

# Building Biblical Theology

Lesson 4

Contours of New Testament  
Biblical Theology

Manuscript



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# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson Four

### Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology

#### INTRODUCTION

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I have a friend who bought an old book from a used bookstore to read on a long trip. He told me that for more than a week the tattered novel in his hands was his close traveling companion; he just couldn't put it down. I told my friend that he must really have liked the book. And he replied, "Yes, I loved it, but when I turned to the last page, I found out that someone had torn out the last page. I was so disappointed," he said, "because it wasn't till I came home and bought a new copy that I found out how the story ended." I suppose it is dissatisfying to take the time to read a good novel only to find that the last page is missing.

And in many respects, the same kind of thing is true with the Bible. We can benefit from reading the early parts of the Bible without knowing how it ends. But if we do not also study the ending of the Bible, the New Testament, it's like never reading the last page of a novel. The Old Testament raises questions, problems, and hopes, but the answers, resolutions and fulfillments appear at the end of the Scriptures, in the New Testament.

This is the fourth lesson in our series, *Building Biblical Theology*. We've entitled this lesson, "Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology." And in this lesson, we'll see some of the essential features of biblical theology toward the end of the story of Scripture, the culmination of God's revelation in the New Testament.

We should take a moment to review what we've seen in this series. We've noted that Christians have tended to follow three main strategies toward exegesis, or interpretation, of Scripture: literary analysis, looking at the Bible as a literary portrait designed to emphasize certain theological perspectives; thematic analysis, looking at the Bible as a mirror that reflects our traditional and contemporary interests and questions; and historical analysis, looking at the Bible as a window to the historical events that it describes. We always use all three of these approaches to some extent when we read the Scriptures, but the discipline of biblical theology treats the Bible primarily as a window, focusing on the historical analysis of Scriptures, looking especially at the ways God was involved in historical events reported in the Bible. For this reason, we defined the discipline of biblical theology in this way:

**Biblical theology is theological reflection drawn from historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture.**

Biblical theology focuses on Scriptural accounts of what God has done in history and draws inferences for Christian theology from those events.

In the last two lessons of this series, we looked at the ways biblical theologians approach the Old Testament. In this lesson, we are concerned with the contours of biblical theology in the New Testament. As we will see, there are many similarities between the ways biblical theology approaches both testaments, but there are also significant differences.

Our lesson will focus on three main issues. First, we'll gain an orientation toward our subject. Second, we'll look into the development of the Bible's teaching about eschatology, or the last days, a crucial issue in New Testament biblical theology. And third, we'll explore how biblical theologians have approached New Testament eschatology itself. Let's begin with a basic orientation toward our topic.

## ORIENTATION

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One of the best ways to get at the heart of New Testament biblical theology is to compare and contrast it with what we have learned in this series about biblical theology of the Old Testament. First, we'll look at the fact that Old Testament biblical theology and New Testament biblical theology have a mutual interest in God's twofold revelation. Second, we'll see how both disciplines have understood what we have called theological structures. And third, we'll explore how each has focused on diachronic developments. Let's look first at twofold revelation.

## TWOFOLD REVELATION

You'll recall that God disclosed himself during the Old Testament in two main ways: through act revelations and word revelations. This twofold concept of revelation has characterized biblical theology of the New Testament as well. On the one hand, the New Testament reports many revelatory acts of God, such as Christ's earthly ministry, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the first century church. It also foretells acts of God that will take place in the future, such as the glorious return of Christ. But on the other hand, the New Testament also reports word revelations associated with the acts of God: God the Father spoke; Christ also spoke, and at times, angels and humans, by the Spirit of God, revealed God's word as well.

This is why New Testament narratives report both the actions and words of Jesus, the apostles, and other Christians in the New Testament; because God reveals himself through their actions and their words. Not only is this true for the narrative portions of the New Testament, but it is also true for the epistles. They occasionally reference or allude to God's actions on behalf of his people and they report God's word to his people.

You'll recall that Old Testament biblical theologians also drew attention to the temporal associations of act and word revelations. Some acts of God were followed by subsequent word revelations, some were associated with simultaneous word revelations, and still others were preceded by word revelations.

Biblical theologians have pointed out that the New Testament contains all three kinds of word revelation as well. The Gospels report how God spoke through the words of Jesus to reflect on Jesus' earlier actions. They also report times when Jesus' teachings explained his simultaneous actions, as well as times when Jesus predicted future actions. The same can be said of the authors and characters in the books of Acts and Revelation as well as the New Testament epistles. Throughout the New Testament God revealed himself through the intersections between his actions and his words.

Like their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament biblical theologians have drawn attention to the twofold manner in which God revealed himself. Old and New Testament biblical theology both focus on God's act and word revelations .

## THEOLOGICAL STRUCTURES

In addition to focusing on God's act and word revelations, Old Testament and New Testament biblical theology share similar ideas of theological structures. You'll recall that Old Testament biblical theologians identified theological outlooks by noting the many ways God's act and word revelations intersected with each other. They paid attention to the logical interconnections between what God did and said. These structures ranged from very basic to quite complex arrangements and New Testament biblical theologians have noticed the same kinds of theological structures in the New Testament.

Following the pattern of our earlier discussions of Old Testament theology, we'll touch on three levels of theological structures in New Testament theology: first, an example of basic-level structures; second, an example of middle-level structures; and third, an example of complex-level structures. Let's think first of basic-level theological structures in the New Testament.

### Basic-Level Structures

Basic theological structures appear in the New Testament through relatively simple logical intersections of divine revelations. Divine words explain acts of God; particular acts of God clarify the meanings of his words. Different act revelations also logically connect to each other; and different word revelations intersect with each other as well. When these kinds of logical structures appear on a small scale, they form what we have called basic-level theological structures or perspectives.

By way of illustration, in Matthew 2:1-12, Matthew reported how God's act in Jesus' birth intersected with the actions and words of the Gentile Magi. Jesus' birth was announced to the world by a star in the sky. The Magi understood that this star announced the birth of a new king, and they spent many months, perhaps as long as two years following the star in search of the new king. And when they finally reached the child, they worshiped him. Matthew's account indicated a coherent outlook on the true theological significance of Jesus' birth: Jesus was the long-awaited king of Israel whom these Gentiles worshiped.

At the same time, in Matthew 2:16-18, the gospel writer created another theological structure noting the logical intersections of Jesus' birth with the actions and words of King Herod. The Magi told Herod when the Messiah had been born, and his advisors told him how the Old Testament predicted the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In an attempt to kill Jesus, Herod ordered every male infant two years old and younger in Bethlehem to be killed. Matthew then reported Herod's horrible death under God's judgment.

Matthew's intersection of these acts and words created a theological structure that indicated another outlook on Jesus' birth: Jesus was the long-awaited king of Israel

whom Herod sought to destroy. In Matthew's account, these two sets of theological structures formed a striking contrast with each other, contributing to a theme that appears a number of times in his book. Herod's reaction to Jesus' birth foreshadowed the fact that many in Israel would reject Jesus as their Messiah and would even seek his death. By contrast, however, the Magi's reaction to Jesus' birth foreshadowed the fact that many Gentiles would welcome the promised king of the Jews and would adore him with great devotion and joy.

Having seen several basic-level theological structures in the New Testament, let's look at a few examples of what we may call middle-level theological structures.

## Middle-Level Structures

When we broaden our view to include multiple basic-level theological structures, we often see that they form larger and more complex theological points of view. One of the most important of these moderately complex theological structures is the covenantal arrangement of New Testament theology.

For example, we speak of the collected books from Matthew's Gospel to John's Revelation as the "New *Testament*." Here the word "testament" is used synonymously with "covenant." We call this portion of the Bible the New Testament precisely because it is associated with the New Covenant predicted by Old Testament prophets. Several Old Testament prophets predicted that after Israel's exile, God would establish a final covenant with the people of Israel. Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 34:25 and 37:26 referred to this covenant as a "covenant of peace." Jeremiah 31:31 refers to this same covenant as "a new covenant."

The middle-level theological structures associated with the New Covenant play a very important role in New Testament theology. You'll recall that we saw how covenants in the Old Testament organized much of Old Testament theology in terms of the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and the consequences of blessings and curses. In much the same way, these four dynamics governed life in the New Covenant and organized the logical intersections of many larger sets of theological perspectives in the New Testament.

## Complex-Level Structures

In addition to all sorts of basic and middle-level theological structures, the New Testament also presents various complex-level structures. As we might expect from our lessons on the Old Testament in this series, the most complex and comprehensive theological structure of the New Testament is the kingdom of God, the Bible's outlook on the goal of history as the transformation of the earth from the corruption of sin into the place of God's glorious presence and reign. Let's sketch some of the contours of this highly complex theological structure in the New Testament.

At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was near. Jesus' preaching and teaching constantly referred to

the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus' gospel message is most frequently called "the good news of the Kingdom." As we read in places like Matthew 4:23, 9:35, and 24:14, as well as Luke 4:43, 8:1, 16:16, and Acts 8:12.

Along with Old Testament writers, Jesus and the authors of the New Testament believed that from the beginning the goal of history had been for God to be glorified by establishing his reign over the whole earth through the service of his holy images. They were convinced that the work of God in Christ's first coming began the final stage of God's worldwide kingdom and that, in the end, the entire earth would be transformed into God's kingdom at the return of Christ, God's foremost holy image. We read of this hope in Revelation 11:15:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).

As we will see later in this lesson, the theology of God's kingdom takes into account every aspect of New Testament theology. The coherent system of the entire New Testament can be summed up under the rubric of the coming of God's kingdom to earth through Christ.

So, we see that New Testament biblical theology is very similar to Old Testament biblical theology both in its focus on act and word revelations, and in its identification of theological structures. But despite these similarities we need to be aware of one major contrast: the ways New Testament biblical theologians have handled diachronic developments.

## DIACHRONIC DEVELOPMENTS

We will look into this aspect of biblical theology by touching on three issues. First, the diachronic character of New Testament theology; second, the obstacles to diachronic study of the New Testament; and third, a new direction that New Testament biblical theologians have emphasized in the place of diachronic analysis. Consider first the diachronic character of theological developments in the New Testament.

### Diachronic Character

In our previous lesson, we saw that much attention has been given to the ways Old Testament theology developed with the passing of time. Each time God revealed more of himself by acting or speaking in history, to one degree or another, his new revelations reconfigured existing theological structures.

The same is true for New Testament history as well. As New Testament history moved forward, theological structures underwent diachronic changes. For instance, at the close of the Old Testament period, God's word through the prophets looked forward to the blessings of God when Israel returned from exile. When Christ appeared these theological concerns with return from exile shifted toward understanding how God had

begun to pour out these blessings in Christ. Christ's earthly ministry brought the hope of eternal forgiveness of sins in his crucifixion; he secured the Old Testament hope for resurrection to new life in his resurrection; and his ascension into heaven granted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit predicted by Old Testament prophets. Moreover, as the apostles continued Christ's work, the Old Testament hope of extending God's mercy to the Gentiles after the exile became a reality through the spread of the gospel. And of course, the New Testament predictions of Christ's glorious return pointed to the day when Old Testament hopes for an entirely new creation would come in Christ.

## Obstacles

Diachronic theological developments like these appear in the New Testament period, but New Testament history presents at least three major obstacles to extensive diachronic analysis. In the first place, by comparison with the Old Testament, the New Testament covers a very short period of history. Compare the length of history in the Old and New Testaments for a moment. Not including the prehistoric days of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the Old Testament deals with over 1600 years of history extending from the time of Abraham who lived around 2000 B.C. to the last prophet who ministered around 400 B.C. By comparison, New Testament history is very short. The entire New Testament represents only around 100 years of history. Although the New Testament introduces the most significant diachronic development so far in history — Christ's earthly ministry — it simply does not cover enough history for there to have been major diachronic developments within that period itself.

In the second place, most situations in the New Testament are very similar to each other. By contrast the Old Testament presents a great variety of circumstances in its history. In the patriarchal period, God's people were a semi-nomadic family in Canaan. Then they were slaves in Egypt. Next, they became a new nation under Moses' leadership. After that, they conquered Canaan during the period of the Judges. Their circumstances changed again when Israel's early monarchy moved the nation toward imperial splendor, and again when later kings and leaders vacillated between obedience and rebellion. Their situation worsened when God sent them into exile. And it improved when he finally began to restore the kingdom through those who returned to the Promised Land from exile.

As God's people went through these various circumstances, he acted and spoke to them in ways that were appropriate for their situations, accommodating himself to their needs. These diachronic accommodations to Israel's circumstances produced great variety in the theological developments of the Old Testament.

By comparison, however, the circumstances of God's people were fairly consistent during New Testament history. To be sure, situations did not remain precisely the same. Jesus, the apostles, and the church dealt with different kinds of people in different circumstances and God's revelation accommodated those differences. Yet, throughout this period of history, early Christians did not face the kinds of extreme changes that took place with God's people in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Christians were consistently marginalized and persecuted. They didn't experience periods of tremendous wealth and horrible poverty. They didn't travel *en masse* from one place to

another. Nor did they experience periods of wide-scale obedience and disobedience. As a result, God's revelations recorded in the New Testament did not accommodate as wide a variety of circumstances as his revelations in the Old Testament. And this stability has made diachronic developments less significant in New Testament theology.

In the third place, unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament deals with only one divine covenant. As we have seen, covenants in the Old Testament signaled major epochal shifts in theology. The covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were quite different from each other. And as a result, very significant theological changes occurred as history moved through each of these covenant periods.

By contrast, the New Testament only represents one covenant, the New Covenant in Christ. This covenant began to unfold as New Testament history moved from Christ's first coming and into the history of the church. And this entire range of history was characterized by the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses of just one covenant. The absence of multiple covenants in the New Testament also diminished the significance of diachronic developments in the New Testament.

## New Direction

Because diachronic changes in New Testament history were not as dramatic as changes in the Old Testament, New Testament biblical theologians have shifted their attention in a new direction. Instead of focusing on different historical periods, they have tended to treat the entire period of New Testament history as a whole.

Now, as we have said there are diachronic developments in the New Testament. There are significant changes between Jesus' earthly ministry, the history of the church and the return of Christ in glory. Even so, it's fair to say that the New Testament tends to treat these developments as a unified whole, as part of a single picture of Christ and his work. For example, the Gospels not only tell us about Jesus' life, but also refer many times to the ongoing ministry of the church after Jesus' departure and also to his return in glory. The book of Acts and the epistles do not simply deal with events after Jesus' ministry, but also refer back to Jesus' lifetime and look forward to his return. The book of Revelation not only deals with Jesus' future return, but also looks back to his life and the history of the church after his departure.

The theological unity created by the New Testament's brief history, uniform circumstances, and single covenant makes it difficult to do extensive diachronic study. So, biblical theologians have shifted the majority of their attention in a new direction. Instead of dividing the history of God's New Testament act and word revelations into small segments, they have focused on the ways different New Testament authors provided different perspectives on the entire period.

In fact, the New Testament provides us with many different theological assessments of the whole history of this period. Consider for instance, that the one history of Jesus' life is described in four different ways by four gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Although the gospel writers did not contradict each other, their books offer very different outlooks on the historical events of Christ's life. They represent four different theological perspectives. The same can be said of the book of Acts; the epistles

of Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude; as well as the books of Hebrews and Revelation. They all present varying theological perspectives on the whole of New Testament revelation. These portions of the New Testament do not contradict each other, but they display different theological vocabularies, categories, and emphases.

For this reason, New Testament biblical theologians have taken their discipline in a direction that has proven to be very fruitful. They have compared the ways different New Testament authors offered distinctive theological understandings of the historical period stretching from Christ's life to his return. They ask questions like: How did Paul interpret the mighty acts of God in New Testament history? How did Luke and John do this? What were their differences? What views did they hold in common? This direction has led New Testament biblical theologians to many important insights.

Now that we have a general orientation toward the contours of New Testament biblical theology, we should turn to our second main topic in this lesson, developments in eschatology, the biblical teaching about the last days. As we will see, no other subject is as central to the ways biblical theologians have approached the theology of the New Testament. But to understand why biblical theology has had this emphasis, we must grasp how the New Testament's outlooks on the last days developed out of earlier viewpoints.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN ESCHATOLOGY

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We will look in three directions. First, we'll set the stage by touching on traditional eschatology, the ways this topic has been approached in systematic theology. Second, we'll look into Old Testament eschatology to see the developments of Old Testament views on the last days. And third, we will examine outlooks on eschatology in early New Testament times. Let's begin with a look at eschatology in traditional systematic theology.

### TRADITIONAL

The term "eschatology" derives from the Greek adjective *eschatos* which usually means the "last," "final" or "end." The word appears some fifty-two times in the New Testament as well as many times in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the term *eschatos* refers at least fifteen times to the "last days," "final things" or "end times." And so, eschatology is a theological technical term meaning "the doctrine of the last days, final things or end times."

Through the centuries, eschatology has been a major category of traditional systematic theology. Systematicians have normally discussed the teachings of Scripture in five major categories: theology proper, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and finally eschatology. In systematic theology, as well as in a number of significant confessions and creeds, eschatology has usually been the last major topic because it has focused primarily on the future, specifically the events associated with the return of Christ.

Now, through the centuries, most Christians have realized that the Bible is very clear about certain aspects of the end times. They have heartily agreed on some basic issues like Christ's glorious return, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgment resulting in condemnation for the lost and everlasting life for those who are in Christ. But beyond these basic teachings, traditional discussions of eschatology have led to sharp divisions among believers. Take, for example, the issue of the millennium that centers on the interpretation of Revelation 20, John's prediction of Christ's 1000-year reign on earth. Sincere believers through the centuries have taken a variety of interpretive positions: Does this chapter refer to a literal 1000-year reign, or not? Will it be preceded by certain identifiable signs? Has it already begun? Well-informed followers of Christ have answered these questions in different ways. They have followed multiple orientations toward eschatology because the biblical teaching on matters like these is not immediately clear.

It is here that New Testament biblical theology holds great promise. Biblical theologians have approached eschatology in ways that cut across the grain of traditional debates. They have introduced new strategies and they have brought fresh insights to traditional understandings of eschatology. And this has led many Christians of all eschatological orientations into deeper unity with each other.

To understand how New Testament biblical theologians have understood the last days in ways that have moved beyond traditional approaches, we need to become familiar with the background of Old Testament eschatology.

## OLD TESTAMENT

As we have seen throughout this series, when God disclosed himself through act and word revelations, he caused developments in theology. Eschatology, what the Bible teaches about last things, was not immune from such diachronic developments. Just as with other subjects, the Old Testament's teachings about the last days also developed in significant ways over time. These diachronic developments in the Old Testament set the stage for what New Testament biblical theologians have discovered about eschatology in the New Testament as well.

In this section, we will briefly touch on how eschatology developed alongside the major covenant administrations of the Old Testament we have studied in this series. Beginning with the covenant with Adam we will follow chronologically through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Each of these stages contributed essential elements to the eschatology of the Old Testament.

### Adam

At the very beginning of biblical history, God revealed two crucial elements of Old Testament eschatology. The first of these is implicit in the creation itself. Humanity was created in God's image. And we were called to work as his royal priests, filling the earth and subduing it. Through these aspects of the creation, God revealed that his goal for history was for the whole earth to be a place where his glory would dwell with his people.

With Adam and Eve's sin, and the curse that fell on them, God revealed the second crucial element of Old Testament eschatology: From this point forward there would be two groups of people competing for control of the world. Genesis 3:15 reveals that the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent will fight for control of the world. The seed of the woman are those who remain faithful to God, while the seed of the serpent are those who follow the ways of Satan. Until the end of time, these two groups will war for control of the world. But God promised that victory will ultimately belong to himself and to the faithful seed of the woman.

Having seen the two elements introduced during the time of Adam, let's turn our attention to Noah's covenant.

## Noah

Following the worldwide flood in Genesis 7, God made a covenant with Noah. This covenant secured the stability of nature so that humanity would not have to fear annihilation as they pursued God's plan for the world. In Genesis 8:22, God said that the seasons, day, and night would continue "as long as the earth endures." By this promise, he assured the faithful 'seed of the woman' that they would have the natural environment necessary to achieve God's goal for them. The ground that had been cursed through the fall would not prevail against them. And in fact, the stability granted through Noah's covenant would continue until the goal of history had been reached. At this point, a new covenantal arrangement for nature would take over.

Having seen the basic vision of history's end given during the universal covenants with Adam and Noah, we should turn to the major diachronic development of Old Testament eschatology that took place in the days of Abraham, the first one with whom God made a national covenant.

## Abraham

God's covenant with Abraham is recorded in Genesis 15 and 17. But the themes of that covenant are introduced even earlier in Genesis 12:1-3. In those verses God singled out Abraham, from all the families of the earth, to be the one through whom he would carry out his promises given to Adam and Noah. The blessings given to Abraham and his family were to be mediated to the rest of the world through them. In fact, God promised Israel success, on a small scale, in fulfilling the call given to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Therefore, the eschatology of the Old Testament narrows to a focus on Abraham and his family. The end goal of history would be brought to the whole world through them.

## Moses

Now we are in a position to look at the second covenant God made with Israel, the covenant with Moses. In the days of Moses, Old Testament eschatology developed

even further. The diachronic developments of eschatology under the covenant of Moses are rather complex. So, we'll examine them in two steps: first, the curse of exile; and second, the blessings of restoration from exile.

As we have seen, Moses' covenant focused on the law of God as the guide for Israel's special service in spreading his worldwide kingdom. The Israelites were offered many blessings if they would obey the law, but were also threatened with many curses if they turned from the Law of Moses. In fact, in a number of passages Moses anticipated that future generations of Israel would turn from the ways of God. He warned them of many severe consequences of disobedience, but his greatest threat against continuing, flagrant violation of God's law was a national exile from the Promised Land. Listen to the way Moses put it in Deuteronomy 4:27-28:

The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell (Deuteronomy 4:27-28).

The threat of Israel's exile was not just a terrible prospect for the Israelites, but for the entire human race. Remember that from the time of Abraham, God's goal for history was to be achieved through Israel. An exile would greatly decrease the numbers of Israelites and would remove them from the land, thus making the promises to Abraham and the call to Adam and Eve much harder to fulfill.

With the negative ramifications of exile in mind, we should turn to the theme of restoration from exile that God promised through Moses. Happily, Moses made it clear that despite Israel's future exile, God would not give up on Israel as his special people. In Deuteronomy 4:30-31, God promised that when Israel repented of its sins and turned back to God in faithful obedience, he would hear them and restore them to the land. Even more than this, in Deuteronomy 30:5 God promised in this restoration to make them more numerous and prosperous than ever before.

One key feature of Moses' eschatology is the way he described this time of Israel's repentance and restoration to the land. Listen to what he said in Deuteronomy 4:30:

When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him (Deuteronomy 4:30).

Moses' statement here is crucial to the diachronic development of Old Testament eschatology because Moses used the terminology, translated here "the later days." This phrase is translated in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, by the term *eschatos* and it characterizes the time of Israel's glorious return from exile. Moses' choice of words here became the basis upon which Old Testament prophets and New Testament authors described the last stage of world history as "the last days," "the latter days," or the "*eschaton*." From this point forward, the return of Israel from exile played a crucial role in the Bible's teaching about eschatology.

## David

Now we are in a position to turn to the developments of eschatology that emerged during the period of David's covenant. Developments in this period were relatively complex as well. So, we'll explore them in three steps: first, the days of the united monarchy; second, the time of Israel's earlier prophets; and third, the days of Israel's later prophets. Consider first how God's revelations transformed eschatology in the time of Israel's united monarchy.

As we have seen in this series, God's covenant with David focused especially on the establishment of David's family as Israel's permanent dynasty. In this covenant, David's descendants and Jerusalem with its temple played a central role in all of Israel's theology, including its understanding of the end times. From this point forward, the end of history was attached to the success of David's royal house ruling from Jerusalem. In fact, in Psalm 72:8-11, we find that a future son of David will rule over the entire earth:

He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.  
The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust.  
The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the  
kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down  
to him and all nations will serve him (Psalm 72:8-11).

And this vision of the future is expanded further in Psalm 72:17-19:

May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All  
nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed. Praise  
be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds.  
Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with  
his glory. Amen and Amen (Psalm 72:17-19).

From this point forward, the end of history was attached to the success of David's royal house ruling from Jerusalem over the entire world.

Now we should move to the words of Israel's early prophets. Israel's earlier prophets applied the dynamics of Moses' covenant within David's royal covenant. They explained even further how the conditions of David's house would relate to the last days. Early prophets warned David's unfaithful sons that God would not tolerate flagrant violations of his law, and that God was about to send the entire nation into exile. These threats were ultimately fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 or 586 B.C.

Yet, to assure Israel that all hope had not been lost, Israel's earlier prophets also recalled Moses' connection between the wonders of the last days and Israel's return from exile. The prophets declared that in the restoration from exile, a great son of David, in his capital city of Jerusalem, would become the focus of a new order. Listen to how the prophet Amos put it in Amos 9:11-12:

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places,  
restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the  
remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name (Amos 9:11-12).

Along these same lines Isaiah wrote these words in Isaiah 2:2:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it (Isaiah 2:2).

Amos announced that David's

“tent” would be restored so that all the nations of the earth would bear the name of the Lord, and Isaiah said that “in the last days,” in other words the days after the exile, Jerusalem would become the greatest city on earth and the peoples of all nations would stream to her for salvation. With such high hopes in the glory of David's house and Jerusalem after exile, it is no wonder that the prophet Jeremiah assured Israel that the time of exile would last for only seventy years. In Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10, the prophet spoke of seventy years of exile — a customary way in the ancient world of speaking of a time of divine judgment. Jeremiah and other earlier prophets frequently announced that in the last days, when God's people returned from exile, there would be worldwide glory for David's house and Jerusalem.

Building upon the ministries of Israel's earlier prophets, God revealed even further diachronic developments in eschatology through his later prophets. God's involvement in history brought about at least two major shifts to the Old Testament concept of the last days. On the one side, the time of exile was extended because the Israelites in exile did not repent of their sins. In Daniel 9, Daniel reported that during the exile he was reading Jeremiah's prophecies of seventy years of exile, but he felt compelled to confess that the Israelites in exile had not yet repented of their sins. Yet, he still asked God to return Israel to the land and to restore Jerusalem. As we read later in Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel delivered God's answer to Daniel. Israel's exile would not end when Jeremiah had said. Because God's people had failed to repent, the exile would be extended seven times longer, to seventy weeks of years. As God had established as early as Leviticus 26, he would respond to continuing sin with curses seven times greater. Put simply, Daniel learned that God had postponed Israel's glorious restoration for approximately 490 years.

On the other side, later prophets also revealed that God showed great mercy to his people by giving them the opportunity to shorten their exile. In 539 B.C. God fulfilled his word through Jeremiah in an unexpected way. He caused the conquering Persian emperor, Cyrus, to release Israel to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem. At this time a small number of Israelites returned to the Promised Land under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendant of David.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah, as well as the author of Chronicles, encouraged this small group of returnees to move forward in the blessings of God by rebuilding Jerusalem. But sadly, by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the restored community had flagrantly disregarded God's law once again. So, the prophet Malachi declared that the beginning of Israel's glorious eschatological hopes were postponed to a time in the distant future, much like Daniel had learned before him. The Old Testament ends with this sad postponement of the eschatological age.

So, we see that Old Testament eschatology developed diachronically. It began in

seminal form in the days of Adam and was refined further in the days of Noah. In Abraham's time, Israel's blessing to the world became the means by which God would bring history to its ultimate end. Moses connected this hope with Israel's glorious return from exile. The covenant with David set his dynasty and Jerusalem at the center of these glorious last days after exile. And although there was a brief period of hope when a number of Israelites returned to the land from Babylon, Israel's continuing rebellion caused the Old Testament to end with the hope of the *eschaton* postponed to the distant future.

With the diachronic developments of eschatology within the Old Testament in mind, we're now in a position to see how the doctrine of the last days developed even further in New Testament times.

## EARLY CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

We'll touch on two issues: First, the outlooks on the last days held by most first century Jews; and second, the dramatic revision of eschatology in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

### First-Century Judaism

The vast majority of Jews in Palestine in the first century held to views of the last days that resembled those of the Old Testament. As the prophet Daniel had predicted, Israel had suffered under the tyranny of Gentiles for centuries. The Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans extended Israel's exile for hundreds of years.

Throughout these centuries, faithful Jews longed to see the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes of the restoration and glory for Israel in the last days. Many rabbis expressed this hope in a twofold view of history. On the one hand, they referred to their current circumstances as "this age." This age extended through the ups and downs of Israel's history, to the low point of Jerusalem's destruction and Israel's lengthy exile. The apparent victory of evil over good caused them to characterize this age in largely negative terms. It was a time of failure, sorrow and death.

On the other hand, many rabbis also spoke of a second period of history, the time of future glory for Israel. They called this future period "the age to come." This time in history would be a never-ending age of Israel's blessing and triumph over evil. At that time, God would gather all of his exiled people, judge the unfaithful in Israel, judge the wicked among the nations, glorify Jerusalem and her king, and spread the blessings of Abraham to the ends of the earth.

During the decades prior to and during Jesus' lifetime, there were many religious factions among the Jews in Palestine. These factions held different views on how the transition from this age to the age to come would take place. Apocalyptic sects believed that the *eschaton* would come through an abrupt, catastrophic divine intervention. Other groups, often called Zealots, believed that the age to come would arise as Jews rose up

militarily against their Roman rulers and saw God's support for their efforts. Parties called nomists, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, held that the last days would come only when Israel proved to be faithful to the law of Moses.

Although there was much disagreement over the precise way this age would transition into the age to come, in one way or another most Jews believed that it would take place with the appearance of the Messiah, the great son of David promised in the Old Testament. The Messiah would bring about the decisive turning point in world history, the final transition from a world of darkness to light, a world of defeat to victory, a world of evil to righteousness, a world of death to life.

Although the views commonly held by Jews in the first century by and large accorded with the teachings of the Old Testament, major diachronic developments in eschatology took place through divine revelation in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

## John and Jesus

John the Baptist and Jesus both announced that the arrival of the kingdom of God in the last days was near. Listen to the way this announcement is described in Mark 1:15:

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

The phrase “kingdom of God” does not appear in the Old Testament, but this announcement of the kingdom drew from an association between God's reign, and what Moses and the prophets called “the last days,” or the end of Israel's exile. Listen to the way Isaiah referred to the reign of God after the exile in Isaiah 52:7-10:

“Your God reigns!” Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes...The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:7-10).

Isaiah described the return from exile with an image of God leading his people back to Jerusalem. The good news declared to the ruins of Jerusalem was “Your God reigns.” In effect, Isaiah announced that when God restores his people in the last days, he will demonstrate that he reigns victoriously over all the nations and their idols.

In one sense, John the Baptist held to a view of the last days that was very similar to his Jewish contemporaries. He believed that the last stage of history, God's kingdom on earth, would come through the Messiah acting quickly and decisively, exercising judgment against sinners and pouring out enormous blessings on God's repentant people. Listen to the way he put it in Luke 3:9:

The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9).

We see here that John the Baptist associated the coming of the kingdom of God not only with blessings for God's people but also judgment against the enemies of God.

Even so, John the Baptist's view of the last days represented a very significant development. He moved beyond his Jewish contemporaries by identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the great son of David who was about to bring the Kingdom of God of the last days. But John the Baptist had a problem. As Jesus' ministry unfolded without a full display of judgment as well as blessings, John wondered if Jesus was in fact the Messiah. In Luke 7:20 we read that John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to Jesus with a question:

John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20).

It's no wonder that John asked this question. Jesus had not done all the Old Testament, first century Jews and John himself had announced that the Messiah would do. But now listen to the way Jesus responded to John the Baptist in Luke 7:22-23:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me (Luke 7:22-23).

In this passage, Jesus alluded to a number of prophecies from Isaiah about the restoration of Israel in the last days after exile. By referring to these things, he affirmed the fact that the act and word revelations of his ministry demonstrated that he was in the process of fulfilling Old Testament prophecies of the last days.

But Jesus also warned John the Baptist and everyone else not to "fall away on account of" him. Jesus encouraged John not to lose hope because of the way he was fulfilling God's kingdom of the last days. In a word, Jesus told John the Baptist, "I have fulfilled enough end-time expectations of God's kingdom for you to believe that I will fulfill the rest." To put it in the terms of this lesson, Jesus' words alluded to a major diachronic development that was taking place. The Old Testament perspective on the last days transformed in dramatic ways from the days of Adam to Malachi. And in the same way, God's revelations through Jesus were bringing yet another transformation of eschatology.

Jesus declared that the age to come was not going to appear suddenly as had been expected. Instead, the *eschaton* would be fulfilled over a long stretch of time. In a number of his kingdom parables in Matthew 13–25, Jesus explained that the kingdom of God would come in three phases. It would begin with his first coming in a small way, grow for an indefinite period of time, and reach its fullness only when he returned in glory. Jesus' earthly ministry would inaugurate the age to come with some blessings and judgments of the last days. The age to come would continue alongside this age for a period of time as Christ reigned in heaven and his church grew. And then at the second coming of Christ, the age to come would reach its consummation and this age of sin and

death would come to an end.

Biblical theologians often refer to this development of eschatology in a number of ways. They describe it as the “already, but not yet,” the “now, but not yet,” and the “overlap of the ages.” Sometimes they speak of it simply as “inaugurated eschatology.” Whatever the terminology, the basic idea is the same.

Old Testament prophets, first century Jews, and even John the Baptist thought of the arrival of the last days more or less as a single historical step. Jesus also viewed the transition to the last days as the last step of history, but consider this analogy: we all know that a normal human step can be seen as one motion, a single step. But if we look at it more closely, it isn’t difficult to see that it can be divided into at least three phases: lifting your foot from the ground, extending it through the air and lowering your foot to the ground. In much the same way, Jesus explained that the last days or the *eschaton* would come incrementally. He announced that it was inaugurated at his first coming, that it would continue growing for a period of time, and it would finally reach its consummation at his glorious return.

With the ways biblical eschatology developed from the time of Adam to the time of Jesus in mind, we’re in a position to see how biblical theologians have approached eschatology in the New Testament.

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## NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

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As modern followers of Christ, we entered the Christian faith with a modern cultural background. We all came to Christ with views of life that are very different from the backgrounds of New Testament writers. And because of these differences, we often have to work very hard to grasp the mindset, the worldview that governed the ways New Testament authors conceived of their faith. This is one of the great advantages of biblical theology. It has brought to light some of the basic outlooks to which New Testament authors referred over and over as they expressed their Christian faith.

To grasp how biblical theology has approached these matters, we’ll look at three issues. First, we’ll touch on the importance of eschatology in the New Testament. Second, we’ll explore the New Testament concept of Christ, or Christology, as the fulfillment of the *eschaton*. And third, we’ll see how New Testament soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, was shaped by eschatology. Let’s look first at the importance of eschatology.

### IMPORTANCE

Although it may sound like an overstatement at first, Jesus’ three-phase eschatology was so prominent in the hearts of early Christians that we find it either explicitly or implicitly on every page of the New Testament. Of course, we know the New Testament touches on many other theoretical and practical subjects. But biblical theologians have demonstrated that in one way or another every New Testament teaching

was shaped by Jesus' three-phase view of the last days.

For generations the vast majority of Jews in Palestine had yearned for the Messiah to usher in the last days — the age of victory, salvation and eternal life. With the probable exception of Luke, every New Testament writer was Jewish. And each one of them, including Luke, had deeply engaged Jewish theology. As a result, the Jewish theological concern with the Messianic last days contributed in significant ways to the basic theological framework of New Testament writers.

Eschatology was especially important for the New Testament because Jesus' teaching about the last days represented one of the most decisive ways in which Christians had broken with first century Judaism. Jewish religious leaders and the general Jewish population raged against Christianity precisely because of the Christian outlook on the Messianic last days. Christians believed that the Messiah had already come, but in a way that was unexpected. He had suffered and died at the hands of Jews and Gentiles; he had been resurrected and had ascended into heaven where he ruled over all; and he would return one day to judge all of humanity, including unbelievers within Israel. Such a messianic scenario was utterly contrary to what most Jews believed in that day. And for these reasons, New Testament authors were deeply preoccupied with Jesus' three-phase eschatology. And this preoccupation is reflected in everything they wrote.

One simple way to see how pervasive eschatology was to New Testament authors is to notice that they spoke of the entire New Testament period as “the last days.” First, New Testament authors called the days of Jesus and his apostles, “the last days” or *eschaton* as we can see in Hebrews 1:1-2:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Here the author of Hebrews referred to the time of his readers as the “last days.” In doing so he did not mean to point to some future time right before Jesus returns, but to the fact that through Jesus, God had spoken finally and definitively. With Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom, the promised last days of the Old Testament had come to the earth.

Second, New Testament writers designated the extended period of church history as the last days in places like 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

This list of sins that Paul said would be committed in the “last days” were all sins that were occurring in Paul's day, and he warned Timothy about those sins. But these are

sins that also continue to occur throughout history even to our present day. That Paul wasn't referring to some future time can be seen in his exhortation to "have nothing to do with them." The wicked people of the "last days" were a threat to Timothy because the "last days" had already come to the world through Jesus.

Third, New Testament authors described the consummation of the kingdom at Christ's return as "the last days." We can see this in John 6:39:

This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day (John 6:39).

Here Jesus taught his disciples about his relationship to the Father. His reference to the "last day" points forward to the ultimate final day when he returns in glory, when the dead will rise and God will judge the world.

As these and other passages demonstrate, New Testament writers believed that all revelations from God from the time of Jesus' earthly ministry until his return in glory took place in the last days. Their teachings could only be understood and followed correctly within the framework of Jesus' three-phase eschatology.

## CHRISTOLOGY

Now we are in a position to see how New Testament Christology, or the doctrine of Christ, presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's eschatological hopes. We will look at this topic in two steps. First, we'll touch on the ways systematic theology has dealt with the topic of Christology. And second, we'll see how biblical theologians have understood this subject. Let's look first at Christology in systematic theology.

### Systematic Theology

In traditional systematic theology, Christology has concentrated on themes that were of critical concern at certain periods in church history. For example, systematians focused on issues like the relation of Christ to the other persons of the Trinity, the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures in his one person, the states of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, the nature of his atonement, and the three offices of Christ as prophet, priest and king. Without a doubt, the New Testament addresses these and similar matters, and they continue to be important topics for the church even today.

But biblical theologians have taken Christology in a different direction. They have stressed that New Testament authors primarily presented Christ as the one in whom every facet of Old Testament hope found fulfillment.

### Biblical Theology

Biblical theologians often point to the time when Jesus met two of his disciples on

the road to Emmaus to illustrate the importance of Christ in the interpretation of the Old Testament. In Luke 24:26-27 we read these words:

“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”  
And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them  
what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:26-27).

Notice here that Jesus explained how the Old Testament spoke of him. He referred his disciples to “Moses and all the Prophets,” to the entire Old Testament, and showed them “what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Time and again, biblical theology has pointed out that New Testament authors follow Jesus’ example here by treating himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatology.

The New Testament points out many ways in which Jesus fulfilled prophecies about the last days, but the fulfillment of prophecy does not adequately express the New Testament outlook on Christ. Instead, we have to understand that New Testament eschatological hope was concentrated in the person of Jesus. Jesus was the centerpiece of New Testament eschatology.

Recall for a moment our discussion of Old Testament typology in the previous lesson. At every stage of Old Testament history, key persons, institutions and events appeared in ways that indicated the goals toward which God was moving history. They were preliminary displays, foreshadows, or types of what would be fully realized at the end of history. For this reason, because Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah through whom God brought the *eschaton*, New Testament authors spoke of Christ as the fulfillment of all Old Testament types.

To mention just a few examples, at the earliest stages of history God moved the world toward its final goal by calling Adam to rule over the world as the royal priest of God’s kingdom; Jesus completes humanity’s rule over the world in the last days as the great king and high priest. God ordained Noah to rescue humanity from God’s judgment to further God’s kingdom purposes; Jesus does this once and for all in the *eschaton* through his death and resurrection. God promised Abraham that his descendants would bring God’s blessings to all the families of the earth; Jesus finally brings this about in the last days through the spread of the gospel. God raised up Moses to give Israel the revelation of his law; Jesus reveals God’s final word in the *eschaton*. God told David that his dynasty would conquer God’s enemies and rule over the world on God’s behalf; Jesus makes this happen in the last days. These are but a few examples that illustrate how New Testament writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes.

Now we must remember that Jesus and the New Testament explain that his fulfillment of Old Testament expectations would take place in three phases: the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the kingdom. Because of this, New Testament writers often drew attention to different ways in which Jesus fulfills Old Testament hopes. For example, Jesus began to fulfill Adam’s call to rule first in his earthly ministry. He continues to extend his reign over the world now. And he will rule over every inch of creation, making all things new, when he returns in glory.

Jesus fulfilled Noah’s rescue of humanity for service to God in his earthly ministry as he called men and women to repent and ordered his disciples to baptize them. He continues to do this as the church calls people around the world to salvation and baptism. And Jesus will ultimately deliver from divine judgment when he returns for the

masses of humanity who have faithfully followed him.

Jesus also fulfilled Abraham's call to be a blessing to the entire world. First, he and his disciples reached out to Gentiles. Second, he continues to do this now by bringing the blessings of salvation to people all over the world. And third, he will complete this aspect of God's kingdom when he fills the new creation with redeemed people from every tribe and nation.

Jesus also fulfilled the guidance of Moses' law as he and his disciples affirmed God's law and brought new revelation. Jesus' guidance of his people continues now as his Spirit equips the church to spread biblical teachings to the ends of the earth. And when Christ returns, every person in the new creation will have the law of God written perfectly on their hearts.

Finally, Jesus also fulfilled the promise of victory and global rule for the house of David. He did this first by conquering Satan through his death, resurrection and ascension. His church continues to spread Christ's spiritual victory over the world through the gospel. And when Christ returns, he will judge all of God's enemies and rule over the entire creation as the great son of David.

These examples provide a framework from within which we can grasp many specific ways New Testament authors focused on Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes. Christ personally brings to full realization every hope of Old Testament eschatology in the three phases of the last days.

## SOTERIOLOGY

Biblical theologians have often understood the doctrine of salvation or soteriology in new ways. To see what we mean, we'll look at this topic first by touching on soteriology in traditional systematic theology. And then we'll see how this doctrine has been treated in biblical theology. Consider first soteriology in systematic theology.

### Systematic Theology

In broad terms, traditional systematic theologians have divided the doctrine of salvation into two basic categories: *historia salutis*, or the history of salvation, and *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation. The history of salvation refers to the ways God accomplished salvation in objective history. The order of salvation refers to the subjective application of salvation to individual people.

In systematic theology, the accomplishment of salvation, or *historia salutis*, has been rather narrowly defined as the sum of what God accomplished in the earthly ministry of Christ. Much attention has been given to the atonement of Christ. For whom did Christ die? Why did he die for us? What did his death accomplish? In recent decades more attention has been given to the resurrection of Christ. Why did Christ rise from the dead? What does his new life have to do with our salvation? Systematic theologians also speak of Christ's ascension and enthronement in heaven, and how his present reign affects those who believe in him. And they also speak of the return of Christ in glory

under the rubric of eschatology. But apart from these main considerations, systematic theologians have not devoted much attention to the objective accomplishment of salvation.

Instead, systematicians have concentrated most of their attention on the application of salvation, or the *ordo salutis*. This emphasis has set the course for most Christians by emphasizing how salvation is to be applied to the lives of individual people. Even today when we use terms like regeneration, repentance, faith, justification, sanctification and glorification we usually have in mind specific aspects of the application of salvation to individuals. In the theological vocabulary of nearly every branch of the church, regeneration refers to the new birth that people experience as salvation is initially applied to them. Repentance is a person's turning away from sin and toward Christ. Faith is an individual's trust and reliance on God's grace in Christ for salvation. Justification is God's forensic declaration of a person's imputed righteousness received through the instrument of faith alone. The term sanctification usually indicates an individual's growth in holiness. And glorification is the complete application of salvation to a person, the reward of eternal life.

Many of us are familiar with the ways these and other aspects of soteriology are discussed in systematic theology. But New Testament biblical theology has looked at the doctrine of salvation from a different vantage point: perspectives that are derived from Jesus' three-phase eschatology.

## Biblical Theology

By contrast with systematic theologians, biblical theologians have focused much more on the accomplishment of salvation, the *historia salutis*. They have shown that in the New Testament the application of salvation to individuals is always understood within the framework of the three phases of Jesus' eschatology, the historical accomplishment of salvation in him.

Imagine New Testament soteriology as the set on a theatrical stage. From the outlook of biblical theology, the accomplishment of salvation in Christ forms the backdrop of the stage. This backdrop has three large panels representing the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the last days. The application of salvation to an individual life is like the actions of a character standing near the foreground of the stage. New Testament authors described what happens when salvation comes to an individual, as if they were looking at the stage from three different seats in the audience. They view a person's experience of salvation against the three background panels representing the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the last days.

From the first vantage point, a follower of Christ rests his or her salvation on being joined to what Christ accomplished during the inauguration of the last days. From the second vantage point, a follower of Christ experiences salvation through his or her lifetime by being joined to what Christ is accomplishing during the continuation of the last days. And from the third vantage point, followers of Christ will experience salvation when they are joined to what Christ will accomplish at the consummation of the last days.

For the most part, it's easy to see that this is the way New Testament authors related the accomplishment of salvation to the application of salvation. For example, the

apostle Paul used the term salvation in three basic ways. Sometimes he spoke of it from the first vantage point as something that had already occurred. For instance, we read these words in Romans 8:24:

For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:24).

Here Paul spoke of our past experience of being regenerated by the Holy Spirit and set on a new course of life because we were joined to what Christ accomplished 2000 years ago. At other times, Paul spoke of salvation from the second vantage point as a current, ongoing reality in the experience of believers. As he put it in 1 Corinthians 1:18:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Here Paul spoke of our daily ongoing salvation in Christ, which is certainly based on what Christ did in the inauguration of the kingdom, but it's also closely tied to our union with him in his heavenly ministry now. At other times, Paul spoke of salvation from the third vantage point as something that was still future, something that was still to occur at Christ's return. As he said in Romans 5:9:

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:9).

Consider just one striking example. The last facet of the *ordo salutis* is commonly known as "glorification." We normally use this term as a reference to what happens to individuals when Christ returns. But biblical theologians have noted that we truncate the concept of glorification in the New Testament, if we limit it simply to what happens at the consummation of Christ's return. For example, Paul wrote of glorification in terms of all three phases of the last days. In the first place, he spoke of it as something that has already happened to believers. Listen to what he wrote in Romans 8:29-30:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

The verb translated "glorified" is *edoxasen*, and this form of the verb indicates an event that had already taken place. Because individuals in Christ are joined to Christ's glorification in his resurrection and ascension, they have already received with him a measure of glorification. Believers have already been glorified in Christ.

In addition to this, Paul also indicated that glorification is an ongoing reality for faithful believers. The daily experience of living in union with Christ can also be spoken of as glorification. As Paul put it about himself and his company in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The phrase translated "with ever increasing glory" is *apo doxēs eis doxan*, which

may more literally be translated, “from glory to glory.” Here the apostle Paul made the point that the Christian life of service to Christ is an increasing glorification of the believer.

And of course, Paul spoke of glorification as something that happens in the future. Much like systematic theologians, Paul understood that followers of Christ will receive ultimate glory when Christ returns. As we read in 2 Timothy 2:10:

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory (2 Timothy 2:10).

In much the same way, biblical theologians have indicated that New Testament authors thought so much in terms of the three phases of Jesus’ eschatology that they treated every aspect of soteriology in this threefold manner.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have introduced the contours of New Testament biblical theology. We have gained an orientation toward this discipline by comparing it with biblical theology of the Old Testament. We have seen the precursor of New Testament theology in the developments that led to Jesus’ teaching about the last days. And we have explored how biblical theologians have treated Jesus’ three-phase eschatology as a governing framework for all New Testament theology.

Biblical theology of the New Testament has helped us increase our understanding of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles in many different ways. But above all else, biblical theology has shown us how we are to live for Christ in the light of what he has already accomplished in his first coming, how we are to live for Christ in the power of his Spirit within us now, and how we are to live for Christ in the hope of his glorious return.

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## GLOSSARY

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**apocalyptic/apocalypticists** – Name given to first-century Jewish sects that expected God to intervene quickly and catastrophically to destroy their enemies and establish the age to come

**biblical theology** – Theological reflection drawn from the historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture

**christology** – The study and doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ

**Cyrus** – Persian emperor from 559-530 B.C. who decreed that the Israelites could return to the Promised Land

**diachronic development** – The ways Old Testament theology transformed, changed, or developed over time

**eschatological** – Having to do with the study or doctrine of the last days

**eschatology** – The study or doctrine of the last days

**eschaton** – The last stage of world history; the last or latter days

**historia salutis** – Theological term meaning “history of salvation”; the ways God accomplished the salvation of his people in history

**inaugurated eschatology** – View of the end times that says the age to come has begun (been “inaugurated”), but hasn’t yet come in all its fullness; the “already, not yet”

**new covenant** – The covenant of fulfillment in Christ; first mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31

**nomists** – First-century Jews who believed that God would not intervene to establish his kingdom until Israel had become obedient to the Law of Moses

**ordo salutis** – Theological term meaning “order of salvation”; the order by which salvation is applied to individual believers

**soteriology** – The doctrine of salvation

**systematic theology/systematics** – A theological discipline that seeks to give a rational and orderly presentation of the doctrinal truths of Christianity

**testament** – An agreement or will; used in the Bible as a synonym for “covenant”

**the age to come** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the future age of righteousness, love, joy and peace that would follow the exile; time when all of God’s purposes for history would be fulfilled

**this age** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

**Zealots** – First-century Jewish sect that believed God would usher in the age to come only when the Jews rose up militarily against the Roman rulers