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B1210 – March 4, 2012

Preterism

Alright, we're looking at eschatology, the study of last things. Everyone already has an eschatology, whether they're a Christian, a Muslim, a Roman Catholic, a Jehovah's Witness or an Atheist, everyone has one and the way you detect someone's eschatology is to listen to what they say. For example, I got an e-mail last week that said, "Never take life seriously; nobody gets out alive anyway!" Now is that an eschatology? Very clearly. And it's the same eschatology Paul said you were logically endorsing if you rejected the resurrection. For if there is no resurrection from the dead then eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. So it may be simply expressed but nonetheless, it is an eschatology and there are ethical implications. Never buy the line that eschatology isn't important. It's very important. Tell the Jews of the Holocaust it wasn't important what Hitler and the 3rd Reich believed about their future kingdom. It mattered very much. It was pretty much all that mattered because it was their belief about a future cleansed human race that drove them to exterminate inferior races. Somehow you've got to get to that future kingdom. And to do so sets in motion a plan that will secure that future you have carved out in your imagination.

As far as the true eschatology is concerned it's a study of how three groups of people in Scripture relate to God and to one another in the end of history. Those three groups are Gentiles, Israel and the Church. We've said God has distinct promises for each of those three groups and distinct purpose in history for each of those three groups. And we've largely focused on the distinctions between Israel and the Church because this is the majority interest of Scripture. We've covered Israel. Last time we focused on the Church. The Church, we said, does not follow a historical progress in the way that Israel does. Israel's historical progress is based on the interplay between the two covenants, the Abrahamic on one hand, which marks out their

eternal destiny of the nation, and the Mosaic on the other hand, which affects their progress toward that destiny. The Church's destiny, on the other hand, is not covenantally driven, it's thematically driven. And we looked at six basic themes.

Let's review those. When you go through the Book of Acts what is the very strange thing that happens almost right away? This talking in tongues bit. What is that all about? Well, duh, whatever it is you should know it's not just a continuation of Israel. Something has changed. Now we have Jewish truths being spoken in Gentile languages? Hello! So then, yeah, the Church begins with Jews but very quickly it takes in Samaritans, it takes in Gentiles. Those tongues in Acts 2 are a sign that hey, something new is forming here, something that involves people of every tribe, tongue and nation. It's not just Israel anymore. That something new is what we call the body of Christ or the Church. And it's not a nation. It's composed of people out of every nation. This is why it's good for you to be in touch with Christians from other parts of the world. We can get in our little shell of Christianity over here and think we're the only one's that have any kind of expression of Christianity or our way is the right way and everyone else is wrong. Excuse me, but the church isn't just Americans or something. There are Mongolian Christians and Chinese Christians and Iranian Christians and European Christians and Jewish Christians. And we're all what? What is the first theme of the Church? We're all in union with Christ. Red, yellow, black, white, speaking mandarin or Hebrew or Russian, male, female, slave, free, adult, child, we're all in union with Christ. You are a part of this tremendous organism that's been forming since the day of Pentecost. It's a massive structure that the Lord Jesus Christ is building that is very diverse. Imagine if you were an architect trying to draw a blueprint for this thing called the Church. What kind of a hairy, complex drawing you would have as you sat there and listened to the Lord Jesus Christ describe it. I have these people over here in Asia, they speak this language, this is their skin tone and this is what I'm doing with them. Then I've got this other group of people over here in South Africa and they speak this language, this is their skin tone and this is what I'm doing with them. And yet we're all part of the exact same thing. We're all part of the Church. We all have Christ as our head. This is the metaphor of Christ as the head and the Church as the body. And we, even though we're here on earth, we are all in union with Christ in heaven; we are all seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. That's what we mean by union with Christ.

Right now we are united with Him, right now we are seated with Him, right now there's a spiritual union that exists. And where did you ever read of Israel in union with Christ? That's my point; there really is a difference between Israel and the Church.

There are certain terms that relate specifically to the Church's destiny. We mentioned one last time, the rapture. So we want to look at that and then we want to look at another term, the judgment seat of Christ. The rapture, let's start with that one, this is a new vocabulary term introduced with the Church. Let's turn to 1 Thess 4:13. The term rapture, some people will say, well, the word "rapture" isn't in the Bible so I don't agree with it. Well, the word Trinity isn't in there either so I'm not particularly impressed with that argument. It is in the Latin Vulgate, it's referred to as the *rapio* in 1 Thess 4:17, the passage we use at funerals and it's also in Acts 8:37 where Philip is raptured from one place to another place several miles away, so we have an example of a rapture in that a person is moved from one place to another. So the basic idea of the word is to snatch away to another place. Verse 13, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep," do you see how practical Paul was? You hear people say well, prophecy is too hard and I don't want to bother with it, Christians disagree about it, etc. Well, why did Paul bother writing two whole epistles that deal with it? In the context what was the problem? This church was under persecution, they were facing an onslaught of attacks, and members were being killed. And what do you need when you are facing one dark day after another? You need hope. So Paul doesn't want them to be uninformed about those who are asleep," that's your metaphor for physical death, they're just asleep, so that's comforting already, just the term asleep is a soft one that communicates eventual resurrection. So prophecy is to give hope, it's to comfort, to give us the strength to endure. "I don't want you ignorant about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope." There were people that had no hope of resurrection and that would be intense grieving indeed. But it's a different story for the Christian.

Verse 14, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Look at that and think about it. And after you do that, is there going to be a reunion? If Jesus were to come today, what does it say? He would bring with Him those Christians who have died. You can think in your own family, in your own

congregation of somebody that has died, you're going to see them again. That's what it says here in my Bible. It says "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Verse 15, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first." Verses 14-16 are dealing with the details of the event. So let's diagram this. Here's the ground, here's some rotted body with a few molecules left. Jesus comes down from heaven and He brings with Him, it says "those who have died" but their bodies are in the ground because when we die we don't get resurrection bodies right away. So along with the Lord Jesus Christ come Christians who have died before us. They come with Him and at this point they receive their resurrection bodies, because what else does it say in verse 16? He "will descend ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first." So all of a sudden there's an assembling of material transforming into bodies and these spirits are all of a sudden back in a body, a resurrected one.

Talk about something mind blowing here. Try putting this in a biology class. What's going on? Obviously bodies who have died centuries ago have decayed, the molecules have been incorporated in all kinds of plants, worms, all kinds of things. But somehow God creates this resurrected body and He does it instantly. It doesn't take a million and a half years to do this. You don't have to go through a hundred transformations. This is something that happens instantly when Christ returns, an amazing thing.

Then he goes on and he gives another detail in verse 17. "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord." You get the added detail over in 1 Cor 15 of how rapidly this happens. Here's a Christian on earth, he has a mortal body and the Christians in heaven don't have mortal bodies, they're just spirits. What happens is, these spirit people get their bodies and then, suddenly, when they get their resurrection bodies those of us in mortal bodies get changed in a twinkling of an eye into a resurrection body without ever having to go through the death process. So these people, they died, their spirit departed from their body, their soul is in the presence of the Lord. Then they are reunited with their bodies. But the people who are alive at this fantastic instant in history don't have to die.

There will be one generation of Christians and one only who never die, but instantly go from this body to the next one. At this point everything changes, a radical thing. That's what we call the rapture and it can happen at any moment. That is a distinct Church related doctrine; Israel never knew of that.

Another distinct vocabulary for the Church is the judgment seat of Christ or the bema. Turn to 2 Cor 5:10. The bema is a judgment of believer's works. It's not a judgment of salvation; it's a judgment of works for those who already have salvation. So it's a judgment within the family of God. Don't be confused over what you're going to go to this judgment for. It's an analysis, a perfect analysis, by the Lord Jesus Christ of our deeds, whether they were done out of the flesh or out of the Spirit. That's the basic dichotomy. We can operate on the basis of the flesh or on the basis of the Spirit and if the stuff is coming out of the flesh its bad, rotten fruit but if it's done out of the Spirit then you have good fruit and that will be rewarded. Verse 10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." So that's the idea, there are many other passages about this. We all must appear - you will appear, I will appear and you have to give an answer; nobody is going to answer for you, your spouse isn't going to be there to cover for you, your pastor isn't going to be there to give a testimony for you, it's you and the Lord Jesus Christ, mano y mano and you'll have to give an answer for what you did with what He gave you.

And there's going to be junk, what may have looked like a great spiritual thing on the outside but it turned out to be nothing more than wood, hay and stubble. And that's going to be burned up because it's worthless. But of course, you'll already be resurrected so sin isn't going to be the issue at this judgment. The issue here is deciding rank, where are you going to rank in Christ's administration? What's your assignment? He wants you to do something. So the result of the bema seat is a ranking of believers; some people are going to be down here, some people are going to be up there, some people are farther up there and it's all based on how they lived the Christian life, how they fulfilled their stewardships in this life, the quality of the fruit produced. And they're going to be assigned to certain positions in the kingdom, some won't get any rewards but they'll be saved and they'll go in to be custodians of the kingdom or something, and there will be other people

assigned to some other duties in the kingdom. We don't know a lot about this except that there are various layers of responsibility in the kingdom that people will be assigned to, based on how they managed what Christ gave them in the here and now. Did they learn to manage those things by the Spirit or did they use them under the flesh? The judgment seat is the place where all that gets sorted out. And fortunately it's the Lord Jesus Christ who carries out this judgment because He knows us perfectly. He knows our motives perfectly, He is the One who has a perfect perspective to do this. So this judgment is a distinctly Church thing. Israel doesn't go to any judgment seat of Christ. They have their own judgment and it's a national judgment, not an individual judgment, so that's another difference.

The third vocabulary that goes with the Church is the marriage of the Lamb and the marriage supper of the Lamb. So we have rapture, judgment seat and marriage supper of the Lamb. And that is that the Church is the bride of Christ and at the Second Coming of Christ will go to the marriage feast, all of creation at that point now views the Lord Jesus Christ plus the Church, which is His body, as one unit. So the marriage feast brings together the Lord Jesus who is perfect in His resurrection body plus the Church which has been resurrected and we have the marriage feast. The Church and Christ are prepared to do something in the kingdom.

Now that we have these three vocabulary terms the difficulty is how to put these three terms together with the terms related to Israel. How does this all go together? There are five basic views that try to sort this out and put them together, to somehow fit them into the plan we see developed out of the OT, which in itself isn't wrong. God is coherent thinker, He has a plan. So the question is how do the three milestone events of the Church fit with Israel's program from the OT? That is the challenge of eschatology, putting this all together and here are the five views people have come up with: Preterism, Mid-Tribulationism, Post-Tribulationism, Pre-Wrath and Pre-Tribulationism. There are a few other views we won't consider in this class but this is generally what we're looking at.

What we're going to do is go through these so you can see how people have put these together. Remember, this is what the Church has been working out the last 200 years and they're still working on it. Why are we going to go through it? Here's why, "60% of the NT is affected by one's view of Bible

prophecy.” That’s right, 60%, I heard that rather high number stated in a debate; it’s going to affect almost 2 out of every 3 verses in the NT. So it is rather critical that you get Bible prophecy right because it’s going to affect most of your understanding of the NT. So it’s especially critical and it is the issue of our day and the Lord wants us to dig in and work it out.

To do it let’s start with this. What does the OT tell us about the future? The OT tells us that Israel is a national entity defined by the Abrahamic Covenant that marked out for them a certain destiny in a real estate. This nation was also given a law or standard to live by in the Mosaic Covenant that marked out blessings and cursings on the way to their destiny. To get to the final blessing the OT teaches that Israel will have to go through a time of horrible suffering called the Tribulation, it will escalate in intensity. The purpose of that period will be to punish the nations and purge Israel to belief in the Messiah. Those who respond positively to the gospel, whether they are of Israel or the nations will go into the kingdom. Those who do not will be utterly destroyed when the Lord Jesus Christ returns in His glory. He will establish His kingdom on earth and according to Rev 20 the kingdom will last for a thousand years.

The challenge is where does the Church fit in this, how about the rapture and the judgment seat of Christ? Where do they fit in this OT scheme? That’s why we’re going to go through this. This is not easy stuff. But our approach is to start with what we already know from the OT and then try to fit in what we know now from the NT.

The first view we’ll look at is called preterism; it’s actually quite recent in evangelical circles though it’s been around in Roman Catholic and among the German higher critics of the Bible for a few centuries. But we want to define the word so you get the flavor of it because if you’ve ever heard Hank Hanegraaf on the radio, the supposed Bible Answer Man, you’ve heard a preterist or if you’ve heard R.C. Sproul. Sproul is a preterist and he’s teaching the Bible from a preterist point of view so you’d better understand what you’re listening to.

As far as the word is concerned I’m going to give you the opposite word, it always helps to learn words by contrast, and it’s this against that. The opposite of preterism is futurism. Now that I’ve made that contrast, what do

you think preterism is all about? If futurism is future; preterism is what? The past. That's the big difference. Basically what the preterists are saying is that this OT prophecy stuff, all that Tribulation talk about Israel and the birth pangs and the day of the Lord, all that is past, it's all over with. You say WHAT??? All over, the Tribulation has happened? When did it happen? The preterist today say most if not all of it happened AD70'ish, there are a couple of groups here, but AD70 is the key to their system. What happened in AD70? The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. So their interpretation is that when the Jews rebelled against Rome Vespasian took his armies to Jerusalem and when he had to go back to Rome he sent his son Titus to take over and he waged a campaign to conquer Jerusalem, defeat the Jew. Rome was the instrument through which God punished the Jews for crucifying their Messiah, and all that suffering Israel went through, preterists say, was the Tribulation, that's when Matt 24 was fulfilled, that's what the book of Revelation is all about; the book of Revelation has already been fulfilled, it's done. The book of Revelation was done around AD70 which means it has to have been written before AD70 because it's prophecy and you can't write a prophecy book about something that already happened in history. So that's what we mean by preterism, past, past fulfillment.

Now this may shock some of you, maybe you've never heard of this before but it's rampant, particularly in Church of Christ and Reformed circles. I have a good friend I grew up with in the Baptist church in Paris, TX. He lives here in town and he was always driving by our house when we lived over on Morse St and we'd talk. One day sitting right there in the seat of his car was David Chilton's book *Days of Vengeance*. And if you know David Chilton, he was a radical preterist; he went so far as to argue that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ occurred in AD70. So obviously now we're denying the literal, physical, bodily return of Jesus Christ, it was instead a mystical coming of Christ through the Roman armies to judge Israel. Now if this shocks you, understand it's because so many people don't read their Bibles and have not been taught how to study the Bible so they become suckers for this kind of thing.

Preterism has a few strands to it, so what I'm going to go through briefly is the difference between the extreme preterists and the more moderate or partial preterists. The partial preterists are those like R. C. Sproul who have enough respect for a literal hermeneutic to say wait a minute, we may say

the Tribulation is past, but we certainly can't say the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is past. So the partial preterists try to separate the Tribulation, make it past, from the future Second Coming. The extreme preterists like the one I just mentioned, David Chilton, are the more consistent preterists, they argue like I would if I were a preterist, that the Second Coming of Christ is past, it's over, there is no future Second Coming of Jesus Christ, that already occurred in AD70 and now we are in the new heaven and new earth. Those are the two basic strands.

Now both of these strands are amillennial or postmillennial over against premillennialism. Remember, we've been through the millennial views. All I'm trying to say here is that preterism is associated, always, with amillennialism or postmillennialism. So let's be reminded of what these terms mean. If you don't know what the words mean, take them apart. What does millennium mean? A thousand years. What does a- in front of a word always mean? No. It's a negation, A-theism, no God, a-gnostic, no knowledge. A is always a negation, so a-millennial means there is no millennium or no more millennium than what we are experiencing right now. So what do they do with the passages about the wolf lying with the lamb? They allegorize them. What do they do with the land promise to Israel? They allegorize it. The land was just a type of heaven.

What does postmillennial mean? Post- means after. Millennium still means a thousand years so Christ comes after the thousand years and usually the thousand years are just thought of as a long period of time. Their belief is that the Great Commission is going to conquer the world for Christ and when the world is sufficiently Christian then Christ will come back and say thank you, good job you guys, thanks and He'll take over from there. That's postmillennialism.

By the way, amillennialism came from where? Who held it before the Protestant Reformation? Roman Catholicism who got it from Augustine, there's good and bad in Augustine, but the eschatology of Augustine got sucked up by Rome and when the Protestants made the break they just inherited the eschatology. So you had amillennialism come into Protestantism.

Preterism will always be associated with amillennialism or postmillennialism. You will never find a preterist premil. Premillennialists are almost always futurists because premillennialism means what? Pre- means before so Christ comes before the millennium. Why? To establish it. So premillennialists believe that most of the prophecy that was not fulfilled in Christ's first coming is still future. So at least be aware of these connections, preterism is connected with amillennialism and postmillennialism. Futurism is associated with premillennialism.

So the preterists are coming out of amillennial Protestants who got it out of Rome. Actually, the first clear statement on preterism I know of is a Roman Catholic Jesuit named Alcasar. The Jesuits were set up to be an intellectual powerhouse to shut down this thing called Protestantism. One of the problems Rome faced was Protestants arguing that the pope was the antichrist. Martin Luther was famous for this one and he wasn't one to back down; he'd get right in your face and tell you like it is and he said the Pope is the Antichrist and you can imagine, they didn't like that too much. So Jesuit Alcasar said we can get rid of this notion real quick if we hold to preterism, that all that stuff about the Tribulation and the antichrist were in the distant past. See the argument? It's a slick move; if the antichrist came in the 1st century then obviously the pope in the 16th century can't be him. That was one of the solutions that he put forward. I'm not saying Roman Catholics today are preterist, just that there was a Jesuit who had this idea.

So the view is that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman armies of Titus in AD 70 was the wrath of God against unbelieving Israel. Let's think about this. If you are sharp your antennas are going off right about now because what did we say about the wrath of God and Israel? Israel will go through a time of wrath. Remember the rabbi who said let the Messiah come but let me not see Him. He was scared. So they would go through a period of wrath. But what was the purpose of the wrath? To destroy Israel or to purge Israel? To purge Israel; to separate the believers from the unbelievers. But the preterists think AD70 is the end of Israel. But you see how that clashes with the OT Deut 4 and Deut 30 because the OT looks at that wrath as not the last chapter but as a horrible time that they must go through in order to get to the last chapter. But preterism argues that it is the last chapter, God is done with Israel.

Turn to Matt 24 and I'll try to give you the flavor of what they're doing. Understand, in their mind, all this has been fulfilled. None of this is left for the future. And you may be wondering how in the world do they get that? I'm just going to sample a few things. We can't do it all because we'd be here for half a year and this isn't a course on eschatology, this is an overview of the basic materials so you get some sort of handle on these things, learn the vocabulary and get a feel for why I and most of the people you hear teach pre-millennial pretribulationism.

Matt 24:21, "then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will." So they have to say that what happened in AD70 is the biggest catastrophe in world history, right? There's no time like it since creation nor ever will be. Whatever happened in AD70 at Jerusalem has to be the worst judgment ever. And they say, you know, Josephus reports that over a million Jews were killed, it was horrible. But what about the Flood of Noah? Jerusalem is just one city; Judea is just one country, but the Flood of Noah, that was the entire earth, every city. Oh no, they say, the Flood of Noah was a local flood, it just flooded the Mesopotamian river valley. So do you see how once you start making decisions here it on this issue it starts affecting every other issue. You can't say this is all AD70 and then hold to a global flood, not logically, because AD70 would have to be greater than a global flood and obviously by any scale of comparison it's not.

Look at another one, starting in verse 27, they love this one, "For just as the lighting comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be." Alright, so what's in view? What's the doctrine? The Second Coming. But they say the Second Coming happened in AD70. You say, well, did anyone see it? I mean, don't we have some reports from history of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? Obviously if Jesus Christ came back visibly, physically, literally then we ought to have someone in history reporting it. Guess what they say. It happened so fast, it was like lightning, see, nobody saw it, nobody got a glimpse, it was that fast. Instead of saying, as the verse is teaching, when He comes He will come rapidly, like a bolt of lightning, they say it happened so fast nobody saw it., despite the fact that now you have to explain verse 30 which says every tribe of the earth will mourn when they see Him.

Let's go to those verses, I know you're finding this hard to believe, I'm just trying to get you into the mind of these people so you can see how they're thinking and how radically it affects other portions of the Bible. Look at verse 29, let's deal with this one, because remember, in their view all this is descriptive of the destruction of Israel, Israel is being judged, Israel is being demolished by God, God is done with Israel. So what do they do with this language of verse 29? "But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." That's the end of Israel they say, Israel is finished. You say how do they get that? Well, that's what they already believe. And they say, Isaiah in his thirteenth chapter uses this language of judgment on Babylon and then they go over to Rev 12 and say, in Rev 12 you have a woman with twelve stars and there's a sun and a moon and they say, see, that's the twelve tribes, Jacob and Rachel are the moon and sun and so putting all this together this is metaphor for judgment of Israel, AD70. It's not the physical sun going dark, the physical moon not giving light, it's not meteor showers, it's figurative language for the destruction of Israel.

Verse 30, "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory." This is all judgment of AD70. Jesus coming in the Roman armies. Verse 31, "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other." That's the growth of the church, that's the day of Pentecost, that's how they handle these kinds of passages.

This is just a quick sampling, we could go to a lot of verses, so please don't think this is an exhaustive analysis of their view, this isn't a class in eschatology, that could take two or three years, I'm just doing a very fast overview to get you familiar with the view.

One of the interesting things that is required by the preterist system of eschatology is that the book of Revelation had to be written prior to AD70. Why do they have to say that? Because it's prophecy. So if it's prophecy and the prophecy has already been fulfilled, the book had to be written before it happened. But if the book happened in AD70 then Revelation had to be

written before AD70. And that is very hard to support. I'd say impossible to support, every indication both externally and internally is that the book was written much later, toward the end of Domitian's reign, say, AD95-96. Yet this early date is required and that forces you into some very strange hermeneutics when you try to interpret everything in Matt 24 and Rev 4-19 as occurring in AD70. Yet, as we are going to see, they claim that they are the literal interpreters of some texts and we are the ones that are metaphorically interpreting. So next time we'll get into their so-called time texts, these are at central texts to the preterist system, what they call time texts.

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