (HEB 8:8). God gets his way in regard to what He wanted at Mt. Sinai and the covenant is enforced by angels during the tribulation period accordingly. The present age is the grafting in of the Gentiles and that is a consummation of about half of the Abrahamic covenant which also is consummated or completed by the new heavens and new earth.

But because justification is unconditional, and sanctification is conditional, there will be a judgment of rewards for the Christian. This is how covenants and eschatology fit together with the truth of justification versus sanctification.

Let's look at this theses scripturally starting with the Abrahamic covenant. God promises to make Abraham a great nation, promises blessings for those who bless him, and curses for those who curse him. Abraham is promised specific geography, and told the nations of the earth will be blessed by him. We see here two different types of promises that are conditional and unconditional. If you will, justification and sanctification. The promise to make Abraham a great nation is unconditional. This covenant will be completed by God no matter what the Israelites do. Blessings and cursing are conditional depending on what we do. Those who bless Abraham will be blessed, those who curse him will be cursed. God also predicts the captivity in Egypt and when He will lead them out to possess the land (GEN 12:1-3, 15:13-16, 18-21, 17:5).

Now we come to Mt. Sinai and the fulfillment of the prophecy of Israel being led out of captivity as a great nation. God informs Moses that he wants to make Israel a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. This is partially fulfilled in the new covenant according to Peter. This is a continuation of the promise which is unconditional. Under the conditional promises God warns Israel not to break the weekly Sabbath or the Sabbath of resting the land every seven years. To do so was to not help the poor or give rest to the servants and workers in Israel. God also warns Israel not to make a covenant with other nations but to rather trust Him for protection and needs. God warns Israel that a violation of resting the land every seven years will be punished times seven (7×7). References: EX 19:4-6, 23:10, 32, 1PET 2:9, LEV 25:4,5, 26:14-35, JER 25:11,12, 29:10,11, 2CHRON 36:21. Now, let's go to the book of Daniel and chapter nine:

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— 2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

20 While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my plea before the Lord my God for the holy hill of my God, 21 while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. 22 He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, "O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. 23 At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision.

24 "Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. 25 Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. 26 And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. 27 And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."

Let me sum this up thus far. Israel violated the national sign of their covenant with God: the Sabbath years, or weeks of years (EX 31:12-14). That was letting the land rest every seven years in order that the poor could glean from the fields (EX 23:10,11). Gabriel informs Daniel that there was seventy weeks to complete the transgression, or 490 years. Gabriel states that there are two time periods totaling 69 weeks that end with the destruction of Jerusalem, or 483 years. Then he states the last seven years are marked by Is-

rael making a covenant with the antichrist. In the middle of that week, the antichrist stops the sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem and declares himself God. Therefore, the last days (HEB 1:1,2 1COR 10:11) are an undisclosed number of years that end with Christ's return. The 490 years is known as the "times of the Gentiles" and ends with the completion of the tribulation period:

Luke 21:20 – "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, 22 for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 23 Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

During the times of the Gentiles, believing Gentiles are grafted into the nation of Israel as a partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Christ said that no man knows when He will come for the church which would exclude the tribulation period because His return in that time period has a specific beginning, middle point, and ending which begins with Israel's covenant with the antichrist. Isaiah calls this a covenant with hell (ISA 28:15-18).

The imminent return of Christ is a resurrection of the just including those who are still alive:

1Corinthians 15:50 – I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Another obvious resurrection of the just is at the end of the tribulation period:

Revelation 20:1 – Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Then we have the judgment after the end of the millennial kingdom:

Revelation 20:11 – Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Please note: the Reformed view of justification, one resurrection and one judgment is VERY helpful to their thesis. More than one resurrection can lead to the belief that Christians will not stand in a judgment to determine their just standing, but rather a judgment for rewards because their just standing is already determined. I have discussed this personally with many Reformed teachers—they definitely hold to a single resurrection and judgment. It fits their view of justification; Justification is not confirmed positively till the final judgment.

To the contrary, we don't stand in the last judgment, but rather a judgment for rewards (1COR 3:10-15, 2COR 5:10, LK 14:12-14).

Now, in regard to the Davidic covenant in 2Samuel 7, I only want to mention the principle of THE PROMISE and PROMISES. Please note:

14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” 17 In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

We see that in the covenants, there is the principle of God disciplining us as His children versus judgment and condemnation. Also note: 1COR 11:31, 32; HEB 12:3-17; PROV 3:11,12; 1COR 5:4,5.

Let’s wrap up with a look at the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:

31 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” 35 Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord of hosts is his name: 36 “If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.” 37 Thus says the Lord: “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.”

38 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. 39 And the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah. 40 The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown anymore forever.”

Obviously, this covenant is not completed yet. All of these covenants work together towards the final goal that we look for: the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. And all other biblical elements fit into this goal and work in concert with it including eschatology, covenants, soteriology, and eschatology. They must all agree.

Endnotes:

1. “In this book, then, I shall speak, as God permits, not of those first judgments, nor of these intervening judgments of God, but of the last judgment, when Christ is to come from heaven to judge the quick and the dead. For that day is properly called the Day of Judgment, because in it there shall be no room left for the ignorant questioning why this wicked person is happy and that righteous man unhappy. In that day true and full happiness shall be the lot of none but the good, while deserved and supreme misery shall be the portion of the wicked, and of them only....I shall now cite from the Gospel according to Matthew the passage which speaks of the separation of the good from the wicked by the most efficacious and final judgment of Christ” (Augustine: City of God).

“Augustine taught that the eternal fate of the soul is determined at death” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo).

