

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. William Macleod

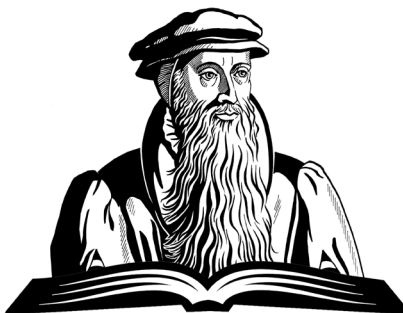
Module 7:

ESCHATOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Lecture 3

**EVENTS LEADING TO
THE SECOND COMING**



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Module 7 ~ The Doctrine of Last Things

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Module 7 ~ Lecture 3

Events Leading to the Second Coming

Today we come to our third lecture in eschatology, and we will be dealing with the events preceding the second coming of Christ. Having begun consideration of individual eschatology, and dealt with death, and the intermediate state, I would like now to return to general eschatology, and look at the events which lead to the second coming of Christ. The return of Christ is the great hope and expectation of the church.

First, we will look at terms used for the second coming. There are three terms used in Scripture for the second coming of Christ. The first of these is “apocalypsis”, which means “revelation”. It has the idea of the removal of the veil, showing something which is otherwise hidden. It is the term used by Paul, when he says to the Corinthians, “So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”—1 Corinthians 1, verses 7–8). It’s also used in 2 Thessalonians 1:6–7, “Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; and to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.” So it’s this revelation of Christ from heaven.

The second term that is used is “epiphaneia”, which means “appearance”, from which we get our term, epiphany. Paul uses this term when he admonishes Timothy: “That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ”—1 Timothy 6, verse 14—the “appearing” of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The third word that’s used is “parousia”, which means “coming”, and is used, for example, in Matthew 24:27, “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the “coming” of the Son of man be”—the “parousia” of the Son of man.

Now, thinking of the promised return. Our Lord Jesus told his disciples that he was going to have to leave them. This made them sad, but he assures them, “I will not leave you comfortless”—John 14, verse 18. He would not leave them like orphans. Indeed, he explained to them that it would be for their benefit: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you”—John 16, verse 7. The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would be the abiding presence of Christ with the church, and he would apply the redemption purchased by Christ to them. He would regenerate them, indwell them, sanctify them, assure them, guide them, empower them, and glorify them. The Spirit would unite them to God. Jesus, as a man, was limited to being in one place at one time. But the Spirit, as God, is omnipresent. He’s able to be everywhere at once, and able to help every Christian, wherever they are, and to do it at the same time.

Jesus further encourages his disciples, “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”—John 14, verses 1–3. He assures them that he will return again. On an earlier occasion, he had warned them to be ready for his return: “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come”—Matthew 24, verse 42. When tried before Caiaphas, the high priest, he asserted, “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven”—Matthew 26:64, and this caused the high priest to rend his garments and condemn Jesus as a blasphemer. But our Savior is the only man who never ever blasphemed. He spoke the truth. Following his ascension, while the disciples were still gazing up into the skies into which their Lord had disappeared, two angels stood by them in white clothes and said, “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven”—Acts 1:11. Christ will return one day visibly and bodily, just as he had ascended and disappeared into the clouds.

When will Christ come again? Down through the centuries, people have tried to predict when Christ will return. The Jehovah Witnesses predicted that Christ’s second coming would be in 1878. When it didn’t happen, they predicted it would be in 1881. And when that didn’t happen, they said it would be in 1914, then 1918, then 1925, then 1975. They are obviously false prophets. Much publicity some years ago was given to Harold Camping, president of Family Radio, and a well-known Bible teacher, who predicted that Christ would return in September, 1994. He too was proved to be false.

Our Lord Jesus said that “Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only”—Matthew 24:36. If it could be worked out from the Scriptures, Jesus would have done that. He knew many things that we do not. He is the Word of God, and the greatest Prophet there ever was, yet he did not know the date of the second coming. If course, as God—the second Person of the Trinity—he is omniscient, and he knows everything, but as a human being, he is limited. He knows only what God, through the Spirit, chooses to reveal to him. God had a purpose in keeping that day from him, and also from us.

Our duty is made plain: “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh”—Matthew 25:13. We live in dangerous times. We are to be watching. There are many false prophets around. In Old Testament times, someone who prophesied of a future event, and it did not happen, was to be stoned to death—Deuteronomy 18:20–22. Jesus warned against those false prophets: “Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect”—Matthew 24:23–24. Yes, if it was possible, even the elect would be deceived. But of course, that is not possible: “But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things”—1 John 2:20. Peter assures believers of their preservation: “Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”—1 Peter 1, verse 5.

But was Christ mistaken as to his return, thinking that it would take place in the lifetime of his disciples? Liberal theologians think that Christ was mistaken as to the time of his return. They say that he thought he would return in the lifetime of his disciples. In Matthew 24, we are told of many great things which were to happen, including his own return. And then Jesus says, “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall

pass away, but my words shall not pass away”—verses 34–35). On the surface, this seems to imply that his return would take place during the lifetime of some present. However, we totally reject liberal theology and its unbelief. If Jesus made mistakes, he is not the Son of God, and he cannot say this. If his prediction of certain events was wrong, we cannot trust him in anything he said. As real Christians, therefore, our starting point is the infallibility of Christ, and the infallibility of Scriptures.

But how then are we to understand Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24? Some evangelicals follow what is called a preterist understanding of this chapter. For them, all that is prophesied in Matthew 24, and also in Mark 13, has actually happened already. They see these events as fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Jewish nation, which took place in AD 70. Jesus, they say, is using common apocalyptic language, which to us seem overly graphic to describe these dramatic events. Now it’s certainly possible to interpret the chapter in that way, however, to me, the chapter goes well beyond the events of AD 70, even allowing for the use of apocalyptic language here.

Others interpret it in a partly preterist way. They divide the chapter at the end of verse 35. What happened before verse 36, was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, but then verses 36 on describe the end of the world. However, the language in the part before verse 36 does seem to go beyond what happened in the destruction of Jerusalem, dramatic though that event was.

Surely, what we read in verses 30 and 31 describe the second coming of Christ: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”—Matthew 24, verses 30–31. Surely this can only refer to the end of the world and the final judgment.

Others argue that “this generation shall not pass” refers to the “evil and adulterous generation,” like the one that was then present. So an evil and adulterous generation in future times—there will always be such an evil generation. This type of generation will not pass till all is fulfilled. Or, alternatively, that it refers to the Jewish race, that the Jewish race will not pass until all these things be fulfilled. But surely, if this was the case, the word used would be “genos”—kind or race, rather than “genia”—which means “generation”. In all the other places in the New Testament where “genia”—“this generation”—is used, it refers to that actual generation. For example, “But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows”—Matthew 11:16. Another example would be: “The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here”—Matthew 12:42. So Jesus is talking here about those who are alive and hearing him at that time. “This generation” refers to those who were present then and listening to him.

The best way to understand what Jesus is saying here is to go back to the original questions he was asked. The chapter begins with the disciples showing Jesus the temple. They are obviously proud of the beautiful buildings. Jesus responds to them: “See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down”—verse 2 of Matthew 24. That must have shocked the disciples. It left questions in their mind. Later, as he sat resting on the Mount of Olives looking towards Jerusalem, “the disciples came to him privately,” asking, “Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?”—verse 3. So it is important to notice that Jesus is here asked two questions. First, he’s asked, When will the temple be destroyed? And then the second questions is,

What shall be the sign indicating the second coming and the end of the world? It is, in answering the first of these questions that he replies that this present generation will not pass till the temple is destroyed, and all these things connected with that be fulfilled. So the difficulty in interpreting Matthew 24 and 25, is that it is dealing with two future events separated by a considerable period of time. It's a bit like looking at mountain ranges in the distance. There are actually two mountain ranges separated by many miles, but they look just like one range until you come up to them. The same thing is to be found with the Old Testament prophets looking into the future. We see some things connected with the first coming of Christ, and some things connected with the second coming of Christ, but being in the future, we see these things as somewhat mingled together. At one time, the prophets are talking of the first coming of Christ, and then also of the second coming of Christ. So with Christ here, he is describing future events. At some points, he is clearly referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, and then he describes the end of the world. And then he comes back to the destruction of Jerusalem again.

So when Jesus says, "This generation shall not pass until all these things be fulfilled, he is obviously answering the first of the questions of the disciples, and referring to the destruction of the temple, when not one stone was left standing upon another. When the early Christians saw the approach of the "abomination of desolation", that is, the Roman army with the worship of the emperor, they heeded the word of Christ. Christ had said, "Then let them which be in Judea flee to the mountains"—verse 16, and they actually fled from the city of Jerusalem, and so they escaped the destruction of Jerusalem. So verses 15 to 20 clearly answer the first question with regard to the destruction of Jerusalem. However, in verses 14, or verse 27, or verses 30 to 31, he is obviously talking about his own coming and the end of the world. In verses 34 and 35, he returns to the temple being destroyed, and is clearly speaking of the events of AD 70. Again, in verses 36 onward, he is talking about the end of the world.

Now there are some other passages which seem to imply an imminent return of Christ. Jesus once said, "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come"—Matthew 10:23. Surely this teaches that Christ will return in the lifetime of the disciples. But this coming refers to his coming in power. And he came in power at his own resurrection, and at Pentecost by his Spirit. The disciples, in the time remaining till his resurrection and Pentecost, will not have been able to evangelize every town in Israel. Jesus had said, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"—Matthew 10:5–6. Following Pentecost, the Lord, in the great commission, instructs that the gospel is to be preached to all nations, not just the Jews—Matthew 28, verses 18–20. Similarly, we have the words of Christ in the Gospel of Mark: "And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power." This passage is immediately followed by an account of the transfiguration, in which the veil is lifted slightly, and the kingship and glory of Christ is partly revealed. But the kingdom of Christ came with power in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and in the pouring out of his Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

So then we have the question, should we expect that Christ might return any day? Jesus said that his return would be as it was in the days of Noah. Then, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and did not realize what happened until the flood came and carried them all away. And Jesus warns, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come"—Matthew 24:42. It was said it was the same in the

days of Lot: “Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all”—Luke 17:28–29. We are warned, “Remember Lot’s wife.” Don’t look back; keep your eyes on the coming of Christ. The Lord Jesus will come as a thief in the night. “Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh”—Matthew 24:44.

Christ, of course, can come in two ways. He can come in death, carrying us away to our long home. Or he can come in the second coming, ushering in the final judgment. Paul speaks of Christ’s return: “But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief”—1 Thessalonians 5, verses 1–4. They should not be sleeping, but watching for the return of the Lord. The day of the Lord, that is, the day of his return in judgment, will come suddenly and take many by surprise. Peter also warned: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God”—2 Peter 3, verses 10–12. Again, the emphasis is upon the suddenness of Christ’s return.

But we are also to be looking forward to it, and praying for Christ to come soon. The last words in the book of Revelation are also relevant and speak of an imminent return: “He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen”—Revelation 22, verses 20–21. Christ himself assures us that he will return. Two thousand years have passed. But to God, a thousand years are as one day, so his coming will be soon.

But then, are there events which still need to occur before Christ can return? Some Christians think each day they rise that this might be the day of Christ’s return. Should we be like that—living constantly looking for Jesus to appear? We certainly should be watching and praying each day, and be ready for Christ’s coming, and be ready to die. Even if Christ does not return today, this very day could be our last in this world. We are to be ready for heaven. It does seem, however, that this attitude can become wrongly extreme. The Thessalonian church was troubled with this, in that, “the day of Christ is at hand”—2 Thessalonians 2, verse 2. As a result of this teaching, some of them had given up their ordinary employments, and were just waiting for the end of the world. But Paul is not pleased. He writes, “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition”—2 Thessalonians 2:3. Later, in the same epistle, he warns those who had given up their jobs: “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread”—2 Thessalonians 3:10–12. So it is plain from this that certain things had to happen before Christ could return. Here, we are told about the falling away which has to take place first, and the revelation of the man of sin, or the antichrist. In Romans 11, we are told of something else which must happen before Christ returns—the conversion of the Jews to Christ. Now, of course, these events could take place quickly, but from this, it appears that

Christ could not return today.

Now I'd like us to think about the signs of the end. Jesus was asked the question, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?"—Matthew 24, verse 3. A list of signs are given. There will be many deceivers, false prophets, and false Christs. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be famines, and pestilences or plagues, and earthquakes in many places. Christians will be tortured, and killed, and hated by all nations, for the sake of their relationship to Christ. Many will be offended, turning away from the faith, and even betraying fellow Christians. Many will apostatize. The gospel will be preached to all nations. There shall be great tribulation—Matthew 24, verses 4–28.

We have made reference already to the antichrist, or the man of sin who is yet to be revealed. John also tells us about antichrist, and of many antichrists: "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us"—1 John 2:18–19. Antichrists were already there in the days of John, but there is the great antichrist ahead.

In Daniel, chapter 7, we are told about the little horn who displaces three other kings, also symbolized by horns: "And of the other which came up, and before whom three fell; even of that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spake very great things, whose look was more stout than his fellows. I beheld, and the same horn made war with the saints, and prevailed against them; until the Ancient of days came"—Daniel 7, verses 20–22. And then later, "And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time. But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end"—verses 25–26. The ten horns seem to refer to the Roman emperors, but three of them are displaced by the little horn, which would seem to refer to the Popes of Rome, who take over from the emperors, and continue the power of Rome, and who speak great things of themselves, and make huge claims, but who persecuted many of the saints of the Lord. They did this especially around the time of the Reformation, when there were thousands of martyrs to Roman Catholicism.

Thinking then about the man of sin. Paul tells us about this man of sin: "Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie"—2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, verses 4–11.

Different interpretations have been given of this man of sin, or antichrist. Some see him as a persecuting Roman emperor, like Nero. Others think that it refers to some future great individual. The common view amongst the Reformers and the Puritans is that it is the Pope of Rome. For example, *the Westminster Confession of Faith* states, "There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that antichrist, that

man of sin, and the son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God”—that’s chapter 25, section 6, of *the Confession*. The spirit of antichrist was already at work in Paul’s day, and so there is a continuity of the Popes with the past, i.e., with the emperors of Rome in persecuting the true saints. The antichrist is obviously someone within the church, because he sits in the temple of God. He claims a position like God. Popes claim to be the kings of the church, wearing a crown, or triple tiara, taking the position of Christ as head of the church on earth. And Rome also has been notorious for its fake miracles and lying wonders. It deals in deception, and those who do not love the truth of God’s word are led astray by its false teachings.

In the book of Revelation, we read of the great whore, the Mother of Harlots—Revelation 17, who is also a city, Babylon the Great. She is drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. She is seated on a beast with seven heads. And this is interpreted for us as the seven mountains on which the woman sits. Now Babylon was no longer a city in the first century, but Rome classically is the city built upon the seven hills—or seven mountains. Peter is generally understood to be writing from Rome, when he sent his greetings from the local church where he was: “The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you: and so doth Marcus my son”—1 Peter 5, verse 13. This woman is further interpreted for us as, “That great city which reigneth over the kings of the earth”—Revelation 17, verse 18. And she makes war with the Lamb—verse 14. But she is destroyed: “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird”—Revelation 18, verse 2. She stands in stark contrast to the bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”—Revelation 21, verse 2. Traditionally, the Reformers and Puritans saw Babylon the Harlot as representing the Roman Catholic Church. Many modern Reformed theologians see it, rather, as representing the world and its enmity to Christ and the church. It is worth noticing, however, that the Harlot is distinguished from the kings of the earth who have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth who were made rich through selling their merchandise to her. So therefore, the kings and the merchants are distinct from the Harlot. The Roman Catholic Church martyred many millions of godly men and women, and yet claims to be the bride of Christ. The Roman Empire with its emperors persecuted the apostles and believers in the first centuries, but changed into the Roman Catholic Church, with its Popes, which persecuted the Reformers in later days.

These signs of the end have largely been fulfilled. The gospel is now preached to all nations. Christians are to be found in all countries. There have been famines, and earthquakes, and wars. There is pestilence—this coronavirus troubling the whole world, and the governments and scientists find great difficulty in coping with the coronavirus. There has been a great falling away in the church, and the love of many has grown cold. The present Pope, Francis—a Jesuit—seems more clever and cunning than any of the past. He is even trying to get the Muslims to come in under his banner in the one world church, in opposition to the true, blood-bought children of God.

There is still, however, one sign that needs to be fulfilled before Christ returns, and that is the conversion of the Jews. And more Jews have been converted today than ever before. We will consider this in a future lecture. Following the conversion of the Jews, there will be a falling away, and a brief spiritually dark period: “Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God

out of heaven, and devoured them”—Revelation 20, verses 7–9. There will be intense persecution, and the very existence of the church on earth will be threatened. This will be the so-called battle of Armageddon. Then at the point when the darkness is greatest, the Lord will return. He will judge all mankind, and will cast the devil and his angels into the lake of fire, and all those who side with him. He will receive his children into heaven, to enjoy Him forevermore. Amen.