

The Coming Kingdom

Dr. Steve Schell | Week 7 Essential Doctrines

Excerpt from *The Promise of the Father, "God's Prophetic Plan"*

This isn't it. We haven't arrived. In fact, we've only just begun. The future God has planned for us will be filled with more and more of the Holy Spirit until His presence reaches a level of intensity that if we were to experience it today, before receiving our resurrection bodies, it would consume us. What God has given us in this season of history is wonderful, but compared to what we will have in the ages to come, it is described by Paul as only a "firstfruits" of a much larger harvest (Ro 8:23) and by the author of Hebrews as a "foretaste of the powers of the age to come" (Heb 6:5). We are grateful for what God has given us now, and we want to learn to walk in the Spirit now as deeply as we can. But we are still waiting for more.

When we study our Bible, the whole Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, we soon discover that it reveals a very specific plan concerning the future of the world and our future. In surprising detail God explains how He will bring this present age to an end, and what will take place after that. It seems the only information He chooses to withhold are specific names and dates. Through His prophets, apostles and especially our Lord Jesus, He opens to us the deep counsels of His heart concerning the future, and I believe He does this for a very important reason: not to satisfy our curiosity, but to steady us. He wants us to recognize where we are in His great plan and to be confident of where we're headed. He wants us to see our lives from His perspective because His perspective is what will help us endure through hardship. When things seem to be going in the wrong direction, when it seems that God isn't being glorified, when darkness seems to be conquering light, He lifts us up and shows us the situation as He sees it: merely a passing moment on His prophetic timetable. And that perspective fills us with hope, and it's hope that fills us with joy, and it's the joy of the Lord that restores our strength.

In this final chapter we will look at the main elements of the prophetic plan God has laid out in the Bible. We'll begin with the rejection of Jesus and move forward through time until we arrive at the new heaven and the new earth. And remember, we're not doing this to satisfy our curiosity, but to steady us. You and I need this perspective as much as the early church did, maybe more. We too need to remember that God is completely in control of the course of human history. No, He's not responsible for the evil choices people make, but in spite of those choices, He is able to guide all things toward His great goal which is to draw from the human race a family of sons and daughters who will become exactly like Jesus in character and glory. And He won't allow the flow of history to end until every last soul who will come has come.

The order of future events

In order to understand the meaning of a particular prophecy about the future that we might encounter as we read through the Bible, we need to know where it fits in God's prophetic plan. There is a proper order to those events, and unless we recognize where that passage belongs in God's timetable, what we're reading will be confusing. One passage talks about future blessings while another talks about judgment. One passage warns of a coming war while another pictures peace. One passage describes

the sufferings of a dying Messiah while another proclaims that a glorious Messiah is coming to rule in power. And without understanding the master plan behind it all, we won't know how these very different events fit together. I realize that there are many opinions about what the proper order of these events should be, but the following sequence is the order that I believe the Bible presents. And I'll start with an overlooked statement by Jesus concerning His rejection:

The rejection of Jesus: Matthew and Luke record a statement Jesus made shortly before His betrayal and arrest. Speaking to a crowd in Jerusalem He said:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"
(Mt 23:37-39; also Lk 13:34-35).

Israel's religious leaders, and those who followed them, rejected Jesus' message that the Messiah must suffer and die. Apparently they would have welcomed Him if He had used His power to overthrow the occupying Roman army, but He refused to do that. Instead He insisted that He must die as a sacrifice for their sins, so even as He spoke the words quoted above, they had already formed a plan to kill Him.

Though this statement is often overlooked as a part of God's prophetic timetable, I think it reveals that had Israel's leaders responded differently, the promised restoration described in many Old Testament passages would have begun, and God would have evangelized the Gentile world differently than the way we read about in the book of Acts. Certain things, such as the cross, had to happen, but apparently events would have unfolded differently if the nation's leaders had "...recognized the time of (their) visitation" (Lk 19:44). And the result of that rejection was that the spiritual restoration of Israel was postponed (Isa 52:7-10).

The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension: Jesus fulfilled His role as the sacrifice for our sins; God vindicated Him by raising Him from the dead and then physically lifted Him up into heaven and placed all things under His authority. From there Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His followers.

The first Pentecost: Peter introduced the arrival of the baptism with the Holy Spirit as the beginning of the promised restoration of Israel (Ac 2:16-21) which the prophet Joel, among others, had said would take place before a time of great tribulation for the nation (Joel 2:28-3:2). Yet many in Israel rejected their Messiah when He came and refused to believe the gospel when it was proclaimed to them. So the "favorable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:17-21; Isa 61:1-2) that belonged to Israel, first of all, became instead a prolonged harvest of Gentiles. And that harvest has continued for nearly two thousand years.

The restoration of Israel: But God never stops pursuing His plan of salvation; He simply reaches His goal another way. And from Moses onward (Dt 30:1-9), the prophets declared that there would be a season of regathering Jews into their homeland, of restoring the strength and prosperity of the nation of Israel, of corporate repentance toward God and of a great outpouring of God's Spirit upon all of God's people, both men and women, young and old (Isa 54, 55, 60-66; Jer 31; Eze 36, 37; Joel 2, 3; Ro 11). And though, as we've just seen above, this outpouring on Israel was interrupted the first time,

it will not be interrupted again. Along with the physical restoration of Israel, there will be another, even greater spiritual restoration (an even greater Pentecost). And in this restoration Jesus will no longer be seen by Israel as a false teacher, but as the promised Savior that He is. Works righteousness will give way to the righteousness that comes by faith in Him. People will place their trust in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. And this widespread spiritual renewal, along with jealousy because of the nation's growing prosperity, will provoke a coalition of Gentile nations to attack Israel, and that assault will culminate in a war that is prophesied over and over again in the Scriptures (Isa 29:1-8; 34:1ff; Eze 38:17-23; Zec 12:2-9; 14:2-9). The antichrist's army will invade Israel, surround Jerusalem and capture it (Zec 14:2), but then God will begin to fight to defend His people.

The return of the Messiah: When it looks like all is lost, a series of remarkable events will occur. To begin with, a resurrection will take place during which all the righteous dead will be clothed with their immortal bodies. Those believers who are alive and living on the planet at the time will also be clothed with their resurrection bodies and then be caught up into the air to join the great host of angels and resurrected humans who are accompanying Jesus as He returns to the earth. His arrival will initiate the destruction of the forces that had invaded Israel (Da 12:1; Zec 12:8; 14:4; Mt 24:29-31; 1Th 4:15-17; Rev 19:11-12). Joel 3:2 calls this event "the valley of Jehoshaphat" ("Yahweh judges"); the apostle John calls it "Armageddon" (Rev 16:16) and "the great winepress of the wrath of God" (Rev 14:19-20).

The Messianic kingdom: After these enemy forces are destroyed, Jesus will set up His throne in Jerusalem and rule over the entire earth for one thousand years (Rev 20:6-7). Those who were resurrected will rule with Him extending His authority and ministry as His representatives. The planet will still be populated with mortal humans who will continue to bear children and die (Isa 65:20, 22), and who will still have the opportunity to receive Jesus as their Savior. Jesus Himself will be physically present on earth, and His throne will be in Jerusalem. During this "millennium" the mortal human population will be forced to live righteously (Isa 2:1-4; Zec 14:16-19). Jesus' government and ministry will be extended to the entire planet through His resurrected followers who will "...reign with Him for a thousand years" (Rev 20:6). And the earth will be immersed in a very intense level of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14), one which is so strong that the curse which has been upon the earth and the animal world will be removed (Isa 11:6-8; 55:13; 65:25).

The final war: At the end of this thousand-year period, God will test the mortal human population by releasing the devil from the abyss into which he had been placed (Rev 20:1-3). Even though the reality and goodness of Jesus will be unquestionable during that season, the Tempter will again be allowed to stir rebellion against Him. And this will produce a resuscitation of the antichrist's kingdom, and its armies will again surround Jerusalem and prepare to attack. But this time the attack won't be allowed. Before it happens, fire will come down from heaven and destroy the invading armies (Rev 20:7-9).

The second resurrection and the judgment: Then God will begin His final judgment. The devil, the antichrist and the false prophet will be dealt with first. Then the unrighteous dead will be resurrected and judged according to a written record of their lives (Da 12:2; Jn 5:28-29; Rev 20:11-13). And finally, death itself, as well as the very place where the spirits of the unrighteous dead had been waiting for this moment of judgment, will be sent into the fire of God.

The release of God's glory: Up until the moment when the final judgment takes place, God will restrain the glorious fire of His holiness. That brilliant light that blinded Paul (Ac 9:3-8) and left Moses' face shining (Ex 34:29-35) contains an energy that must be restrained or it will destroy the created universe. Only in heaven can it shine freely. But at the final judgment a threshold will be passed that allows His glory to finally be released. And John was shown that moment in a vision. After seeing the Lord take His throne, John said, "...earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them" (Rev 20:11). That means that they will disappear and never return. John seems to be telling us that when the unrestrained glory of God is released, it will literally evaporate the created universe to make way for a new one.

The new heaven and earth: And finally, the apostle John was also shown "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1). God will create a new universe that is able to withstand the impact of His unrestrained presence. In effect, the creation itself must also be "resurrected," remade of materials which are immortal so that, like our resurrected bodies, it can endure in a future so full of the Holy Spirit that there will be no need for a sun or moon to give light (Rev 21:23).

Conclusion

When we listen to Jesus or the apostles or the great prophets of Israel, we hear people who have a very clear picture in their minds of what will happen next in God's prophetic plan for human history. Their understanding of "tomorrow" was so distinct, so tangible, so beautiful that it dramatically changed the way they lived "today." But somewhere over the course of the centuries those understandings of God's prophetic plan have been lost. Many of us open up our Bibles and are confused by what we read. We see prophetic passages but don't know where they fit in God's timeline, so we don't know what they mean, and as a result we tend to ignore what the Bible says about our future. Yet if you and I are going to live our lives well and face death boldly, we need to understand God's plan. No, we don't need to know all the details. We don't need to spend our time guessing names and dates, but we do need to understand the larger plan that God has chosen to reveal because that knowledge has a powerful impact. It gives us perspective. It reminds us that this age in which we are now living is passing away. It reminds us that the future God has planned for us will be filled with more and more of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us that the baptism with the Holy Spirit, as wonderful as it is, is only a "foretaste of the powers of the age to come." And that perspective fills us with hope, and hope fills us with joy, and it's the joy of the Lord that restores our strength.

Questions

- 1) Look up Joel 2:28-32, then using the outline provided in this lesson, explain the events that Joel is describing.
- 2) Do you see events taking place in the world today which seem to fit in God's prophetic plan? Name one and show where it fits in the outline.
- 3) What event on this list brings the most hope and joy to your heart?

From Northwest District Conference in Everett, WA, “The Coming Kingdom”

Imagine living in a world with no enemy armies or criminals, on land so fertile that even the desert blooms, with rainfall that's abundant and predictable (Isa 30:23). Each day is so peaceful and full of God's Spirit that nearly everyone lives out their full lifespan, and since their children don't die prematurely, families become enormous in a matter of a few generations. Yet there is still plenty of food and room for everyone. Not even animals become ill or attack one another. It's a place so safe no one keeps a weapon, and people allow their farm animals to roam freely (Isa 32:20). In that world there are no poor or outcast.

Imagine a government with absolutely no corruption; a court system that makes only just decisions based on all the facts; local leaders who really care for you and are happy to pray for you. National and regional jealousies are kept firmly under control, and there are no political prisoners.

Imagine a world in which atheism and all forms of false philosophy and religion have ceased. Everyone knows that Jesus is God's divine Son, though some may still refuse to follow Him in their hearts (Isa 26:10). People from every part of the globe make pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to worship Jesus and learn from Him, and the age-old separation between Jews and Gentiles has ceased. And this remarkable atmosphere doesn't change with passing generations. Children routinely grow up to love God and follow Him.

What are we waiting for?

Over and over again the Bible presents us with snapshots of the world as it will look when the Messiah comes to establish the kingdom of God on earth. But until then the world we live in is a badly damaged version of the one in which God intended us to live, but it has become so familiar to us that we forget this one isn't normal. In fact, compared to what God originally designed, it's very sub-normal. And we human beings aren't functioning anywhere near the capacity God intended for us. Everything and everybody is broken and sin-filled, and the cause of all this breakdown is not a mystery. God gave us enough freedom to rebel against Him, and that rebellion has affected everything. But, as we'll soon see, God will not allow this broken situation to continue forever. He always brings things back to His original plan. At an appointed time, that only He knows, He will send His Messiah to rule the earth.

What an interesting scenario. There is an era of history coming in which people will have no choice but to obey God, even if they don't want to, they will have to live righteously, and the result will be amazing: a planet that's no longer cursed, a human population living at peace and God's presence so strong it's like the waters that cover the sea. Paul says even the creation itself groans, waiting for that moment when it will be set free from its slavery to corruption (Ro 8:19-22).

When will it arrive?

The Old Testament prophets frequently pictured this coming earthly kingdom, and the New Testament mentions it but not extensively. And that has led many believers to assume that the final judgment and the new heavens and earth occur immediately after Jesus' return. In their minds He's coming back to take us to heaven, but that's not what the Bible says. The Book of Revelation specifically states that there will be a thousand-year period of time (Rev 20:1-9) between the battle of

Armageddon (Rev 19:11-21) and the final judgment (Rev 20:10-15). John doesn't describe what takes place during those years, except to say that resurrected believers will reign with Christ (Rev 20:4, 6). But the prophets certainly do (Ps 2; Isa 11:10-16; 56:6-8; 60:1-14; 66:18-23; Da 7:27; Zec 14:16-21), and Jesus, by statements He makes in His teaching, shows that He expected His followers to participate in that kingdom (Mt 19:27-30; 25:19-23; Lk 19:17, 19), and so does Paul (1 Co 3:21-23; 6:1-3). So, if you and I don't recognize that there is another chapter of earth's history awaiting us after this one, much of what Jesus and Paul say about the future doesn't make sense. Actually, unless this Messianic Kingdom, which we sometimes call the "Millennium," literally takes place, a large portion of Old Testament prophecy will go unfulfilled. What those prophets describe cannot be spiritualized away. They picture specific wars, places, forms of worship, and even buildings. To help us see how these prophecies fit into God's overall plan, let's divide human history into five chapters.

Five chapters of human history

From the Bible's point of view, human history, past, present and future, can be divided into, at least, five distinct seasons or chapters.

Chapter One: This was the season of unbroken fellowship with God which Adam and Eve experienced before they sinned.

Chapter Two: This was the long period of history between the Garden of Eden and the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus. During this chapter humans proved that they cannot obey God's commands sufficiently to become righteous, and God prepared a family into which His promised Messiah would be born (Abraham, Judah, David, Mary).

Chapter Three: This is the period of history between Jesus' first coming as the Lamb of God to die for sins, and His second coming as the Lord of lords to rule the earth. This season, in which you and I are now living, was not clearly revealed in the Old Testament. Until Jesus came it remained a mystery (Ac 1:8; Ro 11:25; 16:25, 26; Eph 3:1-9). It is a season for the gathering in of souls, particularly Gentiles (Ro 11:25). And God continues to extend this season in order to permit as many people as possible to repent and believe (2Pe 3:8, 9). The battle of Armageddon will be the final event in this chapter.

Chapter Four: This is the chapter we often miss. It's the thousand-year period between the return of Christ and the final judgment. God's kingdom will come to the earth, and resurrected saints will govern and minister under Jesus' direction. Here are several important facts about that season:

a) The earth will still be populated with a large number of people who have not been resurrected but who survived the events of the last days (seals, trumpets, and bowls; Rev 6-18). So during this season evangelism and death will continue. Those who became believers before Christ's return, those who had died and those still alive, will be resurrected, gathered to Him in the air, and will return to earth with Him (1 Th 4:15, 16). These believers will be in solid, recognizable bodies, and they will be immortal. They will be assigned to specific cities and areas of the earth, and there they will rule and minister as Jesus' deputies (Da 7:27; Lk 19:17, 19; 1Co 6:2, 3; Rev 20:4-6).

b) During those thousand years, the population of mortal humans will expand because God's righteousness will be enforced (Isa 65:19-25), and therefore death and disease will be rare. Even though the devil will be bound during those years (Rev 20:1-3), many people will still refuse to

truly surrender to Christ (Rev 20:8), proving that though the devil tempts us to sin, he cannot be blamed for our rebellion against God. During that season, with Jesus physically present on earth, there will still be individuals who rebel against Him.

c) Jesus will set up His throne in Jerusalem, and many Gentiles will travel there to meet Him (Isa 2:2-4; 11:10; 56:6, 7; 66:19-23; Zec 14:16). Jews who had been dispersed all over the world will return to Israel and will accept Jesus as their crucified and resurrected Messiah (Zec 12:10). Their lifespan will be comparable to a tree (Isa 65:20-23).

Chapter Five: At the end of this thousand-year period, a second resurrection will take place (Rev 20:5-6) and then God will judge the devil, the antichrist, the false prophet, and all who refused to repent and receive His mercy by faith (Rev 20:11-13). At that time He will allow His undiminished glory to radiate through the universe, and it will destroy the universe (Rev 20:11). Then He will create a new one, which, like our resurrected bodies, will be immortal and able to endure the full intensity of His glory. Sin, sorrow and death will no longer be present. As children of God, we will live forever in unbroken, joyous fellowship with Him. The final number of people who are saved will be complete.

How does this change us?

If there were no beautiful future waiting for us, if life simply ended at death, then it would only make sense to wring as much pleasure out of it as possible (1Co 15:32). But if Jesus is coming suddenly, and maybe very soon, then that fact changes our perspective about everything. The life we are living now becomes a prelude to something much better. Against that backdrop many people are willing to deny themselves pleasures in this life in order to have the future pleasure of being in God's presence. Many are willing to suffer hardship and injustice now in order to live in a world without them. Service of others, self-discipline, courage, and a supernatural source of comfort in the face of death all flow out of this promise. To successfully live the life of a disciple, it is essential to have this perspective. It brings:

- Accountability: Without it our fear of God declines (Mt 24:42-51; 25:14-30; 1Co 3:10-15; 2Co 5:10).
- Justice: Without it our moral outrage over the evil around us is turned toward God. But with it, we realize that no one escapes God's justice unless they sincerely repent and believe (2Th 1:4-10).
- Compassion: it removes the desire for revenge. Who can wish eternal separation from God on anyone? It moves us to pray for our enemies.
- Hope: It removes the horror of death (Heb 2:14-15). We are confident that we will see our believing loved ones again. Like us, they will have resurrected bodies, and we will be together again on a glorious earth (1Th 4:16-18; 1Co 15:35-50; Ro 8:18; 2Co 4:17; 1Pe 4:13).
- Purpose: We realize that we are being trained here and now for ministry that will take place beyond this present life. Our character that is being formed and our development as those who can minister the truth and power of God will all be used when we serve as Jesus' representative in the Millennium.

"Thy kingdom come" (Mt 6:10)

When Jesus taught us to pray, He didn't teach us to ask, "May we go to heaven when we die." We will, but God's ultimate goal for us isn't a conscious existence in a heavenly paradise. Instead, Jesus taught us to ask, "[May] Thy kingdom come. [May] Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10). Our assignment is to ask God the Father to bring His kingdom to earth so that His commands

will be obeyed as completely as they are in the spiritual realm where He dwells in glory. In other words we're to pray that He will send His Messiah to bring to us this promised kingdom, this blessed hope, this glorious future. He wants that vision to burn in our hearts, because when we see it, it changes the way we think about everything. It becomes to us like a precious treasure hidden in a field.

"...which a man found and hid [again]; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Mt 13:44).

Questions

- 1) If a child were to ask you, "Will I die?" what would you answer?
- 2) Pick one of the passages of Isaiah that is mentioned in the discussion of "Chapter Four" of human history. Someone read it out loud, and then everyone point out one of the promises that you look forward to experiencing.
- 3) How has the knowledge of this future kingdom changed the way you live? Share one specific change.