

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
EIGHT

UNFOLDING
ESCHATOLOGY



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Lesson Eight

Unfolding Eschatology

INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up, my family would always go on vacations in the car, and we would have a clear destination in mind, and we'd reach that destination. But along the way, different things would happen that would unfold the plan. We'd stay in one place a little longer than expected, or we'd have a flat tire, something like that.

Well, similar things happen with Old Testament prophecy. God has a sovereign plan for all of human history, and that plan will reach its end, and every step along the way has been sovereignly planned by God. But at the same time we know that in his providence God watches to see how human beings will react to prophecy, and when they react one way he will respond in one way; when they react in another way he will respond in another way. And so what we find is that the destiny, or the *eschaton*, unfolds throughout the Bible. God reveals more and more of what he's going to do for his people as the Bible progresses.

We've entitled this lesson "Unfolding Eschatology" because we will see how the prophetic vision of the end of time, or of eschatology, developed through the various stages of prophecy. We'll look at four major steps in the unfolding disclosure of eschatology which we must always remember: first, Moses' eschatology; second, early prophetic eschatology; third, we'll take a look at later prophetic eschatology; and then fourth, we'll take a look at New Testament eschatology. Let's look first at the perspectives that come from Moses himself.

MOSAIC ESCHATOLOGY

Have you ever been in really hard times and the only thing that got you through was the belief that one day the hard times would be over? Well, in many respects, Moses gave that kind of perspective to Israel. He told Israel that hard times were coming, even in exile from the Land of Promise, but he also gave them the hope, an eschatological hope, that one day things would be much better. In order to understand Moses' perspectives, we've got to take a look at some of the basic dynamics of covenant that we've already seen in previous lessons: first, covenant cycles; and second, covenant culmination.

COVENANT CYCLES

You will recall that Moses understood that God would test the loyalty of his people and that his people would often fail. As a result, Moses taught that cycles of

judgment and blessing would characterize the relationship between God and his people. When God's people flagrantly rebelled against him, they experienced his judgment in war and in nature. When God's people were faithful to him, they experienced his blessing in war and in nature. This cyclical covenant pattern between blessing and judgment appears many times throughout the whole Old Testament.

COVENANT CULMINATION

Now eschatology in Moses' writings develops out of this basic pattern of blessing and judgment. According to Moses, the judgments and the blessings of the covenant would not continue in an eternal circle, never going anywhere or toward any goal. On the contrary, Moses saw a definite end, or *eschaton*, in the future. To understand how Moses taught a culmination to the covenant life, or an *eschaton*, we need to see three elements in his outlook on history: first, exile; second, repentance and forgiveness; and third, restoration from exile.

In the first place, Moses expected that judgments would increase as Israel went further and further away from God. This increase in judgment would culminate in the exile of Israel from the Promised Land. The people of God would suffer defeat in war, and the harmony of nature in the Promised Land would turn into the corruption of nature. The people of God would be scattered among the nations, and the Land of Promise would lie in ruins. Listen to the way Moses puts it in Deuteronomy 4:25-28:

After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time — if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. 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 4:25-28).

We see here that Moses predicted that a terrible exile would take place, but as horrible as this exile would be, it was not the end of the history of God's covenant with Israel. Repentance and forgiveness could change the situation of exile. As Moses put it in 4:29:

But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 4:29).

Once exile had occurred, the people of God could come to their senses, repent and then find forgiveness from God.

What would be the result of this repentance and forgiveness? In a word, it would be restoration from exile. Moses taught that God would have mercy on his people and

bring them back to the land to enjoy a permanent state of unimaginable covenant blessings. Listen to the way Moses described the culmination of covenant blessing in Deuteronomy 4:30-31:

When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in latter days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath (Deuteronomy 4:30-31).

In 4:30, Moses coined a technical term for this period of final restoration. He said that the restoration of Israel after the exile would take place in the “latter days.” The Hebrew behind this expression is *b’aharit hayyamim* (בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים). In most cases this kind of terminology simply meant “the future” of some indefinite sort. But here, in Deuteronomy 4:30 we find the technical use of the terminology “the last days” or “the culmination of history.” This technical use appears in many places in the prophets, including Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1; and Hosea 3:5. In the New Testament, the same expression occurs in Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; and James 5:3. In fact, it is this expression from which we get our theological term “eschatology” — the study of last things or last events.

We can summarize Moses’ eschatology in this way. Moses knew that Israel was going to fall into serious sin and receive an exile from the land. But once the people were out of the land and they repented of their sins, they would be forgiven by God. And then, in the latter days, or the *eschaton*, they would be brought back to the Land of Promise and receive tremendous blessings. This basic outlook of Moses provides a background for the entire history of prophetic expectations.

With Moses’ very simple eschatology in view, we’re now ready to see the eschatology of the early prophets of the Old Testament. How did the prophets before the exile to Babylon view the movement of history towards its culmination in the latter days?

EARLY PROPHETIC ESCHATOLOGY

Now in this lesson, when we speak of early prophetic expectations, we have in mind those prophets who ministered up to the time of Daniel. The prophets up to the time of Daniel had a basic eschatological perspective that looked very much like Moses’ own perspective. We will look at two aspects of early prophetic eschatology: first, the similarities to Moses; and second, the additions to Moses. Let’s look first at the similarities that early prophetic eschatology had with the basic patterns established by Moses.

SIMILARITIES TO MOSES

Moses presented a pattern of a national judgment leading to exile which would be followed by repentance leading to a great restoration. Old Testament prophets spent

much of their time warning of the coming exile. Again, following Moses, the prophets before Daniel never gave up hope that repentance and forgiveness would take place in the exile. In fact, the prophets believed that God would supernaturally renew the remnant of his people in exile and give them forgiveness. As Isaiah puts it in Isaiah 10:20:

In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 10:20).

Jeremiah spoke similarly when he announced that the people who would be taken into exile would receive a new heart of faithfulness and obedience to God's law. In Jeremiah 31:33 we read these words about the exiles:

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people (Jeremiah 31:33).

The early prophets expected a change of heart in those who were taken into exile.

But third, early Old Testament prophets also affirmed that the repentant remnant would be gathered back to the land of Israel for a great restoration. The words of Isaiah are to the point once again. In Isaiah 44:21-22 we read these words:

Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you (Isaiah 44:21-22).

The early prophets made it very clear that the basic Mosaic eschatology was true. Israel was going into exile and repentance and forgiveness would lead to a restoration to the land. But the early prophets also added some special features to this basic Mosaic pattern.

ADDITIONS TO MOSES

Put simply, a major covenant event took place between Moses and the early prophets, and this covenant was, of course, the Royal Covenant made with David. As a result, the early prophets made three major additions to Moses' portrait of early eschatology, or end times. First, they had a focus on kingship; second, a focus on the temple; and third, a focus on gentile nations. Let's look first at the way the early prophets concerned themselves with kingship.

Kingship

On the one hand, unlike Moses, the early prophets did not merely say that the nation would suffer defeat and natural disasters. Because David's throne had become the

centerpiece of the life of God's people, according to these prophets, the judgment of God would include a desertion of the throne of David. For instance, we read about the judgment against David's throne when Isaiah rebuked king Hezekiah in Isaiah 39:5-7.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (Isaiah 39:5-7).

The desertion of David's throne was one aspect of the exile that culminated the history of God's people.

Despite the tragedy of judgment against David's throne, the prophets also assured Israel that God was not finished with the throne of David. Instead, the prophets predicted that the restoration of Israel after the exile would include a restoration of the throne of David to great glory. Listen to the way Jeremiah described the restoration of David's throne in Jeremiah 23:5-6:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord Our Righteousness'" (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

The promise of a righteous son of David became an essential ingredient in the portrait of the latter days of the restoration.

Not only did the early prophets concern themselves with David's throne, they also focused on the temple built by David's son, Solomon.

Temple

Many Israelites had wrongly believed that the temple of God in Jerusalem was inviolable. The prophets had to speak boldly about the temple of God in Jerusalem being destroyed. For instance, Jeremiah spoke strongly against the false prophets and priests who insisted that the temple would never be destroyed. In Jeremiah 7, the prophet warned the people not to believe this false teaching. In verse 4 we read these words:

Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" (Jeremiah 7:4).

The true prophets of Yahweh uniformly announced that the temple of God would be destroyed at the time of exile.

Yet the prophets also promised that in the restoration period after the exile a glorious temple would be rebuilt. More than any other prophet Ezekiel focused on the rebuilding of this glorious temple in the restoration period. Chapters 40-48 of his book concentrate on this theme. God gave Ezekiel a special picture of the restoration temple and ordered the people to build it. Listen to the words of God to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 43:10-11:

Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple... Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations (Ezekiel 43:10-11).

Early prophets added a concern for David's throne and the temple. But they also added a third concern which Moses did not address very clearly — they were concerned with the Gentile nations.

Gentiles

In the first place, the prophets saw very clearly that Israel's exile would mean victory for certain Gentile nations over the people of God. As we know, they predicted that the Assyrians and the Babylonians would conquer Israel and severely mistreat the people of God.

While victory was given to the Gentiles during Israel's exile, the early prophets also spelled out that this Gentile supremacy would not last forever. In the restoration from exile, God would strike out against the Gentiles who mistreated his people through the restored throne of David. God would defeat the Gentiles and give Israel great victory in a battle against the Gentiles. This theme appears in many ways throughout the prophets, but one of the most dramatic ways it comes to the foreground is in the technical expression the "day of the Lord," in Hebrew, *yom Yahweh* (יְהוָה יוֹם). The basic idea behind this phrase was that Yahweh was able to destroy all of his enemies in a single day, and for this reason, the "day of the Lord" was said to belong to him, much like victorious soldiers say even today as they go into battle, "The day is ours!"

This terminology is particularly powerful in the way it sets up a contrast between Israel's exile and Israel's restoration. Perhaps the best way to see this is to look at the way the prophet Joel uses the expression the "day of the Lord." The expression appears in Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, and 3:14. The first three references to the "day of the Lord" refer to God defeating Judah. The people of the covenant had become God's enemies because of their sins, and the "Lord's Day" was the time when he would destroy them and send them into exile.

But Joel also shifted the way he used this terminology in the second half of his book. He described another event as the "day of the Lord." This "day of the Lord" will take place when Israel is restored from exile. It will be God's defeat of the nations who oppressed the people of God. For example, in Joel 2:31-32 we read these words:

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls (Joel 2:31-32).

So we see that for Joel the “day of the Lord” not only referred to judgment against the people of God, but it also referred to a great battle that would take place as the people of God were restored to the land.

Before we leave the theme of Gentiles in Israel’s eschatology, we should mention one final element — the expansion of Israel through the ingrafting of Gentiles. When the “day of the Lord” comes against the Gentiles when Israel is restored, not all Gentiles will be destroyed. On the contrary, after the battle, many Gentiles will come to the people of God and join them in the worship of the one true and living God. As the prophet Isaiah put it in Isaiah 2:2-3:

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. Many peoples will come and say, “Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths” (Isaiah 2:2-3).

This passage and a number of others point to the culmination of eschatological hopes in early Old Testament prophecy. The blessings of God would pour out on Israel, but these blessings would include the ingrafting of countless Gentiles into the true faith so that God’s covenant people will expand to cover the entire earth. This grand new heavens and new earth would be a world filled with the knowledge of God. Peace would come to the earth and all the peoples who remain will worship the true and living God.

So we see that the early prophets followed the basic pattern that Moses set forth. They believed that an exile was coming, but repentance and forgiveness would lead to the *eschaton*, or the great restoration. Now, to this basic pattern the prophets added several important themes: first, the centrality of David’s throne; second, the importance of the temple; and third, the very special role that Gentiles would play both in the exile of Israel and in the great restoration of God’s people.

We have seen the foundation of Mosaic eschatology and the similarities and modifications of early prophetic eschatology. Now we’re in a position to explore the developments of later prophetic eschatology.

LATER PROPHETIC ESCHATOLOGY

In other lessons, we have seen that intervening historical contingencies can have significant effects on the ways God fulfills the predictions of his prophets. Well, in many

respects, in the later prophets we come upon one of the greatest intervening historical contingencies in the Old Testament. We'll discover that the reactions of God's people had a tremendous effect on the ways that the latter days, or the *eschaton*, would unfold.

As we look into this matter, we will touch on three subjects: first, Jeremiah's expectation; second, Daniel's insight; and finally, the final outlooks of the Old Testament prophets. First, let's look at the particular expectation Jeremiah raised about the restoration of Israel.

JEREMIAH'S EXPECTATION

In most respects, Jeremiah followed the pattern of early biblical prophecy. In two passages, however, Jeremiah added something not known before. He predicted that the time of exile would be seventy years. In 25:11-12 we read these words:

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation (Jeremiah 25:11-12).

In a similar way, Jeremiah 29:10-11 says this:

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

We see then that Jeremiah predicted that the exile would be over in seventy years.

In fact, according to 2 Chronicles 36:21-22, this prophecy was fulfilled when the first returnees came back to the land in 539 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Zechariah also confirmed this dating in Zechariah 1:12 and in Zechariah 7:5. So we see that Jeremiah predicted that the exile would last seventy years and, in some respects, it did just that. In 539, Cyrus, the Persian emperor, announced that the Israelites were to go back to the land and rebuild their temple.

With Jeremiah's expectation of seventy years in mind, we're prepared to understand Daniel's new insight into eschatology.

DANIEL'S INSIGHT

Perhaps Daniel's most important contribution to prophecy was his famous vision of the seventy weeks of years in Daniel 9. This passage is an autobiographical account of an insight Daniel received around the year 539 when Cyrus gave his edict for the Israelites to return to the Land of Promise.

Daniel 9 begins with an introduction in verses 1-3. There Daniel reports that he was reading the prophecy of Jeremiah about the seventy years of exile. In verse 2 we read these words:

I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years (Daniel 9:2).

Now Daniel knew that Jeremiah said that the exile would last only seventy years, but instead of rejoicing, as we might expect Daniel to do, verse 3 tells us that Daniel did something quite different:

So I turned to the Lord and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes (Daniel 9:3).

Even though we might have expected Daniel to be happy that the seventy years of Jeremiah were over, instead he turned to the Lord in sackcloth and ashes seeking the favor of God.

In verses 4-19 we find a summary of Daniel's prayer. In this prayer, he deals with a very serious problem. Jeremiah's seventy years are complete, but the people have not repented of their sins. As he says in verses 13 and 14:

All this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth... we have not obeyed him (Daniel 9:13-14).

Daniel understood what we have already seen earlier in this lesson. Moses announced that exile would be reversed only when the people of God repented from their sins, but there was an unexpected intervening historical contingency here. The Israelites had gone into exile, but they still had not repented of their sins, and as a result, significant changes occurred in the ways that God would unfold the *eschaton*.

Daniel closed his prayer with a plea for mercy. Because the people had not repented of their rebellion, Daniel asked God simply to return the people just for his own glory. We read in verses 17 and 18:

For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy (Daniel 9:17-18).

Daniel hoped against all hope that God would restore his people, despite the fact that they had not repented of their sins.

The remainder of Daniel 9:20-27 consists of God's response to Daniel's prayer. The angel Gabriel comes from God with a message. He tells Daniel this in 9:24:

Seventy “sevens” are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy (Daniel 9:24).

Put simply, Gabriel says that the exile had been extended from seventy years, according to Jeremiah, to seventy “sevens” of years, or about 490 years. Because the people had refused to repent, God decided to multiply the length of the exile seven times over. As God said in Leviticus 26:18:

If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over (Leviticus 26:18).

God delayed the restoration of Israel, and control of the Land of Promise was passed from one Gentile empire to another and to another and to another, until the kingdom of God came in Christ.

Now that we’ve seen Jeremiah’s prediction of seventy years of exile and how Daniel learned that it would be multiplied seven times to some 490 years, we are in a position to look at the final stages of Old Testament prophetic eschatology.

FINAL OUTLOOKS

The last stages of Old Testament prophecy took place during the restoration period after a number of Israelites were released from captivity and returned to the Promised Land. To understand how Old Testament eschatology looked in this final stage, we will consider two items: first, early restoration hopes; and second, later restoration hopes. Let’s first consider the initial hopes of the prophets who served in the early years after the first groups of Israelites returned to the land from Babylon.

Initial Hopes

At this point, we’re focusing on the initial period of restoration from 539 to 515 B.C. During this time, small groups of Israelites returned to the land with the hope of seeing the great blessings from God poured out quickly on the restored people of God. In many respects, they hoped to shorten Daniel’s 490-year delay by repenting and serving the Lord faithfully. Haggai and Zechariah focused on four eschatological hopes: the restoration of David’s throne, victory over Gentile nations, the restoration of the temple, and the renewal of nature. Haggai and Zechariah had great hopes for the people of God. They hoped that the faithfulness of God’s people at this time would bring many blessings to the newly formed nation.

Although hopes in Zerubbabel and the temple were very high in the early years after Israel returned to the land, this situation did not last long. Instead, we come to discover that the hopes of the later restoration period took a different turn. Zerubbabel

completed the temple as Haggai and Zechariah had instructed him, but as we learn from the second half of Zechariah, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, the people of Israel had little more than outward conformity to the will of God. Within one generation, there was widespread intermarriage with Gentile women, and widespread apostasy resulted. Consequently, the hopes of great blessings for Israel in the early post-exilic period were cast into the distant future.

Final Hopes

Malachi focused on this distant hope more than any other late prophet. He sharply rebuked those living in Jerusalem and warned them that a day of judgment and blessing was coming in the future. For instance, in Malachi 3:1 we read these words:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty (Malachi 3:1).

And in his last words in 4:1-2, Malachi speaks of what will happen in that great future day:

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty... “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall” (Malachi 4:1-2).

As the Old Testament closed, it became apparent that this salvation was not coming quickly. The people of God would have to wait for the full restoration.

We’ve seen that eschatology in the Old Testament began with Moses and that the early prophets opened many insights into these matters by adding royal and temple themes. Now, we’ve seen that Daniel and the last prophets of the Old Testament learned that the exile would be extended for a long time. Only then would the great divine intervention take place and bring restoration to God’s people. This brings us then to the last stage in biblical eschatology, the eschatology of the New Testament.

NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

Whenever we read Old Testament prophecy as Christians, we must follow the perspectives of New Testament writers. New Testament writers understood the developments of eschatology within the Old Testament, but they added to this the reality

of Jesus' ministry. Jesus came to this earth and caused a shift in the ways that eschatology would unfold, and as Christians, we must follow this perspective that's given to us in the New Testament. The New Testament picture of eschatology can be grasped as we consider three subjects: first, some central terminology in the New Testament; second, the basic structure of New Testament eschatology; and third, major eschatological themes that appear in New Testament. Let's look first at several important terms in the New Testament that give us an orientation to New Testament outlooks on the end of time.

TERMINOLOGY

We'll focus on three particularly important expressions: first, the word "gospel"; then the term "kingdom"; and finally the expression "latter days."

Gospel

The word "gospel" is familiar to every believer. It derives from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means "good news." Time and again, the New Testament tells us that Jesus and his apostles preached the "gospel" or the "good news." More than one hundred times New Testament writers speak of the Christian message about Christ as the gospel or good news. It's very important to realize that the New Testament did not invent this word "gospel." Instead, New Testament writers picked up the term "gospel" from the Old Testament prophets.

Old Testament prophets used the Hebrew word *basar* (בָּשָׂר) which is often translated "good news" or "glad tidings" on a number of occasions. What good news did they have in mind? Well, in a word, the good news announced by the prophets was the good news that the exile was over and that the restoration of God's people was coming. For example, listen to the way the prophet Isaiah spoke in Isaiah 52:5-7. In verses 5 and 6 we read these words:

For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock... Therefore my people will know my name ... that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I (Isaiah 52:5-6).

God announces that his people will see a great display of his power, and they will know that he foretold the restoration from exile. Then, reflecting on this assurance of restoration, Isaiah says this in verse 7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

Isaiah announced that the appearance of certain messengers would be absolutely beautiful to behold. What kinds of messengers? Those who brought good news, or "gospel."

Now, this prophetic background to the word “gospel” helps us understand why Jesus and his apostles came announcing the gospel of Christ. Jesus brought the restoration from exile. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1-2, and he applied it to his life:

The Spirit of the Lord in on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19).

As this passage makes clear, Jesus saw himself as the one who brought the restoration from exile to the people of God.

A second important term in the New Testament reveals the same perspective. This is the term “kingdom.”

Kingdom

The New Testament frequently summarized the New Testament age as the age of the kingdom. Why was this terminology so prominent in the New Testament? The term kingdom was another way in which the New Testament acknowledged that Jesus had fulfilled the hopes of restoration after exile. Listen once again to Isaiah’s prophecy about the coming restoration from exile in Isaiah 52:7. There he related the gospel to the reign of God in this way:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).

These last words — “your God reigns” — announces the restoration of God’s people, and their victory over the world, and this announcement provides us with a background to the teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of God. Jesus announced the restoration had come in him because God’s reign over the earth was being established.

A third expression also helps us understand the New Testament perspectives on the end of time, the term “latter days.”

Latter Days

You will recall that the Old Testament prophets used the term latter days to describe the period after exile. New Testament writers used the same expression to describe the New Testament period. For example, we read these words in Acts 2:17:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people (Acts 2:17).

Time and again, New Testament writers refer to the whole New Testament period as the *eschaton*, or latter days. They did this because they were relying on Old Testament prophetic terminology. They saw the New Testament age as the culmination of prophetic expectations, the restoration of God's people. These important terms in the New Testament reveal the New Testament writers looked at their age as the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatological hopes. In a word, the final stage of human history came through Christ.

STRUCTURE

This orientation toward New Testament eschatology puts us in a position to see the basic structure that the New Testament reveals for the restoration kingdom. To examine this new outlook on eschatology, we will look at two expectations described in the New Testament: first, the expectations of John the Baptist, and second the expectations of Jesus. Consider first the outlook of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist had an expectation for the kingdom of God that was very common in his day. By reading the Old Testament, John believed that when the Messiah came he would bring the kingdom all at once. Listen to how John spoke of the Messiah in Luke 3:16-17:

One more powerful than I will come ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Luke 3:16-17).

John believed, like Old Testament prophets, that when the restoration of Israel took place it would be a time of immediate blessing and judgment.

Jesus

Because of these Old Testament expectations of sudden final judgment and blessing, Jesus spent much of his ministry explaining to his followers that the *eschaton* was not coming as John and others expected. Instead, God had decided to bring the restoration slowly, stretching it out over time. Perhaps the clearest expression of Jesus' new revelation about the *eschaton* occurs in two parables in Matthew 13: 31-35. There, Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a small mustard seed that grows into a large plant. He also likened the Kingdom of God to yeast that gradually leavens a loaf. The point of

both of these parables is that the restoration kingdom was not coming all at once with judgment and blessing. Instead, it was coming through growth, or in stages.

The New Testament perspective on eschatology taught by Jesus and his disciples has come to be known as inaugurated eschatology. This inaugurated eschatology has been described in many ways, but it helps to view it as a three-fold structure. First, the coming of Christ was the inauguration of the kingdom. Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and the ministries of the apostles formed the foundation, or the beginning, of the *eschaton*. The second stage of the restoration, according to the New Testament, may be called the continuation of the kingdom. This is the time in which we live today — after the first coming of Christ, but before his second coming. The third stage of the restoration may be described as the consummation of the kingdom. When Christ returns, he will bring the full measure of the restoration promised so long ago by the prophets. The whole of the New Testament fits within this basic structure of inaugurated eschatology.

THEMES

Having seen some key terminology and the basic structure of New Testament outlooks, we now should turn to some themes of eschatology which appear in the Old Testament, but then also appear in the New Testament. It will be useful to look at two main themes: the theme of exile and the theme of restoration.

Exile

First, consider the theme of exile. You will recall that the Old Testament motif of exile basically amounted to the fact that God threatened his people with severe judgment in war and in nature. These themes of exile are adjusted in the New Testament to the structure of inauguration, continuation, and consummation. In the first place, when Christ inaugurated his kingdom during his earthly ministry, he often spoke words of judgment against the covenant people.

The theme of exile is also related to the continuation of the kingdom. On the one hand, the judgment of spiritual exile from God's blessing continues for the physical children of Abraham who refuse to serve their Messiah. They are excluded from the blessings of God's kingdom. On the other hand, the same is also true for Gentiles who have come into the visible church. The New Testament makes it clear time and again that church discipline, climaxing in excommunication, was the way Gentiles and Jews in the church are exiled under judgment when they rebel against God.

Finally, the New Testament also teaches that in the consummation of the kingdom an eternal exile will take place. When Christ returns, he will sit in judgment over apostates and send them to everlasting judgment away from the blessings of the new heavens and the new earth. In these ways, we see that the motif of exile is fulfilled in the New Testament. But this fulfillment is shaped according to the stages of inauguration, continuation, and consummation.

Now, of course, the New Testament does not speak simply of the theme of exile. It also teaches plainly that the blessings of restoration for God's people have come in Christ.

Restoration

Old Testament prophets taught that in the latter days God would bless his people beyond measure in warfare and in nature. The New Testament teaches that these blessings of restoration also come in the three stages of Christ's kingdom.

In the first place, during the inauguration of the kingdom, we find many restoration themes characterizing the ministry of Christ. Just as the Old Testament prophets said David's throne would be reestablished, Jesus is called the "son of David," "the king." Just as the prophets of the Old Testament said the temple would be rebuilt during the latter days, Jesus is the temple of God. Just as the prophets predicted great victory over evil, pagan nations and their gods, Jesus began victory for his people by defeating Satan and the power of death. Just as the Old Testament prophets predicted a great inheritance for God's people, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit who is the down payment of our inheritance. And, of course, just as the prophets spoke of great blessings in nature, Jesus performed countless physical healings in his ministry. The New Testament teaches that Jesus' first coming was the beginning of the great final restoration to God's blessings.

In the second place, these themes of restoration also characterize the continuation of the kingdom — our time between the first and the second comings of Christ. Jesus continues to reign as king over the world, just as the prophets predicted for the son of David. The body of Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament visions of the end-time temple of God. The church is now called the temple of God. The church has victories and spiritual battles against evil just as the prophets said God's people would have victory over the world. The Holy Spirit continues in the church as the down payment of our full inheritance. Moreover, Christians often see God's blessing on his people with physical healings and other special acts of providence. In these and many other ways, the New Testament makes it clear that the great promises of restoration find fulfillment in the continuation of the kingdom of Christ.

In the third place, the New Testament not only teaches that Christ inaugurated and continues restoration blessings, it also teaches that the consummation of the kingdom will bring the climax of all restoration promises from the Old Testament. When Jesus returns, his kingship will extend to all the world just as the prophets said David's son would reign over all the nations. When Jesus returns, the promise of a renewed temple will be fulfilled as God reshapes the whole new creation into one temple of God. At the end of this age, there will be a total victory over evil for God's people. The people of God will receive their full inheritance of the new creation. And, of course, nature will break forth into a paradise, fully renewed in the glory of salvation. In these ways and more, the prophecies of restoration will be fulfilled when Christ brings his kingdom to its consummation.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on unfolding eschatology we've seen how the expectations for the finale of history developed from Moses, through the early prophets, to the later prophets, and then to the New Testament. Each step along the way we have seen that God revealed more and more of his plan for the culmination of the world.

Whenever we read Old Testament prophets speaking of the judgment of exile, we must look at this from the perspective of the New Testament. There is exile for covenant breakers in the inauguration of the kingdom, the continuation of the kingdom, and the culmination, or consummation, of the kingdom. And whenever we read Old Testament prophets speaking of the future blessings of restoration, we must always remember that these blessings come in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Christ's kingdom. If we keep these perspectives in mind, we'll be able to look at Old Testament prophesies with the eyes of New Testament writers and of Jesus himself.

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