

ANSWERS TO COMMON  
QUESTIONS ABOUT

# The End Times

Timothy J. Demy  
Thomas Ice

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# About This Series

The Answers to Common Questions series is designed to provide readers a brief summary and overview of individual topics and issues in Christian theology. For quick reference and ease in studying, the works are written in a question and answer format. The questions follow a logical progression so that those reading straight through a work will receive a greater appreciation for the topic and the issues involved. The volumes are thorough, though not exhaustive, and can be used as a set or as single volume studies. Each volume is fully documented and contains a recommended reading list for those who want to pursue the subject in greater detail.

The study of theology and the many issues within Christianity is an exciting and rewarding endeavor. For two thousand years, Christians have proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ and sought to accurately define and defend the doctrines of their faith as recorded in the Bible. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Christians are exhorted: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” The goal of these books is to help you in your diligence and accuracy as you study God’s Word and its influence in history and thought through the centuries.



# Introduction

The study of prophecy and its puzzling pieces is an endeavor that is detailed and complex, but not beyond comprehension or resolution. It is open to error, misinterpretation, and confusion. However, such possibilities should not cause any Christian to shy away from either the study of prophecy or engagement in honest and irenic discussions about it. If you will spend the time studying Bible prophecy, the rewards will be great and the satisfaction will remain with you as you grow in your knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Word.

There are hundreds of questions that can be asked regarding the verses of prophecy found in the Bible and the events they predict. Like a jigsaw puzzle with hundreds of pieces, so too is Bible prophecy. Our intent in the following pages is to provide what is, essentially, the borders of the prophetic jigsaw puzzle, so that you will be able to continue your study of prophecy within a framework.

The theological perspective presented throughout the series is that of premillennialism and pretribulationism. We recognize that this is not the only position embraced by evangelical Christians, but we believe that it is the most widely held and prominent perspective. It is also our conviction that premillennialism, and

specifically pretribulationism, *best* explains the prophetic plan of God as revealed in the Bible. We have placed a list of recommended readings at the end of the book to help guide readers who want to pursue the subject further.

# What Is Bible Prophecy?

## 1. How much prophecy is in the Bible?

Prophecy permeates the pages of Scripture. “The number of prophecies in the Bible is so large,” declares Old Testament scholar Dr. Walter Kaiser, “and their distribution so evenly spread through both Testaments and all types of literary forms that the interpreter is alerted to the fact that he or she is dealing with a major component of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kaiser reports that the late Dr. J. Barton Payne calculated that 27 percent of the Bible deals with prophecy. Only Ruth and Song of Solomon in the Old Testament, and the short Epistles of Philemon and 3 John in the New Testament have no prophetic portions at all. According to Dr. Kaiser, “The highest percentages of predictive material are found in the small books of Zephaniah (89 percent), Obadiah (81 percent), and Nahum (74 percent). In the New Testament, the honors go to Revelation (63 percent), Hebrews (45 percent), and 2 Peter (41 percent).”<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, as many as one out of twelve verses deal with the second coming of Jesus Christ. In the Epistles, the second coming is found in one out of ten verses. Such preoccupation by God in His Word with the subject of prophecy is not something that should be neglected or dismissed. How a person views prophetic events, including the second coming, greatly affects his or her view of present-day Christian living and spirituality.

## 2. How does the Bible use terms like “end times”?

There are a number of different expressions that appear in the Bible to speak of the end times. Sometimes people read in the Bible about the “last days,” “end times,” etc., and tend to think that all of these phrases all of the time refer to the same thing. This is not the case. Just as in our own lives, there are many endings. There is the end of the workday, the end of the day according to the clock, the end of the week, the end of the month, and the end of the year. Just because the word “end” is used does not mean that it always refers to the same time. The word “end” is restricted and precisely defined when it is modified by the prepositional phrase “of the day,” “of the week,” “of the year,” etc. So it is in the Bible, that the term “end times” may refer to the end of the current church age or it may refer to the end of other times.

The Bible teaches that this present age will end with the rapture, followed by the tribulation which will end with the second coming of Messiah to the earth. Thus, we must distinguish between the “last days” of the present age, the church age, and the “last days” of Israel’s future tribulation. Note the following chart that classifies and distinguishes between passages referring to the end of the church age and the “last days” for Israel.

### Biblical Use of Last Days

Israel	Church
“latter days”—Deuteronomy 4:30; 31:29; Jeremiah 30:24; 48:47; Daniel 2:28; 10:14	“later times”—1 Timothy 4:1
“last days”—Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 23:20; 49:39; Ezekiel 38:16; Micah 4:1; Acts 2:17	“last days”—2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3
“last day”—John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48	“last times”—1 Peter 1:20; Jude 18
“latter years”—Ezekiel 38:8	“last time”—1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 2:18

The Bible clearly speaks of a last day or end time, but it does not always refer to the same period of time with that phrase. The contextual referent enables the reader to know whether the Bible is speaking of the last days relating to Israel or the end times in reference to the church.

### **3. How should Bible prophecy be interpreted?**

Words matter. They have meanings and they are used in a variety of ways in any and every language. Part of the process of what is known as hermeneutics, or the interpreting of literary texts, is understanding the framework within which any interpretation is made. Consistent literal interpretation is essential to properly understanding what God is saying in the Bible. Yet some people believe that consistent literal interpretation is either impossible or impractical. One critic believes it to be a “presumption” that “is unreasonable” and “an impossible ideal.”<sup>3</sup> In spite of false characterization, what do we mean by consistent literal interpretation?

The dictionary defines *literal* as “belonging to letters.” Further, it says literal interpretation involves an approach “based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning, . . . not going beyond the facts.”<sup>4</sup> Literal interpretation is something that is very easily understood and done: “Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language.”<sup>5</sup> How is this done? It can only be accomplished through an interpretation of the written text, that includes consideration of the grammatical (according to the rules of the grammar of the original languages), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), and contextual (in accord with its literary context) aspects of interpretation.

#### *Grammatical Interpretation*

The grammatical aspect of literal interpretation considers the impact that grammar has on a passage. This means that any person

studying the text should correctly analyze the grammatical relationships that words, phrases, and sentences have with one another. Biblical scholar Dr. Roy Zuck writes:

When we speak of interpreting the Bible grammatically, we are referring to the process of seeking to determine its meaning by ascertaining four things: (a) the meaning of words (lexicology), (b) the form of words (morphology), (c) the function of words (parts of speech), and (d) the relationships of words (syntax).<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Zuck gives further amplification of the four areas noted previously:

In the meaning of words (lexicology), we are concerned with (a) etymology—how words are derived and developed, (b) usage—how words are used by the same and other authors, (c) synonyms and antonyms—how similar and opposite words are used, and (d) context—how words are used in various contexts.

In discussing the form of words (morphology) we are looking at how words are structured and how that affects their meaning. For example the word *eat* means something different from *ate*, though the same letters are used. The word *part* changes meaning when the letter *s* is added to it to make the word *parts*. The function of words (parts of speech) considers what the various forms do. These include attention to subjects, verbs, objects, nouns, and others, as will be discussed later. The relationships of words (syntax) are the way words are related or put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences.<sup>7</sup>

The grammatical aspect of literal interpretation lets the reader know that any interpretation conflicting with grammar is invalid.

### *Historical Interpretation*

Proper interpretation of the Bible means that the historical context must be taken into account. This aspect means that one must consider the historical setting and circumstances in which the books of the Bible were written. Dr. Paul Tan explains:

The proper concept of the historical in Bible interpretation is to view the Scriptures as written during given ages and cultures. Applications may then be drawn which are relevant to our times. For instance, the subject of meat offered to idols can only be interpreted from the historical and cultural setting of New Testament times. Principles to be drawn are relevant to us today.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the cultural and historical background for a passage is crucial to accurate interpretation.

### *Contextual Interpretation*

Any passage that is taken out of context is a pretext and leads to error in interpretation. Yet, one of the most common mistakes made by those who are found to have misinterpreted a passage in the Bible is that of taking a verse out of its divinely ordered context. Even though a sentence may be taken from the Bible, it is not the Word of God if it is placed into a context that changes the meaning from that which God intended in its original context. Dr. Zuck writes:

The context in which a given Scripture passage is written influences how that passage is to be understood. Context includes several things:

- the verse(s) immediately before and after a passage
- the paragraph and book in which the verses occur
- the dispensation in which it was written
- the message of the entire Bible

- the historical-cultural environment of that time when it was written.<sup>9</sup>

A widely used example of a verse taken out of context is 2 Chronicles 7:14: “My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray . . . .” Frequently this verse is quoted as an explanation of social and moral decline in the United States. Because “My people” are addressed, it is said that the success of a nation is dependent upon the obedience of Christians to the Lord. Thus, God blesses or curses a nation in accordance with Christian obedience. Then 2 Chronicles 7:14 is cited as a formula for national restoration because the passage says to “humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

We believe that this is an illustration of a passage taken out of context because of the following contextual factors:

- “My people” are said in 2 Chronicles 6:24 to be “Israel” as is also indicated by the flow of the historical context.
- Solomon is preparing to dedicate the recently completed Temple and 7:14 is God’s renewal of the Mosaic covenant under which Israel and only Israel operates.

Since this passage involves Israel and not the church, it is improper to speculatively relate it to present-day Christianity in the United States or elsewhere. Proper contextual interpretation allows for the general observation that God delights in a humble and obedient people, but obedience and prayer should be offered according to His plan for the church.

### *Figures of Speech*

Literal interpretation recognizes that a word or phrase can be used either plainly (denotative) or figuratively (connota-

tive). As in our own conversations today, the Bible may use plain speech, such as “He died yesterday” (denotative use of language). Or the same thing may be said in a more colorful way, “He kicked the bucket yesterday” (connotative use of language). An important point to be noted is that even though we may use a figure of speech to refer to someone’s death, we are using that figure to refer to an event that literally happened. Some interpreters mistakenly think that because a figure of speech may be used to describe an event (i.e., Jonah’s experience in the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2), the event was not literal. However, such is not the case. A “golden rule of interpretation” has been developed to help us discern whether or not usage of a figure of speech was intended by an author: When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

For example, literalists understand that a figure of speech is employed by Isaiah teaching that the Adamic curse upon nature (Gen. 3:8–24) will be reversed in the millennium when he says, “And all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12). This figure is discerned by specific factors in the context in which it was written, all dealing with the removal of the curse upon nature at this future time. Even though figurative language is employed, it will literally happen in the course of human history.

### *Literal versus Literal*

Dr. Elliott Johnson, a longtime professor of Bible and hermeneutics, has noted that much of the confusion over literal interpretation can be removed when one properly understands the two primary ways the term literal interpretation has been used

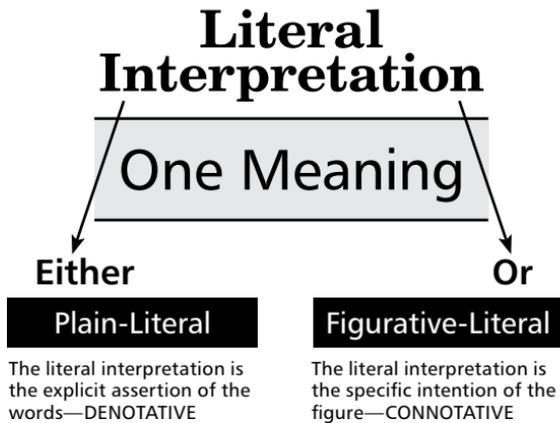
throughout church history: “(1) the clear, plain sense of a word or phrase as over against a figurative use, and (2) a system that views the text as providing the basis of the true interpretation.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, literalists, by and large have used the term *literal* to refer to their system of interpretation (the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system; Johnson’s second), and once inside that system, *literal* refers to whether or not a specific word or phrase is used in its context in a figurative or literal sense (Johnson’s first definition).

Johnson’s second use of literal (i.e., systematic literalism) is simply the grammatical-historical system consistently used. The grammatical-historical system was revived by the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century. It was set against the spiritual (spiritualized) or “deeper” meaning of the text that was a common approach during the Middle Ages. The literal meaning was used simply as a springboard to a deeper (“spiritual”) meaning, which was viewed as more desirable. A classic spiritualized interpretation would for example, see the four rivers of Genesis 2—the Pishon, Havilah, Tigris and Euphrates—as representing the human body, soul, spirit and mind. Coming from such a system, the Reformers saw the need to get back to the literal or textual meaning of the Bible.

The system of literal interpretation is the grammatical-historical or textual approach to interpretation. Use of literalism in this sense could be called “macroliteralism.” Within macroliteralism, the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system yields the interpretative conclusion, for example, that *Israel* always and only refers to national Israel. The church will not be substituted for Israel if the grammatical-historical system of interpretation is consistently used because there are no indicators in the text of Scripture that such is the case. Therefore, one must bring an idea from outside the text by saying that the passage really means something that it does not actually say. This kind of replacement approach is a mild form of spiritualized, or allegorical, interpretation. So it is true to speak

of those who replace *Israel* with *the church* as not taking the Bible literally and spiritualizing the text, since such a belief is contrary to a macroliteral interpretation.

Consistent literal interpreters, within the framework of the grammatical-historical system, do discuss whether or not a word, phrase, or the literary genre of a biblical book is a figure of speech (connotative) or is to be taken literally/plainly (denotative). There is discussion among literalists as to whether or not a given word or phrase is being used as a figure of speech, based on the context of a given passage. Some passages are quite naturally clearer than others and a consensus among interpreters develops, whereas other passages may find literal interpreters divided as to whether or not they should be taken as a figure of speech. However, this is more a problem of application than of method.



*Courtesy of Earl Radmacher. Used by permission.*

God's Word is to be understood through literal interpretation. This is very significant in the interpretation of prophetic passages and the study of eschatology (the doctrine of the last things). It is also an important foundation stone supporting the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture, a view of the future to which we as authors adhere (and which is discussed in further detail in the coming

pages). When the Bible is consistently interpreted literally, from Genesis to Revelation, the pretribulational position is hard to avoid.

#### 4. What is premillennialism?

Premillennialism is one of the three major views of Bible prophecy (the others are amillennialism and postmillennialism). Premillennialism teaches that the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth (known also as the second advent), will occur before the establishment of the thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem described in Revelation 20:1–7. This reign is known as the millennium.

The English theological term *premillennialism* comes from the Latin elements *pre* (before), *mille* (thousand), and *annus* (year). Premillennialism means that Jesus Christ will return to the earth “before the thousand years.”

There are hundreds of millennium references in the Old Testament that speak of the time of Israel’s end-time restoration to the land in blessing. However, it is not until John receives his revelation on the island of Patmos at the end of the New Testament era that the length of the Messiah’s earthly reign is specified.

In the early church, premillennialism was called *chiliasm* (from the Greek term *chilioi* meaning “one thousand” used six times in Revelation 20:2–7). Theologian Dr. Charles Ryrie cites essential features of premillennial view of Christ’s reign as follows: “Its duration will be 1,000 years; its location will be on this earth; its government will be theocratic with the personal presence of Christ reigning as King; and it will fulfill all the yet-unfulfilled promises about the earthly kingdom.”<sup>12</sup>

Dispensational premillennialism (the majority premillennial view) holds that there will be a future, literal thousand year reign of Jesus Christ upon the earth following the events of the rapture, tribulation, and second coming.

Dispensational premillennialists hold that Israel and the church

are two separate and distinct entities throughout all of history, including the millennium. Covenant premillennialists hold that in the Old and New Testament eras, Israel and the church were the same, but in the millennium they will be separate.

There are several forms of premillennialism that differ as to how the rapture relates to the tribulation but all teach that the millennium is one thousand literal years and follows Christ's second advent.

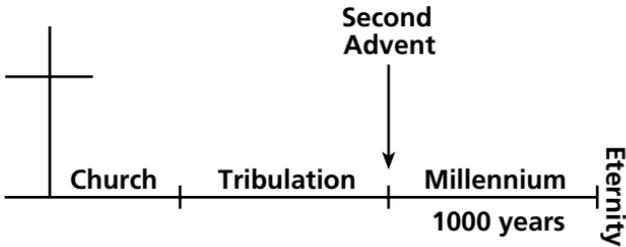
Premillennialism, or chiliasm as it was known in the early church, was the earliest of the three millennial systems to arise. Church historian Philip Schaff explains:

The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene Age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Premillennialism fell out of favor during the Middle Ages, but was revived by the Puritans in the seventeenth century. It is the viewpoint of a majority of those who are conservative in their approach to biblical interpretation.

Premillennialism is contrasted with the postmillennial teaching that Christ will return after reigning spiritually through the church from His throne in heaven for a long period of time during the current age. Premillennialism is also contrasted with the amillennial view that also advocates a present, but pessimistic, spiritual reign of Christ. Biblical premillennialism is a necessary foundation for pretribulationism since it is impossible for either postmillennialism or amillennialism to support pretribulationism.

## Premillennialism



Premillennialism is simply the result of interpreting the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation, in the most natural and normative way—literally. Many of the critics of premillennialism admit that if the literal approach is applied consistently to the whole of Scripture, then premillennialism is the natural result. If the Old Testament promises are ever going to be fulfilled literally for Israel as a nation, then they are yet in the future. This is also supportive of premillennialism. Premillennialism also provides a satisfactory and victorious end to history in time as humanity through Christ satisfactorily fulfills the creation mandate to rule over the world.

### 5. What is amillennialism?

Amillennialism is the view or system of eschatology (doctrine of the last things) that holds that there is no literal earthly millennium (thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ on the earth). Amillennialists believe that the millennium is spiritual. While all versions of amillennialism unite around their belief in no earthly millennium, they sometimes differ as to the exact nature and time of the millennium. While all believe that the millennium is spiritual and thus not earthly, some believe that the spiritual kingdom is present during the current era of the church. Some amillennialists believe that the present spiritual reign of God's kingdom consists of the influence that the church exerts through its many worldwide ministries.

Another form teaches that the millennium is composed of the reign of all dead Christians in heaven. Yet another kind believes that the millennium is equal to the eternal state that will commence at the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth (known also as the second advent). In this view, the new heavens and new earth equals the millennium.

Amillennialism teaches that from the ascension of Christ in the first century until His second coming (no rapture) both good and evil will increase in the world as God's kingdom parallels Satan's kingdom. When Jesus Christ returns the end of the world will occur with a general resurrection and general judgment of all people. It is essentially a spiritualization of the kingdom prophecies.

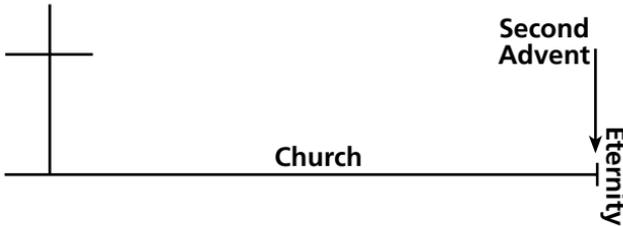
Amillennialism was not present in the earliest era of the church. (At least there is no positive record of its existence.) It appears to have developed as a result first of opposition to premillennial literalism, and then evolved into a formal system. Amillennialism came to dominate the church when the great church father and theologian Augustine (354–430) abandoned premillennialism for amillennialism. It would probably be safe to say that amillennialism has been the most widely held view for much of the church's history, including most of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Dr. Ryrie writes of amillennialism:

One of the popular reasons for preferring amillennialism over premillennialism contrasts the premillennial concept of fulfillment in an earthly kingdom (usually the adjective *carnal* is placed with this phrase) with the amillennial concept of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the church in this age (and usually the adjective *spiritual* is put with this phrase). Thus the system which emphasizes the spiritual church rather than the carnal kingdom is to be preferred. When I hear or read this argument, I want to ask, Since when is the church only spiritual and the kingdom only carnal? The church (look around) has carnal

people in it, and the kingdom will have many spiritual facets to it. Spiritual and carnal characterize both the church and the future kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Always, of course, the conclusive evidence for the truth of a doctrine is not its historical legacy, but rather, its exegetical accuracy.

### Amillennialism



## 6. What is postmillennialism?

Postmillennialism is the view or system of eschatology (doctrine of the last things) teaching that the current age is the millennium, which is not necessarily a thousand years. Postmillennialists believe that the kingdom of Jesus Christ will gradually be extended through the preaching of the gospel; the eventual conversion of a majority of people (not necessarily all people); and the progressive growth of righteousness, prosperity, and development in every sphere of life as this growing majority of Christians struggle to subdue the world for Christ. Only after Christianity has dominated the world for a long time will Jesus Christ then return. After the church's glorious reign of victory (like amillennialism), there will be a general resurrection, destruction of the present creation, and entry into the eternal state. Postmillennialism differs from premillennialism and amillennialism in that postmillennialists are optimistic that this victory will be realized without the need for a cataclysmic return of Christ to impose righteousness. Instead, they believe that it will result from the faithful application of the present process.

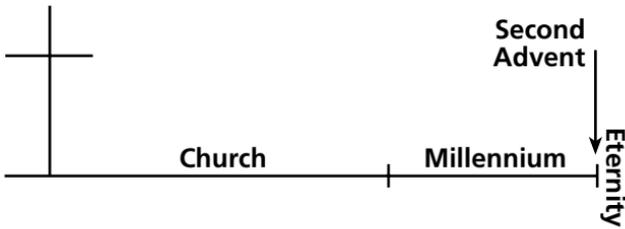
Postmillennialism did not develop into a distinct system of eschatology until after the Reformation. Prior to that time, various elements developed that later were included in the theological mix of modern postmillennialism. Postmillennialism was the last major millennial position to develop.

Dr. John Walvoord, probably the greatest scholar and teacher of prophecy in the twentieth century, noted that there are two principle types of postmillennialism:

Stemming from [Daniel] Whitby [1638–1726], these groups provided two types of postmillennialism which have persisted to the twentieth century: (1) a Biblical type . . . finding its material in the Scriptures and its power in God; (2) the evolutionary or liberal theological type which bases its proof on confidence in man to achieve progress through natural means. These two widely separated systems of belief have one thing in common, the idea of ultimate progress and solution of present difficulties.<sup>15</sup>

Postmillennialism was the dominant view of the millennium in the United States during much of the nineteenth century, but virtually became extinct up until the 1960s. The last several decades have witnessed an upsurge in postmillennialism in some conservative arenas through the Christian Reconstruction movement. (Various lists have been made of the key beliefs of the Reconstructionists, but those beliefs most central to Reconstructionism are: [1] A belief in the sovereignty of God; [2] Postmillennialism; [3] The application of the judicial laws of Moses in modern society; [4] Presuppositional apologetics; [5] The “covenant” concept as the key to understanding the Bible and history and the basis of Christian living. Christian Reconstructionists propose to institute a theocratic—that is, God-ruled—government in America, and they are gaining support in some elements of the evangelical community.)<sup>16</sup>

## Postmillennialism



## 7. What is preterism?

*Preterism* is a term that is used to explain how some interpret Revelation chapters 4–19 in relation to the present. Preterism comes from a Latin word meaning “past” or “gone by.” In its fullest expression, preterism teaches that Jesus Christ has already returned to the earth and that we are now living in the kingdom age.<sup>17</sup> Although preterists often focus on the Olivet Discourse, especially Matthew 24, the system was originally developed as an interpretive approach to Revelation.

The preterist approach to Revelation holds that the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation around A.D. 65, since it was a prophecy about the impending destruction of Jerusalem that occurred in A.D. 70 through the Roman conquest. Preterists believe that the Roman emperor Nero (A.D. 37–68) was the Beast of Revelation or the Antichrist and that the tribulation period began three and a half years before August of A.D. 70, when Rome conquered Jerusalem. Thus, preterists believe Christ’s return in Revelation 19 occurred non-bodily through the attacking Roman army.

There are three types of preterism. The first kind that appeared in the seventeenth century is called “mild” preterism. This view holds that the book of Revelation is about God defeating His two ancient enemies: first, the Jews in chapters 6–11, and secondly, the Romans in chapters 12–19. Thus, early preterism was less dependent on the

A.D. 70 event. We are not aware of anyone living today who holds this “mild” version of preterism.

The second type of preterism is often known as “partial” preterism. This view was developed originally by German liberals between 1785 and 1835 as a naturalistic way to interpret Revelation. Partial preterists see Revelation 6–19 as referring only to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. This is the version that is most popular today and has advocates such as R. C. Sproul, Kenneth Gentry, Gary DeMar, Hank Hanegraaff, and David Chilton.

The third type of preterism is known as “full” or “consistent” preterism. This view appears to have arisen sometime in the mid-1800s in the English-speaking world. Full preterism teaches that the entire book of Revelation was fulfilled through the A.D. 70 events. Full preterists believe that all biblical prophecy has been fulfilled and the second coming happened in the first century. This is clearly a heretical view since it denies a future second coming and accompanying resurrection. Most full preterists believe that we are now in the new heavens and new earth (i.e., “transmillennialism”) and that the earth and the universe will continue as it is today for all eternity. Advocates of this view today include Max King and John Bray.

Arguments for preterism are usually grounded in preterists’ interpretation of the teachings of Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) and in their interpretation of the date of the writing of the book of Revelation. Let’s look briefly at them.

### *Preterism and the Olivet Discourse*

All preterists use Matthew 24:34 as a proof-text for their position.<sup>18</sup> In the passage Jesus declares: “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Preterists contend that Matthew 24:34 is saying that “this generation” must refer to Christ’s contemporaries and therefore, the prophesied events by Christ of verses 4–31 had to occur within 40 years of Christ’s departure from the earth. They argue that the events of

verses 4–31 describe the Roman conquest of Jerusalem that was completed in August of A.D. 70, making Matthew 24:34 a past rather than a future prophecy.

However, based upon the grammar of the passage, “this generation” is modified by the phrase “all these things.” In context, “all these things” refers to the events prophesied by Jesus in verses 4–31. Therefore, the key to understanding when “all these things” will take place is to discern whether they have already been fulfilled in the past or will they occur in the future. Since “all these things” will be fulfilled in the future, then “this generation” refers to the generation that will be alive to see the events of the seven-year tribulation period that are described in verses 4–31. Events like the arrival of false christs, the global preaching of the gospel, the abomination of desolation, global judgments, the second advent of Jesus, and the gathering of Jewish believers in order to bring them to Israel did not happen in the past, but await future fulfillment. The generation that sees all the prophesied events of the tribulation is the generation of which Christ refers in Matthew 24:34.

### *Preterism and the Date of the Book of Revelation*

Preterists teach that the book of Revelation was written around A.D. 65 because the book was a prophecy about things that would happen between March A.D. 67 and August A.D. 70.<sup>19</sup> Since Revelation is a prophecy about the future, a preterist must hold to a date prior to the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecies. Thus, they argue that Revelation was written during the reign of Nero in A.D. 65. This means that if Revelation was written under the reign of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 51–96), around A.D. 95, it renders the preterist viewpoint an impossibility.

The evidence for the A.D. 95 date of Revelation is overwhelming and has been the traditional view of the church since the second century. Irenaeus (second century to ca. 202)—a disciple of Polycarp (ca. A.D. 69–ca. 155) who was discipled by the Apostle John, author of Revelation—wrote in *Against Heresies* (about

A.D. 180) the following: “But if it had been necessary to announce his name plainly at the present time, it would have been spoken by him who saw the apocalypse. For it was not seen long ago, but almost in our own time, at the end of the reign of Domitian.”<sup>20</sup> This is an explicit statement about when Revelation was written, which would be about A.D. 95. All the early church fathers held this view, as have almost all scholars down through church history, except, primarily those who hold the preterist view.

Polycarp was the bishop of the church of Smyrna, one of the seven churches to which Revelation is addressed in Revelation 2–3. He was alive when Revelation was written. Polycarp writes that the church of Smyrna did not even exist during the ministry of Paul.<sup>21</sup> Paul’s ministry came to an end around A.D. 64. Thus, one of the seven churches of Revelation was not even in existence in A.D. 65.

Another of the churches of Revelation, the church of Laodicea, was devastated by an earthquake in either A.D. 60 or 61. It took about thirty years for the city to be rebuilt. Revelation 3:17 says, “Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’” would make no sense in A.D. 65, but does fit the condition of the city and the church in A.D. 95.

Nero’s persecution was local, only in Rome. On the other hand, Domitian proclaimed the first Empire-wide persecution. Nero killed Christians such as Peter and Paul, however, Domitian was known to have exiled Christians, like a female relative named Domitilla exiled to an island named Pontia in A.D. 95 or 98 for being a Christian.<sup>22</sup> If Revelation were written in A.D. 65, why would Nero have killed Peter and Paul, yet exiled John to a remote island?

It is very unwise to construct one’s entire views of prophecy on the foundation of the early date of Revelation, which at the very best is strongly disputed. Why would anyone adopt a view that is totally dependent on such a shaky foundation—especially when the A.D. 95 date is the view of the vast majority of scholars past and present?<sup>23</sup>

### *Preterism and the Text of Revelation*

Preterists teach that the terms “soon” (Rev. 1:1) and “near” (Rev. 1:3) mean that the prophecies of the book had to occur within about a forty-year period. Preterists wrongly classify “soon” as an adverb of time. However, Greek grammar experts specifically cite “soon” as an adverb of manner, meaning that the focus of the word is on *how* something takes place, not *when*. Thus, it means when something begins to take place, it will happen suddenly or quickly. The word *near* means “close at hand.” Within the context of Revelation “near” has the meaning of an overhanging imminence that the end times are near; they are the next series of prophetic events that will unfold. Imminency describes an event possible any day, impossible no day, thus conveying the urgency of the message of Revelation.

The clear language of Revelation speaks of global and supernatural events, while preterists want to allegorize these texts into local and naturalistically explained events. Preterists teach that Revelation is about God divorcing His former wife Israel and taking the church as His new bride. In reality, Revelation is about God preserving the Jewish remnant (Rev. 12) and rescuing them from danger at the second coming (Rev. 19). It is about salvation, not judgment, for Israel! Revelation depicts how history will move from the problems of the garden in Genesis to the New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation. If preterism were true, there is no climax for history. The true meaning is that the prophecies of Revelation are yet to be fulfilled in the future.

### *Some Implications of Preterism*

All doctrine has practical implications.<sup>24</sup> What are the practical implications of those who hold to the view that most—and in some cases all—Bible prophecy has already been fulfilled? First, false doctrine is taught. Something is advocated that the Bible does not teach. Preterism teaches that Christ returned in A.D. 70. Second, the true meaning of a misinterpreted text is not understood. Preterism either teaches no future second coming, or it shrinks to

near extinction the truth of “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). Even if there were not practical implications, the doctrinal error is great. Preterism greatly distorts the culmination of God’s plan for history.

If preterism is true—especially full preterism—then we are already at the end of history and don’t really know specifically where history is headed. In fact, even partial preterist Kenneth Gentry says of Revelation 21–22:

The new creation begins in the first century. . . . My understanding of this antithesis is that the new Jerusalem is replacing the old Jerusalem. The coming of the new Jerusalem down from heaven (chaps. 21–22) logically should follow soon upon the destruction of the old Jerusalem on the earth (Rev. 6–11; 14–19), rather than waiting thousands of years.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Gentry believes that we are in some way in the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21–22. If this is true, then we all must be living in the ghetto side of the New Jerusalem. Such a false teaching reminds one of the Hindu belief that says that current reality is “Maya”—a mere illusion—especially the current existence of evil.<sup>26</sup>

The logic of the preterist position leads one to delusional views of present reality. “The overwhelming majority of the eschatological events prophesied in the book of Revelation have already been fulfilled,” declares preterist Gary North.<sup>27</sup> Since subjects relating to prophecy dominate virtually every page of the New Testament this would logically mean, for the preterist, that most of the New Testament does not refer directly to the church and Christians today. Since so much of the New Testament is written to tell Christians how to live between the two comings of Christ, it makes an enormous difference if one interprets Christ’s coming as a past or future event. If preterism is true, then the New Testament refers to Christians who lived during the forty-year period between the death of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Therefore, virtually no

part of the New Testament applies to Christians today according to preterist logic. There is no canon that applies directly to Christians during the church age.

Not only does Gentry believe that the great tribulation is a past event, he believes that current history is identified as the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21–22 and 2 Peter 3:10–13.<sup>28</sup> This is a common preterist viewpoint. Talk about lowering expectations! Gentry provides four major reasons why “the new creation begins in the first century.”<sup>29</sup> It stretches credulity to think of the implications of the details of such a conclusion. If we are currently living in any way in the new heavens and new earth then this means the following:

- The one thousand years and the new heavens and earth must be equated (cf. 20:1–9 with 21–22)
- Satan has been removed from any more influence in history (20:10)
- There is no longer any sea (21:1)
- There is no longer any death, crying, or pain (21:4)
- All things have been made new (21:5)
- There is no longer any need for the sun or the moon (21:23)
- There is no longer any night (21:25)
- There is no longer any unclean, nor those practicing abomination and lying (21:27)
- There is no longer any curse (22:3)
- Believers are now able to see the Father’s face (22:4)
- There is no longer any sun (22:5)

If Revelation 21–22 is a description of the state in which we are now living then it also renders most of the New Testament obsolete and impractical since it relates to believers and how they should live between Christ’s two comings. The logic of the preterist position would lead to this conclusion, even though many preterists do not think this way in practice. They don’t, but they should!

Jesus said in the great commission of Matthew 28:20, “and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Thus, it follows from preterist logic, that the age, which Christ spoke of in His great commission, culminated in A.D. 70. The practical implication would be that since “the end of the age” concluded in A.D. 70, Christ is no longer with us as we carry out His commission.

### *Preterism and the Sufferings of This Present Time*

The new heavens and new earth are to be a time of peace and rest for God’s people. The era preceding this time of peace will be one of suffering and struggle. But if the preterist interpretation is correct, then the instruction of the New Testament Epistles on the issue of suffering only directly applied to Christians until A.D. 70, because we would now be in the time of peace, not “the sufferings of this present time” spoken of by Paul (Rom. 8:18).

Endurance of unjust suffering is a major theme in the Epistles. In fact, the New Testament portrays it as one of the major ingredients that God brings into our lives to produce Christlike character (Heb. 12:1–17). Peter notes, “For this [unjust suffering] finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. . . . But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God” (1 Peter 2:19–20).

Revelation promises a future reward of corulership with Christ to believers who have remained faithful and loyal to Christ during this present age of humiliation (Rev. 3:21; see also 2:25–28). Revelation 3:21 not only promises future rule with Christ after this current age of humiliation, but it also makes a distinction between Christ’s future kingdom and God the Father’s current rule. “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” These passages do not make sense and certainly do not apply to today if we are in the new heavens and new earth of the preterists.

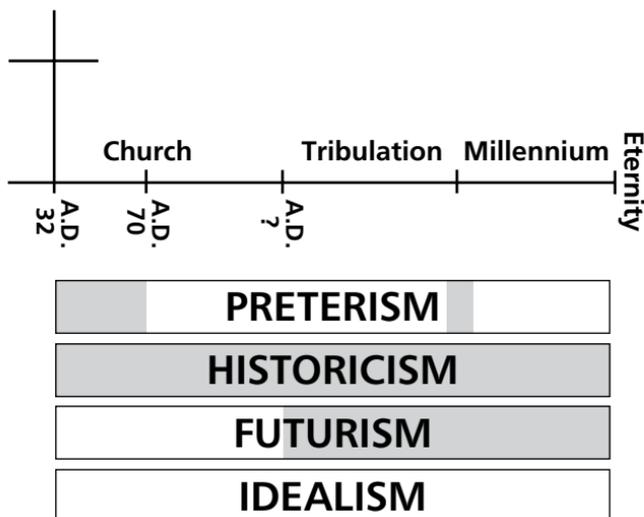
When Bible prophecy is taken literally it leads to a proper understanding of God's plan for history and the individual believer. Such an understanding provides a great hope, indeed a "blessed hope" that Christ's prophetic program for the church and Israel will yet provide some of the greatest moments of history. A futurist eschatology provides a fitting climax for history that began in a garden and concludes in a city—the New Jerusalem. Christ's church will be raptured before the tribulation so that our Lord can complete His plan for His ancient people Israel. The tribulation is a time in which God will rescue, not judge, the Jews so that "all Israel will be saved." The tribulation and much of Bible prophecy is not past; rather, it is future. If it is in the past, as preterism teaches, then we have no future.

## **8. Is the fulfillment of Bible prophecy best understood as being past, present, or future?**

We believe the answer to this question is "future." Part of the foundation for a systematic understanding of the pretribulation rapture (in addition to literal interpretation, premillennialism, and distinguishing Israel from the church) is futurism. An important, but seemingly little-recognized aspect of proper interpretation of Bible prophecy is the role of timing. When will a prophecy be fulfilled in history? There are four possibilities. The four views are simple in the sense that they reflect the only four possibilities in relation to time—past, present, future, and timeless.

The *preterist* view (past) believes that most, if not all, prophecy has already been fulfilled, usually in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The *historicist* view (present) sees much of the current church age as equal to the tribulation period. Thus, prophecy has been and will be fulfilled during the current church age. The *futurist* view (future) believes that virtually all prophetic events will not occur in the current church age, but will take place in the future tribulation, second coming, or millennium. The *idealist* view (timeless) does not believe either that the Bible indicates the

timing of events or that we can determine their timing in advance. Idealists think that prophetic passages mainly teach great ideas or truths about God to be applied regardless of timing. In the chart below, the shading shows when each of these views understands that the fulfillment of prophecy occurs.



### *The Significance of Futurism*

Of the four views noted above, the only one that logically and historically has supported the pretribulation position is futurism. Why? Because, the timing of the rapture relates to when the tribulation will occur in history. Preterism declares that the tribulation has already taken place. Historicism says that the tribulation started in the fourth century with events surrounding Constantine's Christianization of the Roman Empire and continues until the second coming. Idealism denies that there is a timing of events. Thus, only futurism, which sees the tribulation as a yet future event could even allow for a rapture before the beginning of that seven-year period. This does not mean, however, that all futurists are pretribulationists; they are not. *But to be a pretribulationist, one must be a futurist.*

### *Support for Futurism*

A defense of futurism can be developed from the Bible by comparing and contrasting futurism with the other three views. For example, *futurism instead of preterism* can be shown by demonstrating from specific texts of Scripture that “coming” in the debated passages refer to a bodily return of Christ to the earth, not a mystical coming mediated through the Roman army. (Preterists normally use the texts in Matthew 24 and just declare that they can allow for a non-physical coming through the Roman army.)<sup>30</sup>

One area that supports *futurism instead of historicism* is demonstrated by the fact that numbers in the biblical text relating to days and years are to be taken literally. There is no biblical basis for days really meaning years. A major argument for *futurism instead of idealism* is the fact that numbers do count. In other words, why would God give hundreds of chronological and temporal statements in the Bible if He did not intend to indicate the time of events?

Let’s look at some general support for the futurist approach. First and foremost, only the futurist can interpret the whole Bible literally and having done so harmonize those conclusions into a consistent theological system. Just as the people, places, and times were meant to be understood literally in Genesis 1–11, so are the texts that relate to the end times to be taken literally. Days mean days; years mean years; months mean months. Thus, the only way that the book of Revelation and other prophetic portions of the Bible make any sense is if they are taken literally, which means that they have not yet happened. Thus, they are future.

One third of the verses in the Bible are prophetic passages and the majority of those verses pertain to yet future prophetic events. Since a consistently literal approach to the whole Bible, including prophecy, is the proper way of understanding God’s revelation to humanity, then the futurist approach is the correct way of looking at the timing of biblical prophecy. And, as stated before, only the futurist understanding of biblical prophecy can support the pre-tribulational rapture.