

# The Doctrine of the End Times

## WEEK 4: Eschatological Implications of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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- The word “eschatology” comes from the Greek adjective ἐσχατος (“last”) and refers to the study of “last things” or “end times.”
- More specifically, it refers to the study of biblical prophecy about the future events surrounding the end of the age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth to bring about the restoration of all things.
- The study of the end times has brought with it much debate on the timing and the means by which biblical prophecy will be fulfilled. Topics such as the timing of the rapture, the understanding of the Millennial Kingdom, Dispensationalism, and Covenant Theology are all connected to eschatology.
- Because of this, we will take time over the next six weeks to unpack some of the major end times issues, as well as the implications of those in how we approach and interpret Scripture.
- Our schedule will look like this:
  - o Week 1: Introduction to the Doctrine of the End Times
  - o Week 2: Overview of Covenant Theology
  - o Week 3: Overview of Dispensationalism
  - o **Week 4: Implications of Covenant Theology/Dispensationalism**
  - o Week 5: Views on the Millennial Kingdom
  - o Week 6: Why There Needs to be a Millennial Kingdom

### INTRODUCTION

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- Before moving on to details and views about the Millennial Kingdom, it will be helpful for us to take what we have learned about the systems of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism and truly focus on the eschatological differences and implications of these systems.
- While previous weeks have focused on “what are they”, I want to take some time today to really unpack “why these matter”.
- While we would hold that holding to dispensationalism or covenant theology does not impact a believer’s salvation (both would hold to salvation by grace, through faith in Christ), there are severe implications in the realms of hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and, as we’ll discuss more today, our eschatology.
- As has been said before, we need to hold these up to Scripture and determine whether they coincide with truth.

## REVIEW: WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

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- “Covenant theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenants of grace. Some covenant theologians specify three covenants: **works, redemption, and grace**. Covenant theology teaches that God initially made a covenant of works with Adam, promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed, and death entered the human race. God, however, moved to resolve man’s dilemma by entering into a covenant of grace through which the problem of sin and death would be overcome. Christ is the ultimate mediator of God’s covenant of grace.”<sup>1</sup>
  - The **covenant of works** was made with Adam, as the representative/head of all mankind, before the Fall and promised him (and his descendants) eternal life if they obeyed the Lord and death if they disobeyed. Adam failed and, therefore, broke this covenant.
  - God then instituted another covenant, the **covenant of grace**, in order to bring salvation through Christ. It is held that God made a covenant of grace with His people, pledging to save them in Christ. In turn, believers respond in faith, trusting Jesus alone for salvation, which results in faith bearing fruit in a life of faith and obedience. The biblical covenants are an outworking of the covenant of grace.
  - The **covenant of redemption** refers to the covenant made in eternity past between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to redeem a people for the glory of God and the eternal good of His people.
    - The Father chose/elected a people to save
    - The Son agreed to redeem this people through His life, death, and resurrection
    - The Holy Spirit consented to apply the redeeming work of the Son to those whom the Father had chosen

### **THE THEOLOGICAL COVENANTS**

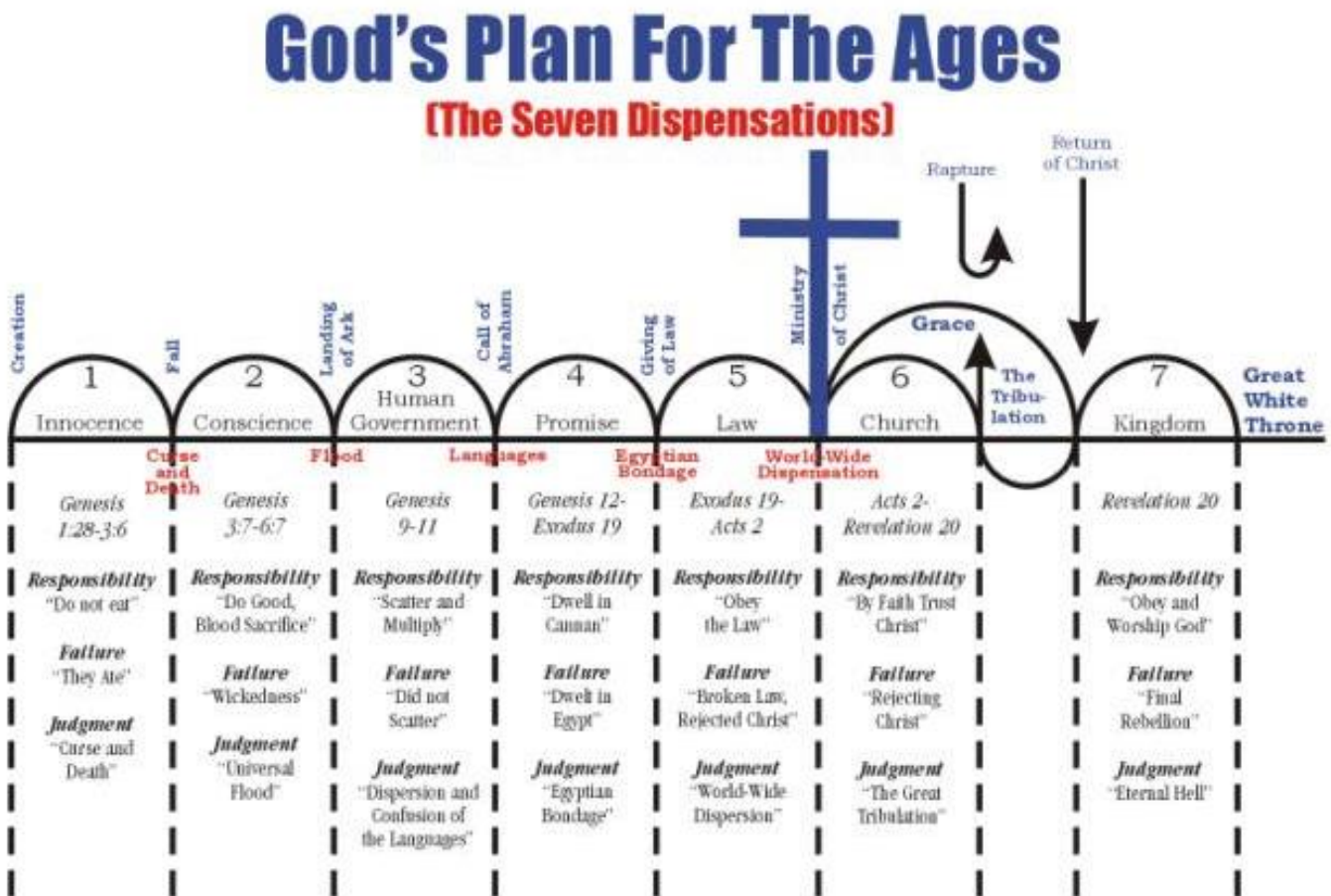
COVENANT OF REDEMPTION	COVENANT OF WORKS	COVENANT OF GRACE	
ETERNITY PAST	BEFORE THE FALL	Old Dispensation	New Dispensation
		ISRAEL = CHURCH	

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Enns, The Moody Handbook of Theology, 503.

## REVIEW: WHAT IS DISPENSATIONALISM?

- “Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.”<sup>2</sup>
- As a system of theology, dispensationalism views a dispensation as “*a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.*”<sup>3</sup>
  - God is the ultimate authority who works to reveal His purposes to mankind and delegates responsibilities to them as stewards.
  - Dispensationalism holds that throughout redemptive history, God has been working through a number of divinely established stewardships, or dispensations.



<sup>2</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, 82.

<sup>4</sup> <https://presenttruthmn.com/the-present-truth/teachings/original-faith/seven-dispensations/>

# VARIATIONS OF DISPENSATIONALISM: CLASSICAL, REVISED, PROGRESSIVE

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- While there are core beliefs that span throughout dispensationalism, there have been developments and changes throughout history.
- Most notably within dispensationalism, are three key subgroups: Classical/Traditional Dispensationalism, Revised/Modified Dispensationalism, and Progressive Dispensationalism.

## 1. Classical/Traditional Dispensationalism

- Classical Dispensationalism views dualistic purpose for the peoples of God.
- God is seen as pursuing two purposes: one related to heaven and one related to the earth.
- This view of dispensationalism views a very sharp distinction between Israel and the church, to the extent that they do not even share the same eternal destiny.
  - The Church – Destined for Heaven
  - Israel – Will Inherit the Earth
- This has led some to believe there are two New Covenants – one with Israel (Jer 31:31-34) and another with the church (Heb 8:8-12).

## 2. Revised/Modified Dispensationalism

- While Revised Dispensationalism still affirms the distinction between Israel and the church, however, it does not hold to the eternal dualism and separation of the heavenly and earthly peoples like Classical Dispensationalism does.
- Israel and the church are two distinct anthropological groups, structured with different dispensational roles and responsibilities, but their salvation and ultimate destination are the same.

## 3. Progressive Dispensationalism

- Progressive Dispensationalism is distinct in its view of a “progressive” relationship of the successive dispensations to one another.
  - More specifically, a central tenet is that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants are being progressively fulfilled today, while having their full fulfillment in the Millennial Kingdom.
  - Regarding the Davidic covenant, they would see an already/not yet aspect to the David throne and reign of Christ, understanding that because God promised David that his throne would be established forever (2 Sam 7:16), Christ must be reigning in some sense now.
- Progressive Dispensationalism views the church not as a separate people group from Israel/Gentiles, but rather all redeemed humanity (Jew and Gentile) in this dispensation.
  - Israel and the church form the “people of God” in terms of salvation, but they retain their distinctions (i.e., believing Gentiles do not become “Israel”).

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT ISRAEL & THE CHURCH?

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- As we've observed in reviewing these theological systems, one of the greatest eschatological implications is the future for the church and Israel.
- Because of this, I want to unpack what God's word says about the eschatological truths and future for Israel and the church.
- We will look together at key texts that will help to give clarity and demonstrate the benefit of exegesis informing our theology.

### 1. The Church and Israel are Distinct

- What we must first acknowledge, from Scripture, is that the church and Israel are distinct from one another.

	Israel	The Church
<b>Type of Nation</b>	Physical Nation	Spiritual Nation
<b>Birth</b>	Originating in Gen 12, becoming a nation in Ex 19-20	Inaugurated in Acts 2
<b>Population</b>	Consisting of Ethnic Jews, including a mixture of believers and unbelievers	Consisting of both Jews and Gentiles in one body of Spirit-baptized believers in Christ
<b>Promises</b>	Earthly (Eze 36:24)	Heavenly (Eph 1:3)
<b>Requirements for Entrance into Nation</b>	In OT Israel, the means of entrance into the nation was involuntary, physical, and external—one became a Jew by being born of Jewish parents.	In the NT Church, the means of entrance is voluntary, spiritual, and internal—one becomes a member of the Church by exercising faith in Christ and being born again by the Holy Spirit.
<b>Temple</b>	Physical (1 Ki 8:11)	Spiritual (1 Cor 3:16-17)
<b>Relationship With Christ</b>	Christ is rejected (1 Pet 2:7-8)	Christ is the Cornerstone (Eph 2:20)

- This distinction is consistent throughout God's word, with all 73 occurrences of the term "Israel" in the New Testament referring to ethnic Jews, even after the establishment of the church.
- This is consistent with the New Testament writers' understanding of a distinction between Israel and the church (1 Cor 10:32; Eph 2:11-16).

## 2. There is a Future for Ethnic Israel

- From what we have discussed regarding the distinction between Israel and the church, this has massive eschatological implications.
  - If God is faithful and does not forsake His promises to His people, and the church and Israel are distinct peoples given promises by God, then God is not done with Israel!
- Evidence of this is shown in God's word:
  - **The Present Privileges of Israel in the New Testament**
    - Romans 9:4–5 affirms that the covenants and promises still remain the possession of the nation of Israel even after the inception of the Church, thereby indicating that these blessings have not been absorbed by the Church.
    - **Rom 9:3-5** - *For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.*
      - This passage gives clear indications that the promises of God to Israel have not been discarded or transferred to the church. It belongs to them!
  - **The Future Hope of Israel in the New Testament**
    - The New Testament reiterates the future restoration of the ethnic nation of Israel as originally promised throughout the Old Testament (Rom 11:26; Acts 1:6-7; Matt 19:28; 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35; 21:24; 22:30), thereby indicating a distinction between Israel and the Church.
    - **Rom 11:1-2, 5** - *I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew...In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.*
      - This passage indicates that God has preserved a faithful remnant from Israel through His grace.
    - **Rom 11:23-24** - *And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?*
      - Paul is reminding the Gentiles that as they were grafted in through the blood of Christ into the New Covenant, Israel, the natural branches of the Covenant promise, can be grafted back in.

- **Rom 11:25-27** - *For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.” “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”*

- Though Israel rejected their Messiah, they will be restored as a nation when the fullness of the Gentiles come to faith.

- **The Purpose of the Tribulation for Israel**

- As we understand the future for the nation of Israel, we must understand that one of the primary purposes for the seven-year tribulation is to prepare Israel for its Messiah.
  - The Jews were not ready to receive Christ the first time, so God will prepare their hearts to receive Him the second time.
  - God’s justice and wrath poured out during the tribulation will make them ready to accept the One they have so long rejected.
  - This is the reason for the extreme suffering of the tribulation time – it will be God’s discipline upon His people to bring them back to Himself.
    - **Jeremiah 30:7** - *Alas! for that day is great, There is none like it; And it is the time of Jacob’s distress, But he will be saved from it.*
  - Through the horrible suffering of the Tribulation, God will remove the spiritual blinders from the nation of Israel.
  - When that happens Israel will become a believing nation and God will have fulfilled his promises with Israel (cf. Jer 31:31-34)
    - **Zechariah 12:10** - *I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.*
    - **Zechariah 13:8-9** - *“It will come about in all the land,” Declares the Lord, “That two parts in it will be cut off and perish; But the third will be left in it. “And I will bring the third part through the fire, Refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ And they will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’ ”*

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND COVENANT THEOLOGY AND DISPENSATIONALISM?

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- Having now covered the details of these theological systems, looking at the key distinctions and implications, I want to unpack why it is important for believers to understand these and their effect within the church.

## 1. Covenant Theology is a Slippery Slope

- As we've discussed in a previous class, Covenant Theology builds its interpretation of Scripture on the foundation of three theological covenants: redemption, works, and grace.
- Because of a spiritualizing hermeneutic, and the covenant of grace spanning from Genesis 3 until the return of Christ, there is a system on continuity from OT Israel and the church.
- This has resulted in such practices as infant baptism as entrance into the New Covenant community (comparable to circumcision in the OT).
  - With this, it risks causing great confusion for children spiritually.
  - If they are already "in the covenant community", it takes away a need for them to trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior.
- With the hermeneutical confusion and theological interpretive lens, it threatens to elevate man's perception of Scripture, rather than seeking true, authorial intent.
- It challenges the faithfulness and character of God by warping the nature of His promises to distinct peoples throughout redemptive history.

## 2. Dispensationalism Exists as a Spectrum

- While dispensationalism interprets Scripture through a more consistent hermeneutic, it is still a system that needs to be challenged by Scripture.
  - While the aspect of various dispensations is a helpful medium to understand the outworking of God's purposes throughout redemptive history, traditional dispensationalism takes this to an unhelpful extreme.
  - On the other hand, some variations have not corrected enough, seeing spiritual fulfillments happening in this age (Progressive Dispensationalism & the Davidic Covenant).
- With all of this, how do we approach these in a way that is faithful to and consistent with Scripture?
    - This should be handled as we would any presupposition that we approach Scripture with – with an open hand.
    - We do not read our presuppositions into the texts of Scripture, but hold them up to divine truth and challenge them.
    - We allow the text to speak for itself, and frame our mind around what God's word says, not what a man or system dictates.
    - **1 Thess 5:20-22** - *Do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.*