END TIMES POSITIONS – AN OVERVIEW

The Bible's Big Picture

The grand narrative of the Bible can be thought of as unfolding over four stages:

Four Stages of Bible's Grand Narrative

Creation



this creation, the only component which bears the image of God himself. Human beings are tasked with co-ruling over creation with God, stewarding what has been created and acting in ways that are consistent with God's expressed will. During this time, humanity experiences flourishing and intimate relationships with one another, with God, with creation, and within their own selves.

God creates the cosmos and everything within it. Humans are the pinnacle of

Fall



Humans disobey God's expressed will, and as a result are no longer able to be in God's presence. There is now rupture of the relationships that experienced flourishing in creation (God with humans, humans with each other, humans with creation, and each human with him/herself). Sin enters the world, bringing with it death, decay, and brokenness.

Redemption



Over time, God unfolds a plan for how He will bring his people back into right relationship with himself. Ultimately, this plan leads to the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus, who provides a way back into right relationship with God through his atoning death on the cross. Salvation is received by God's grace alone through faith alone.

Restoration



God promises his people eternal life in a new heavens and new earth. There will be no more death, mourning, or tears. Creation will be restored to perfection, and there will be full healing of all the relationships ruptured by the fall. God's people will be with him forever and will co-rule over creation alongside Christ.

"Now and Not Yet"

We currently exist in a sort of in between stage – Jesus has already come and accomplished the work that is necessary for redemption. However, the full restoration of creation and humanity has not yet come to pass. This is what theologians refer to as living in the "now and not yet." We are already reconciled to God, but the fullness of his healing and restoration is not yet complete.

How Will God's Plan Finish?

The Bible promises that full restoration is coming. It offers us glimpses into how His plan to bring that about will unfold. The study of what will happen at the end of the story is called *eschatology*. There are many interpretations of the biblical passages that speak about end times, which results in a variety of different ideas about how God's redemptive story will finish.

WHY DOES END TIMES THEOLOGY MATTER?

What you believe about the future shapes how you act in the present.

What everyone agrees on

There is consensus within Christianity about a few key end times topics:

- God keeps his promises
- God has promised to bring his plans for restoration to completion
- Jesus is coming back
 - o As we wait, we are responsible for evangelism, encouraging one another, and enduring in our faith
- There will be a time of final judgment for all people
 - o God's people will enter eternal life; those without the Lord will enter eternal death
- God will bring about a new heavens and new earth where His people will live with and enjoy Him forever

What people disagree about

Though the main things are agreed upon, there is still disagreement among Christians on both how the Bible is best interpreted, and what the biblical passages indicate about how God's story will end.

One key point of disagreement is the best way to interpret biblical end times prophecies.

Biblical End Times Prophecy Interpretation Strategies

Preterism	Events took place at the time of the writer or shortly thereafter	Author's present/near future Our past
Futurism	Events will take place in the future, clustered together at the close of the current age	Author's future Our future
Historicism	Events still to come for the writer and have been unfolding over all of church history since then	Author's future Our past, present & future
ldealism	Events refer to timeless symbolic truths and do not represent a historical sequence of singular events	Author's present Our present

The biblical testimony

The following is a list of common passages which are used to inform end times theological positions. It is not an exhaustive list, but rather a compilation of commonly cited passages. Depending on preferred interpretation strategy (see table above), people will vary with the extent to which they consider the following passages relevant to our understanding of end times.

Note: Scripture passages should always be taken within their context – What is the purpose and genre of the book in which they appear? How do they fit within the overall message of that book? Within the overall biblical narrative? What historical considerations underlie the author's purpose and inform the author's intent?

Key End Times Scripture Passages

Ezekiel, especially chapters 34-48	Writing as a faithful Israelite and prophet of God during the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel makes a variety of predictions of what awaits Israel after the exile. They include visions for hope and restoration alongside confidence that God will deal seriously and severely with the problem of evil in the world. The book ends with a promise that God's presence will return to his temple one day. Scholarly interpretations vary widely regarding the extent to which these prophesies are meant to be literal or symbolic, as well as whether they have already met their fulfillment in historical events and/or in the person of Christ.
Daniel, especially chapters 7 - 12	Daniel records a variety of prophetic visions that describe apocalyptic events, often using highly symbolic imagery and language. Many scholars consider the prophesies of Daniel to have been at least partially fulfilled when the second temple was destroyed in AD 70.
Matthew 24:1-25:46	Also referred to as the Olivet Discourse (so called because Jesus delivered this teaching on the Mount of Olives), this passage contains instruction about coming suffering and tribulation, the signs that will point to Jesus's coming return, as well as predictions about what will happen to the temple. Many scholars consider the events detailed in this passage to have been at least partially fulfilled when the second temple was destroyed in AD 70. Parallel accounts of this passage are presented in Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-36.
1 Corinthians 15	Contains direct instruction regarding both the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the rest of humanity, as well as assertion that Christ has definitively defeated death and believers will receive eternal life. For more about resurrection bodies, see 2 Corinthians 5:1-5.
1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11	Describes what happens to believers who have died before the return of Christ and what is to occur at the coming of the day of the Lord. A stark contrast is made between humans who love and follow God ("children of the light") and those who belong in darkness, engaged in wickedness and destined for wrath.
2 Thessalonians 2:1-12	Discusses the coming of the "man of lawlessness," who will falsely proclaim himself to be God and seek exaltation. His ruse will be convincing, so the Thessalonians are urged to hold tight to the truth they have been taught so that they will not fall for it.
2 Timothy 3:1-5	Speaks in stark terms about the ethical, moral and spiritual decay that will mark the end times. Includes a list of sinful patterns that will be evident among people in the last days. See also 1 Timothy 4:1-5.
2 Peter 3:3-18	Outlines how the world will become skeptical about whether God will keep his promises, and many will mock God and those who follow him. However, God will prove faithful to his promises. The current world will be consumed and replaced with a better eternal world. God does not rush into this, though, because He desires as many people to come to repentance as possible. Additionally, no one can know for sure the time God has appointed for this to come to pass.

Key End Times Scripture Passages

Revelation, especially chapters 19-21

The biblical text that most explicitly addresses what will occur during the end times. Like Ezekiel and Daniel, Revelation makes heavy use of imagery and symbolism. Chapters 19 to 21 speak of Christ's ultimate victory, the vindication of the saints, the judgment and destruction of the wicked, and God's provision of a perfected new heavens and new earth where He will dwell with his people for eternity.

What do end times positions explain?

Several key events emerge from the above passages. How these are understood shape the predominant end times positions.

Key Components of End Times Positions

Second Coming of Christ	Christ's physical return to earth	
Millennium/Christ's Reign	A period of peace & righteousness on earth under the rule of Christ himself	'
Rapture	Believers going up into the air to meet Christ upon his second coming	j.
Tribulation	A period of intense suffering on earth	1
Resurrection of the Dead	Raising of the dead, either unto eternal life or eternal death	G G G G G G G G G G G G G G G G G G G
Final Judgment	Final accounting of deeds and division of people into saved and unsaved	

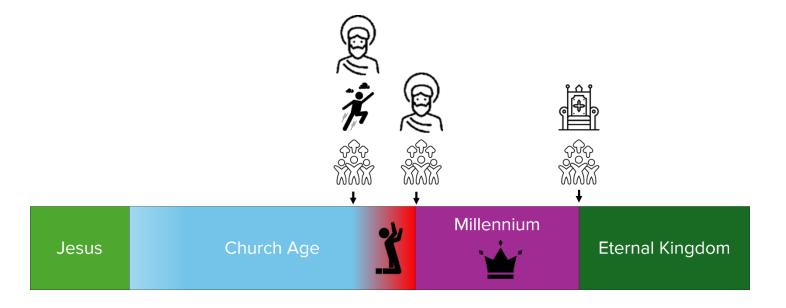
What are the predominant end times positions?

The four most common Christian end times positions are:

- Dispensational premillennialism
- Historic premillennialism
- Amillennialism
- Postmillenialism

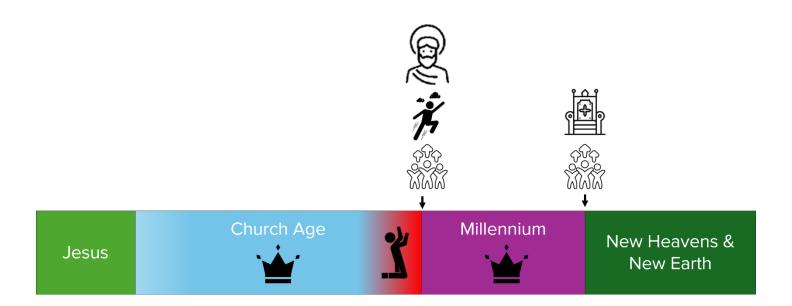
Dispensational Premillennial View

- Developed in the 1800s by John Nelson Darby, popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible
 - o Proponents include Jerry Falwell, John MacArthur, and Hal Lindsey
- Dispensationalism is more than just an end times view; it is a systematic approach to biblical interpretation that suggests there are discrete periods (called *dispensations*) that serve as stages in God's redemptive plan
- Core assumptions:
 - o The Bible is to be interpreted literally whenever possible
 - o A sharp distinction between the church and Israel (i.e., those who are ethnically Jewish)
 - Old Testament promises to Israel are not applied to the church, but instead must be fulfilled literally for the ethnic nation state of Israel
- Distinctive Features:
 - o A 7-year period of tribulation will occur before the second coming so that God can pour out his wrath on the unbelieving world and engage his final plan to bring Israel to faith in Christ as the Messiah
 - The church is raptured (and thus spared from God's wrath) in a partial return of Christ (just far enough to meet believers in the air) before the tribulation
 - o During the millennium, the temple will be restored in Jerusalem, sacrifices will again be offered there, and alongside Christ, Jews will have preeminence in rule over the world (other saints—i.e., Gentile believers—will assist in this rule)
 - o At the end of the millennium, a final rebellion of man and Satan will occur, culminating in Satan's final defeat, after which he is cast into the lake of fire alongside unbelievers
 - o Posits three resurrections from the dead:
 - One at the rapture for Christians who had already died
 - One at the end of the tribulation for the faithful of Israel who died during the Old
 Testament period and for martyrs who converted and were killed during the tribulation
 - One at the end of the millennium for the unrighteous, who are then judged and thrown into the lake of fire
- Especially common among American Evangelical Christians



Historic Premillennial View

- Draws its name from this being the predominant view of early church fathers (e.g., Ireneus, Justin Martyr, Papias)
 - o Proponents include Charles Spurgeon, John Piper, and Ben Witherington III
- Core assumptions
 - o Biblical end times prophecies can be interpreted as a meaningful sequence of discrete events, but can be understood figuratively instead of with strict literalism
 - o Assumes unity/continuity between Israel and the church
- Distinctive features:
 - o Believes the millennium to be a physical and visible reign of Christ on earth, but allows the 1000 years component to be understood figuratively rather than literally
 - Likewise, the tribulation is not necessarily understood to be literally 7 years in length
 - o Rejects a pretribulation rapture, instead interpreting the tribulation as in part a final testing of God's faithful people amidst intense suffering and persecution
 - Some historic premillennialists suggest there may be a midtribulation rapture, where the church is rescued before the final full brunt of God's wrath
 - o Christ's reign has already begun on a spiritual level in the regenerated hearts of believers, and he will return to inaugurate a physical reign on earth prior to the final judgment and the establishment of new heavens and new earth
 - o Upholds two resurrections from the dead
 - One for all faithful believers at Christ's second coming so they may rule alongside him during the millennium
 - One for everyone else at the time of final judgment
- Especially common among Protestant denominations (e.g., Lutherans, Presbyterians)



Amillennial View

- First developed within the 4th century, drawing from Jewish apocalyptic thought and informed largely by the work of St. Augustine of Hippo
 - o Proponents include John Calvin, Martin Luther, and C.S. Lewis
- Core assumptions
 - o Uses a symbolic or figurative interpretation of many biblical end times prophecies
 - o Views Christ's rule as having already begun, though it is not yet fully implemented on earth
- Distinctive features
 - o The millennium is best interpreted symbolically and refers to the church age (i.e., the period between Christ's ascension to heaven and his second coming)
 - No physical millennial rule of Christ will occur on earth; instead, his millennial rule is understood to be a spiritual reign in and through his people—the church
 - o A period of intensifying persecution will come at the end of the church age, followed by the return of Christ
 - The church will be present on earth during this period
 - o Christ's return coincides with the resurrection of all people (believers and unbelievers) and immediate final judgment thereafter
- The predominate view for most of church history



Church Age



New Heavens & New Earth

Jesus

Postmillennial View

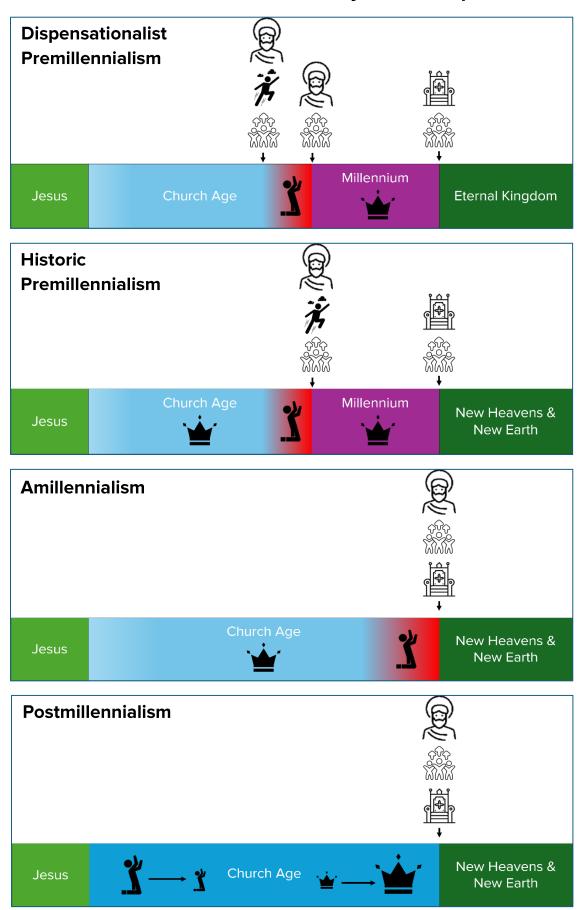
- This approach traces its roots back to the Reformation, with the viewpoint developed more fully in the 17th century
 - o Proponents include Jonathan Edwards, R.C. Sproul, and B.B. Warfield
- Core assumptions:
 - o A strong confidence in the capacity of the gospel message and the Holy Spirit to bring about God's purposes
 - o Often hold an interpretive preference for preterism—the view that at least some biblical end times prophesies were fulfilled in the past
 - Many point to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 as the event that fulfilled many prophecies
- Distinctive features:
 - o Like amillennialists, postmillennialists reject the idea of a discrete historical period during which Christ is physically present to rule on earth prior to final judgment
 - o As the gospel spreads and the Holy Spirit indwells more and more hearts, there will be increasing improvement in human relations and godly rule will prevail
 - Often accompanied by belief in the millennium as a coming golden age of unprecedented peace and prosperity once the gospel and Christian ethics have spread globally, which may or may not last a literal 1000 years
 - o Christ will return after the spread of the gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is complete on earth
 - Some hold that there will be a brief rebellion against God immediately before Christ returns, though not nearly as pronounced as the tribulation proposed by other end times positions
- Was a common view among Protestant Christians and social reformers in the 19th and 20th centuries







End Times Positions – A Side-by-Side Comparison















Dispensational	Two stage	A literal 1000-year	Occurs prior to the	Literal 7-year time	Three separate	Posits three stages
Premillennialism	process:	reign of Christ,	tribulation and	of intense suffering	resurrections:	to the judgment of
	 A partial return 	alongside the	serves to preserve	on earth	Resurrection of	humanity:
	prior to	church and the	believers from	Will serve to bring	saints to	• One for raptured
	tribulation	martyrs (people	experiencing the	Israel to salvation	participate in	believers
	when Jesus	converted and then	pouring out of	 Church does not 	rapture (Note:	One for the
	meets the	killed during the	God's wrath	endure tribulation	some hold that	nations at the
	church in the	tribulation),		 God's judgment 	this occurs later,	beginning of the
	air and takes	occurring after the		and wrath pour	near the end of	millennium
	them to heaven	full second coming		out on the	the tribulation)	One for
	• Full physical	 Beginning of new 		unbelieving world	 Resurrection of 	resurrected
	and visible	heavens & new			martyrs at full	unbelievers at the
	return to earth	earth, as the			second coming	end of the
	of Christ and	curse is partially			 Resurrection of 	millennium
	the church, to	lifted (full			everyone else at	
	co-rule during	realization after			final judgment	
	millennium	millennium ends)				
Historic	A singular	Christ's reign	Occurs after the	A period of intense	Two separate	Holds to only one
Premillennialism	occurrence	began and is	tribulation and is	suffering and	physical	judgment,
	when Christ	currently present in	simultaneous with	testing of people	resurrections of the	occurring at the
	physically and	the regenerated	Christ's second	• God's wrath pours	dead:	end of the
	visibly returns to	hearts of church-	coming	out on	 Resurrection of 	millennium, when
	earth to rule	age believers, but	• Some posit a	unbelievers	believers at	both the wicked
	alongside the	will culminate in a	midtribulation	 Believers must 	second coming	and the righteous
	church	distinct period	rapture prior to	endure and stay	 Resurrection of 	will stand before
		when Christ is	second coming,	faithful amidst	unbelievers at	the Lord, give
		visibly and	but this is less	persecution and	final judgment	account for their
		physically present	common	attack from Satan,		lives and deeds,
		to rule on earth		the Antichrist, and		and be sorted into
		• Permits 1000		the wicked		the saved (who
		years to be				enter eternal life)
		interpreted				and the unsaved
		figuratively				(who are cast into
						eternal death)













Amillennialism Though Christ is reigning currently from his seat at the right hand of the Father, He will physically return to rule on earth Postmillennialism The glorious progress of the gospel will usher in the return of Christ after its spread to all corners of the world Postmillennialism Though Christ is reigning millennium as millennium as symbolic and holds that Christ seat at the right hand of the Father, He will physically return to rule on earth The glorious progress of the gospel will usher in the return of Christ after its spread to all corners of the world Postmillennialism Though Christ is reigning millennium as willennium as symbolic and holds that Christ seat at the right that Christ presently rules on earth thand of the presently rules on earth thand of the presently rules on earth through his presently rules on earth thand of the presently rules on earth through his presently rules on earth through his between rapture and second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of the return of Christ "Tapture" as the resurrection of							
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Christ after its year golden age spread to all corners of the corn		gospel will usher	• Literalists propose	between rapture	decrease as the	occurring at the	occurring at the
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corners of the peace when all "rapture" as the under its influence resurrection of righteous will stand		Christ after its	year golden age	May interpret	more and more of	second coming	when both the
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are in submission second coming of spiritual in nature give account for			are in submission	second coming of		spiritual in nature	give account for
to Christ's spiritual Christ (i.e., regeneration their lives and			to Christ's spiritual	Christ		(i.e., regeneration	their lives and
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• The figurative rather than sorted into the			• The figurative			rather than	sorted into the
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