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CHRIST AND THE FUTURE

THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ABOUT THE LAST THINGS

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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THE FUTURE IS NOW

People have a keen interest in the future. That many ‘itching ears’ are ready to listen to any prophet (*2 Tim.* 4:3) is evidenced by the popularity of psychic hot lines, fortune-tellers and prognosticators of the future. Politicians make compelling ‘campaign promises’ for the future.

Interest in the future is especially pronounced in North America. Americans visiting Europe will notice how centuries of tradition continue to influence Europeans. North Americans are more oriented to the future, and interpreters of American culture generally agree that North Americans today are far more preoccupied with the future than previous generations.

Christians share this heightened interest in the future, but are confused as to what to believe. This may reflect cultural confusion, but it also reflects the myriad of pronouncements from differing voices within the Christian community. These pronouncements often arise from a dispensationalist perspective, and many authors are especially adept at seizing upon uncertainty about the future.

FOUR IMPORTANT BIBLICAL THEMES

Confusion and heightened interest in the future call for careful study and reflection on the Bible’s teachings. We need to examine the Scriptures to determine what we can know and believe regarding the future.

The only reliable antidote to speculation and fear is a disciplined study of what God promises in the Bible. As we begin examining the biblical promise of the future, we should bear four biblical themes in mind: the need to stay within the boundaries of God's word; Christ is the Lord of history; 'Paradise Regained' will surpass 'Paradise Lost'; and our hope is living and certain.

The most important rule believers must observe is to stay within the boundaries of God's word. Much current confusion results from failing to abide by this rule.

The future might be termed a mystery. We can consult a scrapbook or examine historical documents to determine the past, but the future is hidden from our view. We can conjecture, but we cannot predict.

Though we cannot predict the future, God can. In his word he reveals the things we need to know for our salvation, including precisely what we need to know about the shape of things to come.

The only antidote to speculation is listening carefully to God's promises regarding the future and disciplining ourselves not to go beyond them. This is the only safe course in a confused and disputed terrain. We must gratefully receive what God teaches in his word about the future, and humbly remain within the limits of this revelation.

One of the central themes God's word teaches us is that Christ is the Lord of history.

A common mistake believers make in considering the future is to become disoriented by focusing on themes, without seeing their biblical connections. We think of the millennium, the signs of the times, the return of Christ, and the resurrection of the dead, but our vision is unfocused. We see a confused complex of disconnected events looming upon the horizon.

Disorientation about the future occurs when we fail to see that all God's ways in history centre on Jesus Christ, who is 'the same yesterday, today and forever'. He is the one through whom we know the meaning and purpose of all history. In the Old Testament, the Lord's dealings with his people continually pointed to the future and particularly to one in whom his promises would be fulfilled. When Christ communed with the two disciples on the Emmaus road, he began 'with Moses and with all

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the prophets, [and] explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures' (*Luke 24:27*).

Just as Christ fulfils the Old Testament promises (*2 Cor. 1:20*), he also guarantees the future consummation of God's promises by his resurrection, session at the Father's right hand, and outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Christ has been given all authority in heaven and on earth and will reign until all things have been subjected to him, including the last enemy—death (*1 Cor. 15:25-26*).

Christ as the Author, Governor, and Goal of history is explicitly affirmed in several New Testament passages. In Ephesians 1:9-11 Paul describes the 'mystery of God's will' as 'the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth'. In Colossians 1:16-17, we read, 'For by him [Christ] all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' John's visions in Revelation describe Christ as 'the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth' (*Rev. 1:5*). Only the Lamb of God has authority to 'open the book and its seven seals', signifying his power to administer God's sovereign purposes in history (*Rev. 5*).

The biblical revelation regarding the future always fixes our attention on Christ. Just as God's ways with his people in times past have all met in Christ, so all of his ways in the future will meet in Christ. The great event on the horizon of the future, in biblical perspective, is Christ's return or 'Second Coming'. This event is the great future toward which all history is moving. It is the event that gives meaning to present history and which will consummate God's work of redemption. The entirety of the biblical teaching about the future is intimately linked to the coming of Christ at the end of the present age.

Another theme in the biblical revelation regarding the future is that of 'paradise lost, paradise regained'. To understand the biblical promises for the future, it is necessary to go back to the beginning, to God's original covenant fellowship with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In these circumstances we see something of that communion with God for which humankind was created, and which will be restored in the new creation.

It is striking how closely the vision of Revelation 22 resembles the original paradise. The new heaven and earth is described, not only as the new Jerusalem, but also as a renewed garden of life: 'And he showed me', says John, 'a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb . . . And on either side of the river was the tree of life . . . yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations' (22:1-2). The 'first things' of creation are prophetic of the 'last things' of the new creation. Paradise regained, however, will bring more than Eden. The progress of history and the greater glory in redemption through Christ ensure that the new heavens and the new earth will surpass the old. Not only will God be acknowledged throughout the whole of creation as the Most Holy One, but he will also suffer no further rebellion or covenant unfaithfulness. The covenant communion of God's people before the face of God will be unbroken and unbreakable. It will not be threatened by a 'fall from grace' or defection among the redeemed.

The Bible's promises for the future are not to be confused with the modern practice of 'fortune-telling' or predicting a precise timetable for the future. There is much that God does not give us to know in his word. But what he has given us kindles in the believer a living and certain hope, a confidence that the redeeming work of Christ will not fail to be fully accomplished. Through the resurrection of Christ, 'we have been born anew to a living hope' (*1 Pet.* 1:3) that will not die.

The believer's expectation for the future is marked by a hope nurtured by the word and a lively expectation of the accomplishment of God's purpose in Christ. The future does not loom darkly on the horizon. It is eagerly expected and anticipated, bright with the promise of the completion and perfection of God's saving work.

It is true that many biblical exhortations relating to the future call God's people to watchfulness and sobriety, warning them against being found unprepared at Christ's coming (*1 Pet.* 4:7; *1 Thess.* 5:6; *Matt.* 24:42-

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45). They often warn the church to remain faithful to the apostolic teachings and word of God (2 *Thess.* 2:15; *Heb.* 10:23). Biblical descriptions of Christ's coming starkly describe its frightening consequences for the wicked (2 *Thess.* 2:8; 2 *Pet.* 3:12; *Rev.* 18:10).

But the chief note sounded in God's revelation regarding the future is one of hope. God's people eagerly await Christ's return because it promises the completion of God's work of redemption for them and for the whole creation. The future is bright because it is full of promise, the promise of God's Word.

OLD TESTAMENT EXPECTATION FOR THE FUTURE

Staying within God's boundaries, honouring Christ as Lord of history, understanding that the lost paradise will be more fully regained, and being confident of our certain hope, we can now examine more carefully the Old and New Testament teachings concerning Christ's first coming.

All of God's redemptive dealings with his covenant people, prior to the birth of Jesus in the 'fullness of time', kindled an expectation and anticipation of Messiah's (Christ's) coming. Consequently, restlessness pervades the Old Testament. Each new chapter in covenant history heightened anticipation of that future consummation. There is a dynamic to the history of the covenant in the Old Testament that would not permit believers to look only to the past, in remembrance of what the Lord had already done, but demanded that they also look to the future, in the hope of even better things to come.

The Old Testament expectation of the coming Messiah is the seedbed for all the other dimensions of the Old Testament's teaching about the future.

The first word of the Lord, spoken to our first parents after the Fall, announces the future birth of a Redeemer who will crush the head of the serpent and vindicate God's gracious rule within his creation. In Genesis 3:15, we find this 'mother promise', the first gospel announcement: 'And I [the Lord God] will put enmity between you and the woman,