

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. William Macleod

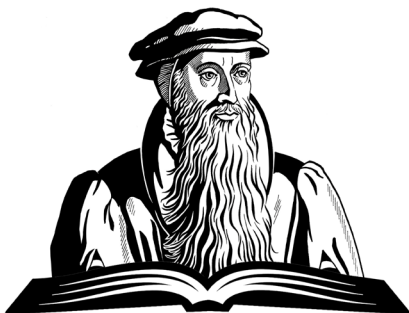
Module 7:

ESCHATOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Lecture 6

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENARIANISM



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 7 ~ The Doctrine of Last Things

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Module 7 ~ Lecture 6

Dispensational Premillenarianism

We now come to our sixth lecture in Eschatology, and our subject today is Dispensational Premillenarianism. It is important to consider Dispensation Premillenarianism, as it has been the generally-held viewpoint of most evangelical churches for the past hundred and fifty years. It has been widely promoted by radio and TV ministries, by the *Scofield Reference Bible*, by Bible institutes and colleges, and by popular books like Hal Lindsey's, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Dispensationalists view the Jews' return to the land of Palestine, and the setting up of the nation of Israel as one of the most important conditions of the coming millennium. There are signs that dispensationalism is beginning to lose its grip on the evangelical church, with criticism coming from Reformed theology, which has weakened the general attachment to dispensationalism. Great teaching centers for promoting dispensationalism, such as the large Dallas Seminary, are starting to modify and water down their dispensational theology, though the traditional views are still widely held by many Christians.

First though, I wish to look briefly at Historic Premillennialism. Historic Premillennialism is to be clearly distinguished from Dispensational Premillennialism. It was common in the early church, and was called Chiliasm. For example, it was the view held by Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus, but was rejected by Augustine, and so generally lost favor, and was not current in the medieval church. At the Reformation, premillennialism was revived by many Anabaptists, but was rejected by Luther, Calvin, and the other main Reformers. Calvin described it as, "Too childish to refute." In the nineteenth century, it was revived and popularized again by Edward Irving, in famous lectures which he gave at the time of the General Assembly in Edinburgh, and was accepted by the Bonar brothers, Horatius and Andrew Bonar, and Robert Murray M'Cheyne. The famous London Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was also a premillenarianist, though he does not give it a lot of room in his sermons or his writings.

Premillenarianism taught that Christ could return any day, and when he did return, it would be in order, physically, to reign for a thousand years in Jerusalem. Revelation chapter 20 is understood to teach that after a period of falling away and persecution, Christ would come and raise Christians from the dead—the first resurrection, and they will reign with Christ for those thousand years. At the end of that period, there will be a second resurrection, when the wicked will be raised and judged. The thousand-year period will be a period of peace and prosperity and gospel blessing, and the promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled, and men will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. This millennium will end with a little season of Satan's rebellion, which will be put down by Christ, then will be the judgment, and the final state.

We turn now to look at Dispensational Premillenarianism. Dispensational Premillenarianism is

of a much more recent origin. It's been around only for the last hundred and fifty or two hundred years. But during that time, it's become very prominent, so that many thought that you couldn't be an evangelical Christian and not hold to this position. It's much more elaborate than Historic Premillennialism, and goes much further. And essentially it's not compatible with Reformed theology and sound Biblical exegesis. It is fanatically espoused by its adherents as a fundamental point of orthodoxy, and they tend to hold that those who do not hold to this view are really to be dismissed as unbelieving liberals.

Dispensationalism, as a system, was developed by J. N. Darby, whose dates are 1800 to 1892. He was one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren. He was born in London of Anglo-Irish parents, and began his education at Westminster School, but completed it in the Trinity College, Dublin, in Ireland. He was ordained as an Anglican clergyman, and began his ministry within the Church of Ireland. He saw some early success in the conversion of Roman Catholics. But when the Archbishop required converts to swear allegiance to George IV as the rightful King of Ireland, this created antagonism amongst the Irish, and so the conversions ceased. Darby resigned in protest, and over the next few years, developed his own distinctive theology.

He began to believe that the kingdom prophesied in Isaiah, and in other Old Testament prophecies, was entirely different from the Christian church. The basic idea is that Jesus Christ came to this world in order to be King, ruling on the throne of David, over the Jews in Jerusalem, but he was rejected, and so, he turned to the Gentiles. But one day, after the age of the church, he will return to reign over the Jews. The Christian church among the Gentiles was a kind of afterthought—it was never meant to happen. Dispensationalism rejects Reformed theology and the idea that God is sovereign and has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. Essentially, dispensationalists must be Arminian, believing in free will, and that there is no fixed plan of God. Dispensationalism considers all history as divided into dispensations, or economies, of God. That is, defined periods of time, during which God dealt with God in different ways and in distinctive covenants, each quite different from the others, and the way of salvation changing according to the dispensation.

Now Reformed theologians also talk about dispensations—they have the Old Testament dispensation, and the New Testament dispensation, but they are dispensations of the covenant of grace, and they have only the one way of salvation, essentially the same in the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament saints were saved by faith in Christ, the Christ who was to come and the work which he would do. Those in the New Testament are saved by Christ too, but by looking back in faith to Christ and his work which he finished at Calvary. There are differences between the two dispensations—the blood sacrifices being offered in the Old Testament dispensation, but in essence, there is only the one covenant of grace, and all who are saved, are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Dispensationalist go much further than this. Usually they distinguish seven such periods, or dispensations. First, innocence, before the fall. Then conscience, from the fall to Noah. Then human government, from Noah to Abraham. Then promise, from Abraham to Moses. Then the law, from Moses to Christ. Then grace—the church age. And then the millennium. Following this world's history, comes the eternal state. The way to be saved for dispensationalists is different in each dispensation. Each of these periods is a time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God, and each time, man fails. Man's failure leads to the replacement of the dispensation by a new one, with a new test of obedience, and this way, a new dispensation begins. The most important of these dispensations are the last three.

Now we're thinking of the errors of dispensationalism. Dispensationalists draw a definite dis-

inction between Israel and the church. Traditional dispensationalists teach that the Israelites of the Old Testament were saved by keeping the law, keeping the commandments. Though some modern, progressive dispensationalists will tend to modify this somewhat and talk about salvation by grace. But this was the traditional view of dispensationalist, that you were saved in the Old Testaments by keeping the Ten Commandments, and the ceremonial law.

Jesus made plain to Nicodemus, who was under the old law dispensation, that no one could be saved without being born again—John 3, verse 3: “Ye must be born again.” Paul asserts that no can be justified, pardoned and accepted by God by keeping the law: “Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin”—Romans 3, verse 20. We can’t be saved by keeping the commandments, because the commandments only point to our sin and condemn us. In another epistle, Paul writes, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast”—Ephesians 2, verses 8–9. Salvation has always been by grace, and always will be, in order that God will get all the glory, and that man cannot in any way boast of saving himself. The problem of so many Jews was this: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God”—Romans 10, verse 3. Neither Jews nor anyone else can get to heaven by their good works, or keeping of the law, or performing of ritual. Salvation is by grace. It is made perfectly plain in Hebrews that men and women in Old Testament times perished because of unbelief, not failure to keep the commandments, but unbelief: “But with whom was he grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief”—Hebrews 3, verses 17–19).

The error of drawing a distinction between Israel and the church is shown when Stephen states concerning Moses: “This is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us”—Acts 7:38. Here, the word in the Greek for the church is “ecclesia,” the common word used in the New Testament for “the church.” Israel in the wilderness journey was God’s church. The church is the people of from the days of Adam to the present, till the end of the world. There is essentially only one way of salvation—only one Savior—a Savior who was promised in Genesis 3, verse 15. In the Old Testament, the people looked forward in faith to what the Messiah would accomplish, and we today look back. There are, of course, superficial differences between Israel as the church in the Old Testament, and the church in the New Testament. But Israel was the church in Old Testament times. Outward membership of Israel was no more of a guarantee of salvation than outward membership of a church today: Romans 9, verse 6—“For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.”

Another error of the traditional dispensationalists is to distinguish sharply between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is that which belongs to the church, and the kingdom of God is that which belongs to the Jews. However, a careful study of these terms will show that Matthew used the term “kingdom of heaven” because he was largely writing with a Jewish audience in mind, and the Jews preferred to use the term “heaven” instead of using the holy name of God. The same parables are used to explain what the kingdom of heaven is in Matthew, and what the kingdom of God is in Mark and Luke.

Dispensationalists refer to the church as a parenthesis, or a kind of temporary interlude in the progress of Israel’s history. They do not see the church period as something prophesied in the

Old Testament. They note that Paul wrote to the Colossians: “I Paul am made a minister; who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church: whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”—Colossians 1, verse 23–27. A “mystery” is a “secret now revealed”. So the church, composed of a few Jews and many Gentiles, is something that was hidden in Old Testament times, but is now revealed. The rejection of Christ by the Jews meant that God turned from them to the Gentiles. The gospel was preached to them, many of the Gentiles believed and are saved, and so we now have the church as it is today—many Gentiles, and only a few Jews. The mystery is indeed the fact that salvation is not limited to the Jews, but that the Gentiles also are saved. Though this was largely hidden in Old Testament times, it was revealed to some of the prophets. The dispensationalists say that it wasn’t known in Old Testament times, but James makes this clear that it was known to the prophets, when speaking at the Jerusalem council. When summing up, he argues that the Gentiles do not have to keep the ceremonial law, he quotes from Amos 9, verses 11–12: “After this, I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.” He then argues: “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world”—Acts 15:16–18. God knew this in the days of Amos, and indeed from the beginning of creation. God did not change his mind. It was always God’s purpose to gather the Gentiles into his church.

Now, turning to the rapture. Dispensationalism lays tremendous stress upon the rapture. Dispensationalist hermeneutics assert that the Bible and prophecy should, if at all possible, be interpreted literally, including numbers, periods of time, materials used, buildings, etc. For example, from the later chapters of Ezekiel, it would appear that the temple would be rebuilt and sacrifices offered again, and that is what they say. This is a denial of the New Testament revelation, and especially of the Book of Hebrews, where Christ is presented as the last great sacrifice which did away with the need of any other. There is a reluctance by dispensationalists to consider the whole context of a verse or chapter, to note the different forms of literature which are used in the Bible, and to interpret symbolical language as such.

Dispensationalists teach that Christ could come at any time. They lay great stress on what Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord”—1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 13–17.

Dispensationalists teach that Christ will come first, to snatch away or rapture his people. When he appears, the saints who have died will arise. Graves will open, there will be a resurrection, and they will join those who are still alive, and meet the Lord in the air. From there, they will disappear

to heaven, where, for seven years, they will enjoy the wedding supper of the Lamb. There are many variations of this teaching, but this would be the most common. They believe the first resurrection spoken of in Revelation 20, verses 4 to 6, is the resurrection before the rapture. Amillennialists, and some postmillennialists believe that the first resurrection spoken of in Revelation 20 is the spiritual resurrection of the regeneration—the new birth. Other postmillennialists believe that the first resurrection is the great spiritual revival which takes place at the beginning of the millennium. Reformed theologians believe in only one physical resurrection at the end of the world, on judgment day. For dispensationalists, there are several resurrections, more than just two.

We have noted that dispensationalists speak of the church age as being a parenthesis. So when does it end? Obviously, when the church saints are raptured to heaven. Then God returns to his original plan with Israel and the Messiah. A distinction is drawn between Christ coming for his saints—the rapture, and Christ coming with his saints at the end of the seven years. At the end of the seven-year period, there will be another resurrection of the saints who died during the seven-year period. Dispensationalists assert that during the time of the great tribulation on earth—the seven-year period which follows the rapture—there will be terrible persecution. Antichrist, the beast from the sea—Revelation 13—will be revealed, and he will reign on the earth. At that time, the majority of the Jews will be converted. Then Christ will return with his saints. Christ will land on the Mount of Olives which will cleave in two, creating a new valley—Zechariah 14—and the Christian Jews will flee into this new valley which is formed in order to be saved from the army of the Antichrist—Zechariah 14:5. Christ will fight against Antichrist in the battle of Armageddon, and Antichrist will be destroyed. Satan will be bound and cast into the bottomless pit for the thousand years—Revelation 20. Christ will now reign in Jerusalem with his believing Jews, over the whole earth, for a thousand years. All nations will be subject to him. The saints who are risen at the end of the seven year tribulation, along with the saints raptured at the beginning of that period, will live and reign in heaven for the thousand years. Two judgments will occur at this time: the judgments of the Gentiles who persecuted the people of God during the tribulation, and the judgment of the Jews—Ezekiel 20:33–38. Some dispensationalists distinguish actually seven different judgments, and seven different resurrections.

The millennium will be a time of great prosperity and peace, when the promises and the prophetic passages of the Old Testament will be fulfilled. For example, “But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea”—Isaiah, chapter 11, verses 4–9. Christ’s kingdom will be universal. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him, and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him”—Psalm 72, verses 8–11.

In interpreting the final chapters of Ezekiel 40 to 48, it is argued that the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that sacrifices will be offered once more. This however, would undermine the

work of Christ. They say that Old Testament priests will be offering sacrifices again, but these Old Testament priests offered such sacrifices that would be an example and shadow of heavenly things—Hebrews 8, verse 5. “But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”—Hebrews 9, verses 11–14. Christ’s work does away forever with animal sacrifices. These types and symbols have been replaced. “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins”—Hebrews 10, verse 4. Quoting again: “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” One offering; perfected forever them that are sanctified. Hebrews 10, verse 14. Animal sacrifices have forever been replaced by the one sacrifice of Christ. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body”—John 2:19–21. The earthly temple was destroyed by the Jews when they crucified Christ. But he has now built a better one, which is his body, the church. The shadows are gone, we now have the reality. There can be no returning to these shadows.

Following this glorious millennium, dispensationalists believe Satan will be loosed for a little while. He will gather the nominal Christians and unbelievers, and rebel with a great army against Christ, but he will be crushed by Christ. Then the resurrection of the saints who died during the millennium will be raised, and the second resurrection of all unbelievers take place, in contrast with the first resurrection of Revelation 20, verse 5. The final judgment of the great white throne will follow, and then the eternal state. The Jews will have their eternal state in the new earth, and the church composed of Christian Jews and Gentiles, will have their eternal state in heaven. So there’s three states in the future: heaven, earth, and hell. Many modern dispensationalists have moved from these extremes, but this will be the traditional view.

There is a real problem for all premillennialists—it is that Christ is already on the throne! He’s already reigning over heaven and earth. Peter, at Pentecost, proclaimed that God raised up Christ from the dead and placed him on the throne, on heaven’s throne, over heaven and earth: “Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ”—Acts 2, verses 33–36. Christ’s ascension was immediately followed by his coronation. This reigning of Christ is described by Paul to the Corinthians: “Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign”—Christ must reign—“till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death”—1 Corinthians 15, verses 24 to 26. Paul also refers to Christ’s coronation as immediately following his resurrection and ascension, when he writes to the Philippians: “And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things

in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”—Philippians 2, verses 8–11.

For the Christ who is already reigning over all angels and men, in the beautiful sinless perfection of heaven, to return to this world, to reign over the Jews in a sinful world, would actually be a second humiliation for Christ. Surely Christ’s sufferings are over! How could Christ return to this world, when he, in his humiliation, expressed his misery in this world? For example, when he said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?”—Matthew 17, verse 17. Christ’s humiliation is over, and his exaltation is begun. He will never again fight hand to hand with the devil. He crushed his head at Calvary. He destroyed Satan on the cross. He came the first time, “that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil”—Hebrews 2:14, and he succeeded in doing that.

Critical to rapture thinking are the words, “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord”—1 Thessalonians 4, verse 17. There seems to be here the idea of Christians caught up into the air, but it is important to notice the second half of the verse: “so shall we ever be with the Lord.” Surely this is describing the end of the world and a permanent state—we will forever be at home with the Lord. The meeting will be in the air, but it is simply the beginning of eternity. But what then is referred to by the words: “Them also that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him”—verse 14? It refers simply to their soul’s returning with Christ from heaven, to enter into their bodies. Or, it may refer to the saints going forever to be with Christ in heaven.

The idea of multiple physical resurrections and multiple judgment days finds no support in the parables of Jesus. There is only one day of reckoning for all. For example, the dragnet captures good and bad fish, and at the end of the world, they are separated one from another—Matthew 13:47–50—one judgment day. The wheat is separate from the tares at the end of the world and not before—Matthew 13:29–30. When Christ returns, it will be to judge, and the righteous—or the sheep, will be placed on the right hand, and the goats—or the wicked, on his left—Matthew 25, verse 32.

Dispensational Premillenarianism errs in building a whole system on a very narrow space. One or two verses are pushed to extremes. There is a failure to appreciate the symbolical language of many of the passages of the Scripture, especially when dealing with prophecy. Amen.