

# Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

## Day 38

### When Is Jesus Coming Back?

The Bible provides some signs or indications of Christ's approaching return. Jesus himself reveals a number of these in the Olivet Discourse (specifically, **Matthew 24:4–35**). What makes this area of theology so difficult, however, is that prophetic statements regarding Messiah's coming to reign on earth are scattered throughout Scripture, and it is a monumental challenge to harmonize them or put together the puzzle's pieces.

Furthermore, much of the prophetic literature is in poetic form and in a genre called "apocalyptic," so whether predictions should be understood figuratively or literally is a subject of debate. As a result of these obstacles, there have been three broad views regarding the flow of events in the "end times": amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism.

The term *millennium*, from the Latin word for "thousand years," is based on the opening verses of Revelation 20, which speak of Christ reigning for a thousand years. "The millennium" basically is synonymous with the concept of "the kingdom." How does this, then, fit with the second coming?

#### **Amillennialism**

Amillennialism indicates that this view denies the millennium, that is, a literal, earthly and physical future reign of Christ. Rather, it is believed his reign began at his first coming, so he is reigning now—either on earth in the lives of believers individually and the church corporately (the majority amillennial view), or in heaven, as Christ sits at the right hand of his Father (a more recent, minority amillennial view).

Amillennialism is sometimes known as *realized eschatology*, in contrast to "futurist eschatology," because, they say, the messianic kingdom has been realized and thus is not a future reality to be anticipated. Jesus seemed to indicate this, for example, when he said, using the present tense, "*The kingdom of God is in your midst [or, within you, or among you]*" (**Luke 17:21**). This view also holds that moral and spiritual conditions will deteriorate as the time of Christ's return approaches (**2 Timothy 3:1–9**). When he comes, all people will be resurrected and be judged. The eternal state will then be established.

Amillennialism has largely come from the significant theological influence of the fourth-century church father Augustine, especially his book *The City of God*. The majority view through the majority of church history, it is the standard belief of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Amillennialism results from a more figurative or spiritual interpretation of many prophetic texts. For example, the entire book of **Revelation** is taken in a more figurative way, and the “thousand years” (**20:1–7**) refers not specifically to one thousand years but rather to a long period of time, namely, the time between Christ’s first and second comings.

### **Postmillennialism**

Like amillennialism, being based upon a more figurative interpretation of prophetic texts, postmillennialism denies any *physical* future reign of Christ *on earth*. Rather the millennium, or “kingdom,” will be a very long era that is brought about as God works through the evangelistic efforts of believers on earth. *Unlike* amillennialism, postmillennialism is intrinsically optimistic, holding that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be effectively proclaimed, the world will be thoroughly evangelized, and even those who do not specifically profess Jesus as Savior and Lord will be so profoundly affected by a Christian worldview that the world will be characterized by righteousness and peace.

So the kingdom is not established at Christ’s first coming, but rather sometime in the flow of church history between his first and second comings. *After* this long period of the “kingdom,” Jesus will return—*postmillennial*. Like amillennialists, postmillennialists believe that the resurrections, the judgments, and the eternal state will then occur.

Postmillennialism, which developed in the seventeenth century, was popular thereafter due to the influence of the Enlightenment, advances in science and education, and the Industrial Revolution. But two world wars and the increasing visibility of wickedness throughout the world have led to a decline, even though the view has enjoyed a recent revival of sorts.

Another term that applies to some who hold to postmillennialism (and possibly amillennialism) is **preterism**, from the Latin word meaning “past.” Generally, preterism asserts that some biblical prophecies concerning the “last days” already were fulfilled (before AD 70),

implying that the kingdom is now a reality. Specifically, preterism says “last days” refers to the last days of the Mosaic covenant, or the Old Testament Law.

God verified the Law’s end when he allowed the temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed in AD 70. This is what Jesus meant by “This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (**Matthew 24:34**, a crucial preterist text). Prophecies regarding the “antichrist,” “tribulation,” and “day of the Lord” were fulfilled in the middle of the first century. Jesus Christ did return—not physically, but spiritually, and not to reign, but to judge. But most preterists do believe Jesus will return physically in the future, and then will follow the resurrection of all, the judgment of all, and the eternal state.

### **Order of Events**

#### **Amillennialism**

1. The kingdom was established at the advent; Christ is reigning on earth through Christians or in heaven.
2. Wickedness will increase as time goes on.
3. Christ will return to earth.
4. The righteous and the wicked will be resurrected and judged.
5. The eternal state will be established.

#### **Postmillennialism**

1. The kingdom has been or will be established on earth by the church sometime between the advent and the second coming.
2. Righteousness will increase as time goes on.

#### **Premillennialism**

Premillennialism is the view that Jesus will yet return physically and that he himself will establish his kingdom and reign on earth for a thousand years—a millennium. Unlike the other two views, this one results from interpreting prophetic texts much more literally (while still seeking to handle the elements of poetic literature and figures of speech responsibly).

For example, premillennialism is based on a literal understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, in which God promised Abraham many descendants (today called Jews) and a land for them to dwell in forever (then known as Canaan or Palestine, and today Israel; Genesis 12:1–3; 13:14–17), and the Davidic covenant, in which God promised David many descendants and that among those would be an eternal throne or kingdom, a continuation of David’s reign (2 Samuel 7:4–17).

It maintains that God’s promises in these covenants have *not* yet been fulfilled—they are *not* fulfilled in a *spiritual* sense in the church today (as amillennialism/postmillennialism say) but will be, literally and fully, in the millennium, along with the promises of the new covenant, announced in **Jeremiah 31**, and inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection. This view interprets Revelation literally (while recognizing the nature of apocalyptic literature and the presence of figures of speech).

Premillennialism was the generally accepted view during the church’s first three centuries, up until the time of Augustine. Its modern-era resurgence began during the nineteenth century.

In chapter 39, we will look at the flow of future events from a premillennialist perspective in a bit more detail.

### **FUN FACT**

Jesus Christ is returning in judgment *today*! Or so a certain preacher said would happen this evening (May 21, 2011, as I write)—specifically, 6:00 PM around the world. Obviously, since you are reading this, he was wrong. By no means was he the first to forecast the date (*or* the hour) of the second coming; all such “foretellings” have proven false. The problem is that Jesus himself said no one knows the time of his return except his Father (**Matthew 24:36**). As we have seen, soon thereafter he said, “Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (**v. 42**). And again, the application is: Be ready!