

# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson 4

Contours of New Testament  
Biblical Theology

Faculty Forum



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# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson Four: Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology

### Discussion Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Rob Griffith  
Jean Mondé

#### Question 1:

#### Why do biblical theologians study the Old and New Testaments separately?

**Student:** Richard, why do biblical theologians study Old Testament and New Testament biblical theology separately?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's a good question, because that is what we're setting up in these lessons, that we're treating them as separate things. Historically, people who have done biblical theology have tended to just do what they studied before, and that is specialization in Old Testament or specialization in New Testament. That's one big reason. I think people just sort of make the shift from sort of standard studies in those two fields, and then when they start doing theology they do it according to those two fields. Now the famous person, or the really influential person we're talking about, Geerhardus Vos at Princeton, he did both. He has books on... In fact, one of his books is the *Biblical Theology* [of the] *Old and New Testaments*. Now oddly enough, the New Testament section is only about that long, that section is about that long, but that's of course appropriate given that the New Testament is about that long. But then he had other books that people call New Testament biblical theology like his *Pauline Eschatology*, his little book on *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, a few things like that, that were specifically on New Testament themes. And I would also think George Ladd's book, *A Theology of the New Testament* is a good example of biblical theology of the New Testament; it has that focus. Some of Herman Ridderbos' works: *The Outline of Paul's Theology* or *The Coming of the Kingdom*. Those books are more New Testament oriented. But then you find others that are Old Testament oriented like Willem VanGemeren's *Progress of Redemption*, or Walter Kaiser's *Toward a Theology of the Old Testament*. Those are people who are doing their particular fields, and I think that that's probably the main reason.

At first though, we should say that early on, let's say maybe midway through the last century, people were working very hard to do the same kinds of things in the New Testament as biblical theologians did in the Old Testament. And so biblical theology was seen as a unified discipline, but then as things developed and certain attempts were made and faltering occurred, then they started splitting them between the two,

so that when I was seminary, people would speak of OTBT and NTBT. And you try to say those really fast and you'll get a sense of how things went crazy. OTBT of course means Old Testament Biblical Theology and NTBT New Testament Biblical Theology. So they really have become almost separate disciplines, though a New Testament biblical theologian will depend more on the Old because they do look at things chronologically, and so they know that the Old Testament does lay the foundation or is a prelude to that New Testament revelation.

**Student: What are the similarities and dissimilarities between doing Old Testament biblical theology and New Testament biblical theology?**

**Dr. Pratt:** You know, we go over those kinds of things in the lesson, but probably it's not altogether clear. So, let me see if I can just sort of lay it out point by point. There are similarities, two big similarities, and then a third dissimilarity. I'm using now the categories that we used in the Old Testament biblical theology lessons. One of the big similarities is this coordination of act revelation and word revelation. Again, this distinguishes biblical theology as a discipline from systematics, which tends to focus just on word revelation, concepts that are spoken of in the Bible rather than acts of God. And so biblical theology does zero in on the mighty acts of God especially and how they are then interpreted by word of God in either before, during or after the events. And so, you have those kinds of distinctions, and those distinctions are made in New Testament biblical theology, too, to a large extent.

A second big similarity is what we call synchronic synthesis. I mean, just like Old Testament theologians will chop the Old Testament into periods of time and try to bring a synthetic awareness of the theology that was going on in that period, that's what New Testament theologians have done, too, as they've practiced their discipline of biblical theology. That has proven to be very fruitful, too. Where the disciplines started differing from each other, or the point of departure between the two, it wasn't immediately noticeable. If you look at earlier centuries, you don't see them going away from each other, but nowadays you can see it very plainly — once it's said, anyway — and that has to do with what we call diachronic development.

There's a big difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament when you start tracing how themes develop, and the biggest difference is simply this: The New Testament doesn't have much history. It just does not have much time for things to develop. And that's extremely critical. It may seem silly at first, but if you were to look at certain forms of New Testament biblical theology in the past, especially from the Dutch, they tried to work the New Testament with a lot of extensive diachronic development. Some of them actually went through the life of Christ and tried to divide it up into different stages and to show theological development from one stage to the next to the next, and there's been a long history of people trying to show diachronic developments from Jesus say to Paul, or to Peter, those kinds of things. And so those things were enfolded for a while, but it became very clear that even though there is the passage of time, let's say from 4 BC with the birth of Jesus to let's say around 100 A.D. with the death of John the Apostle, there's a hundred years

there. So, things did develop and things moved forward in many respects, but it's not a dramatic as it is in the Old Testament. Name some of the situations, Jean. Name some of the different situations that people in the Old Testament faced. You have Adam and Eve in the garden. What would be another situation?

**Student:** The people of Israel leaving Egypt.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, leaving Egypt is big. That's different because they're marching along. Then they end up doing what?

**Student:** Well, meeting at Mt. Sinai for one.

**Dr. Pratt:** Meeting at Mt. Sinai. That's huge. That changes situations.

**Student:** They entered the Promised Land.

**Dr. Pratt:** Entered the Promised Land to fight a war. Oh boy, that's different than working through the wilderness.

**Student:** Monarchy. You have the monarchy.

**Dr. Pratt:** They have monarchs. Then they lose everything and go off into exile. Then some of them come back. And so, you can see the transitions, the diachronic transitions are huge in the Old Testament. You go from where everything's wonderful to where things are really bad, to times when God's covenant people are wealthy, to times when they're poor, even imprisoned, even conquered, to times when they're conquering, to times when they're hungry, to times when they're well-fed, and when they're proud or when they're humble, and so on, and so on, and so on. You find all that variety, and what that variety does is it makes Old Testament biblical theology very rich. This is fertile ground for saying how do things develop? How does the omniscience of God, for example, develop as you go through God's people going through periods of war or going through periods of plight and periods of wealth and health and things like that? See, now you've got a lot of work to do and a lot of fun things, and believe it or not, biblical theology can be fun in that way.

But when you come to the New Testament and you think about the people of God, the new covenant people, they're basically in the same situation. Now there are differences. I mean, there's a difference between during Jesus' life where he had just a few followers, maybe a few thousand at a time, in Palestine. That's one stage. You could say this is the Palestinian stage to the work of the apostle Paul which was not in Palestine, shall we say? So, the shift from Jews to Gentiles, that's a big shift. And much could be made of that. Unfortunately, biblical theologians of the Old Testament don't tend to do a whole lot with that, but they certainly could. But what were the economic situations that the first century church faced? Basically the same, yeah? There were some that were wealthy and some that were poor. Generally speaking, they weren't the wealthiest around. They certainly weren't a nation that was marching

through a desert ever. They weren't en masse travelling anywhere. They were scattered around basically staying where they were. And so you have much continuity socioeconomically in the New Testament period that there's just not a lot you can do diachronically.

**Student:** Well it seems you have your major acts in the New Testament, you have the birth, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. Then you see the spread of the church, but the next big act is...

**Dr. Pratt:** Way off.

**Student:** It's way off. It hasn't come yet. We're waiting for it.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right, exactly.

**Student:** And all that takes what? Sixty years?

**Dr. Pratt:** Less than a hundred for sure; even in the broadest terms, less than a hundred. And so, you will find biblical theologians making distinctions between the pre-death, resurrection and the post-resurrection period, for example. You will find that kind of thing, and that is important. The outpouring of the Spirit was something that was new, that was coming in the first chapters of Acts. And so, there are distinctions to be made, but by and large, things were essentially the same during that short period of the New Testament. And that's why Old Testament biblical theology and New Testament biblical theology are so different from each other.

## Question 2:

### What do biblical theologians do with the New Testament?

**Student:** So if there's not the much diachronic development in the New Testament, what do New Testament biblical theologians do?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's great, because they've got to do something. Right? I mean, if you're committed to this idea that God reveals himself in actions and in words and that those are coordinated somehow, if you are committed to the idea that you can make syntheses of those things, which we have said they are, what do they do if they don't have much diachronic ground to work with? The answer basically is to sort of do a synthetic theology of the whole New Testament, a synchronic synthesis of the whole New Testament, and to realize, however, that within that there are going to be varieties. And this is what biblical theologians of the New Testament end up concentrating on the most. Now not all of them did that, especially early on, but now if you were to look at biblical theology of the New Testament, what you'll find is they'll talk about things like this, they'll say, what's the theology of Matthew? What's the theology of Mark? What's the theology of Luke-Acts? Or what's the

theology of the Paul, or Peter, or James? And basically, the notion is they're all, all of those theologies, are talking about the same complex of divine actions and how they synthesize is different according to different writers of the New Testament. That's the key.

And so, they spend most of their time working out the varieties of theological perspectives on that group of divine actions. Now what are those actions? Those actions are things like: Let's start off with John the Baptist, which is where most of the gospels do, the birth of Christ, the earthly ministry of Christ, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and then his glorious return. And basically, even though there is diachrony in that, those things happen over time, basically New Testament biblical theologians are asking the question, if you take all of that as a synthetic unit, how do the writers of the New Testament create their syntheses? And remember, even as far back as B.B. Warfield — earlier in another lesson, I think even the first lesson of this series — we mentioned that one of the contributions B.B. Warfield made was that there are manifold or multiple concatenations or arrangements of theology in the Bible itself. And of course, that sort of spins us around in some ways because we don't think of the Bible as having multiple theologies, but this is precisely what Warfield said, and it's what New Testament biblical theologians concentrate on. For example, again, one of the standard texts for New Testament biblical theology is George Ladd's book *The Theology of the New Testament* and his chapters are actually marked out just like I said: the theology of Matthew, the theology of Mark, the theology of Luke-Acts, the theology of John and his epistles, Johannine theology, Pauline theology, Petrine theology, and so on and so on as he walks through the various writers. And what he does is he tries as hard as one can to distinguish them from each other. It would be very easy with the force of systematic theology behind us to sort of make all of these fit together neatly and nicely, but even as an evangelical, he works very hard to distinguish them from each other, as all of us are sort of used to doing nowadays.

### **Question 3:** **Did biblical writers contradict each other?**

**Student:** Wait a minute. Are you saying that the biblical writers contradicted one another?

**Dr. Pratt:** No, no, no. That's always not the case here. Now there will be some people who say that, yes. There are lots of even popular books, unfortunately, written these days that actually pit one New Testament writer against the other and say that their theologies are incompatible, or even competing with each other. They view the whole first century as this sort of competition among various writers and various church leaders; I've got my group, you've got your group, now let's see who has the best theology. That kind of thing. You know, they decide which is the best theology based on criteria that they bring to the text rather than being willing to submit to



them. But no, we're not talking about contradiction, but we are talking about difference, and there's a big difference between contradiction and difference. A person can look at something as complicated — and think about how complex this is: The birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus. Now all those things put together in a package, that's a lot of stuff to talk about.

So you can imagine that human writers even inspired by the Holy Spirit are not given omniscience about all of that. What they're given is God working through their backgrounds, through their own personalities, their own experiences, they're given certain angles or certain perspectives that are important to distinguish them from other people who are also inspired who have, nevertheless, different perspectives, and different emphases, and different vocabulary. I mean, it comes down even to vocabulary. And this is one of the critical differences between systematic theology and biblical theology that we even mentioned in the systematic theology series, and that is systematic theology tries to come up with a unified vocabulary. Now when you try to come up with one way to describe everything, every little piece of what let's just say the New Testament says, you're going to run into problems, because the New Testament doesn't talk about all those little pieces in the same way. They use different vocabulary to talk about the same things.

So when we as Christians, heavily influenced often by systematic theology, go to the New Testament, our tendency is to cram every single part of the New Testament into the vocabulary that's been adopted by a particular Christian tradition in its systematic theology. And that's where a lot of controversy comes up because people say, well I understand what the systematician was saying and using this term this way, but the systematician is not acknowledging all the varieties of ways in which that term is used in the New Testament, much less the Old when you add that. And this comes up in discussions about justification for example. You know, when Jesus is quoted in Matthew as saying, a man will be justified by every word that comes out of his mouth, using the word "*dikaioo*". Okay? Just like when Paul says that a man is justified not according to works but by faith, we realize that Jesus, a la Matthew, is using *dikaioo* differently than Paul was. Now if you've got a theology that has to have the word justification or justified used just in one way, you've got a problem. Add to that James who says that a man is not justified by faith alone but by works also, now you've got at least three New Testament uses of this word justification. And so how you bring all those into a systematic theology becomes very complicated. But that's what biblical theologians love to do. They love to push the limits of the New Testament's diversity.

### Question 4: How diverse are the theologies of the biblical writers?

**Student:** Okay, so what are those limits first of all? We're talking about pushing the limits of diversity, what are those limits? And how do we bring all these perspectives together?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's great, because that really is ultimately even what B.B. Warfield was saying, see? Remember, he said that you've got these various theologies in the Bible — he was including the Old Testament also, so look for justification in the Old Testament and you'll find a lot more variety, even over that what we just said — but he was saying that systematic theology has to create this mega-system that allows all this diversity, or various theologies to have their right place, their voice as it were, within the system of theology that the church creates as a comprehensive structure for the Bible. And that is a very difficult thing. This is one reason why we have different denominations, because different denominations will take in their systematic theology, they'll tend to lean on one New Testament writer more than another. My own tradition tends to lean heavily on...guess who? Which New Testament writer? Paul, of course. Others tend not to do that so much.

So it really does depend on what that denomination's history is as to what part of the New Testament it leans on most heavily, and then they develop their own technical vocabulary in their tradition, and it becomes kind of their shorthand or jargon, and then that makes it hard for them then to bring other theologies of the New Testament into their jargon, or into their shorthand that they share with each other, see? That is one of the problems with a confessing denomination, or confessionalism, is that no confession can incorporate all that vocabulary. It has to pick and choose. It has to decide what its technical vocabulary is, and that creates serious problems.

It's also one of the reasons why people often these days are challenging some very important traditional protestant doctrines that really don't need to be challenged. What they're doing is they're arguing over how we should use these terms, and they're wanting to be more inclusive of the way that the New Testament uses those terms and then create, as it were, a mixed doctrine that sort of imbibes all of these, or includes all of these varieties. While that may be fun to try to do, it certainly is disruptive to say the least. If a branch of the church has had a technical definition that has in effect eliminated other options, it's very hard to get that church to accept the variety. And sometimes, we always have to remember that the terminology does not equal the concept. For example, I believe very strongly in justification by faith alone. I don't believe that the word justification is always used that way in the Bible, but I believe in the concept — that's different — of justification by faith alone that the Reformers emphasized, and so when I find the word justified used in other ways in the New Testament, like when Jesus says a man is justified by his words, then what I do is I don't try to make that a part of my doctrine of justification. I just simply acknowledge that words are important, and words make a difference. The same with

James. I'm not trying to bring James' use of the word justification into the doctrine of justification. There's no need to do that. If you start doing that, then you're going to have some very serious problems.

Everybody picks and chooses what parts of the Bible they're going to develop their vocabulary, their shorthand out of. And there's nothing wrong with that because if you allow your vocabulary in theology to be as diverse as even the New Testament's vocabulary, then, I often say, your theology is going to be as confusing as the Bible itself. So, what was the point of having theology to begin with? The point is to make it understandable, to communicate it, to fulfill the Great Commission. So, we must be very careful not to allow the diversity that is there and that biblical theology emphasizes to call the shots, or play the melody, or play the rhythm that systematic theology has to dance to. It doesn't have to dance to that. Systematic theology represents a long history of traditional vocabulary, shorthand abbreviations that allow people to communicate with each other, and you don't have to bring all the diversity of biblical theology into your systematic theology.

**Student: So, would you say then it's the wider historical context of theology, or what the church has given us over history that should really set our boundaries?**

Dr. Pratt: Well it sets the boundaries in the sense of not telling us what the Bible says in each particular case, but in how we use words and concepts technically. The shorthand we adopt. And if we give up the shorthand — in other words, if we don't have ways in which we can talk to each other or other Christians can talk to each other and understand what they all mean in a phrase or two — then what we end up with is a situation where you're having to define every single thing you say a hundred or thousand ways in order even to have a sermon or to have a lesson, and that gets to where it's crazy and confusing, and that's the last thing we want it to be.

### **Question 5:**

**How do we discover the different theologies of the New Testament writers?**

**Student: Now Richard, the New Testament does not give a systematic theology, we can say. How do we discover the different theologies in the New Testament from the Gospels and from the Epistles?**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a great question, because that is what we have in the New Testament. I mean, if you think about all the variety of genres in the Old Testament, you don't have quite that variety, but you do have letters and histories basically, the Gospels and Acts, and then the letters, and maybe you want to distinguish Revelation as apocalyptic, maybe, but it too is a letter to churches. So basically what we're talking about here is discerning different theologies, systems of theology in fact,

perspectives on theology, syntheses, from those kinds of literature. And that's not an easy thing to do. A lot of people think it is fairly straightforward, but it really isn't, because you have to think of this as involving all kinds of different layers of theological reflection.

If you think, for example...Let's just take Romans as an example because it's the one that most people point to and say that is the part of the New Testament that's most like a systematic theology. Now the people who say that are the ones whose systematic theology has been deeply influenced by the book of Romans, so it looks like systematic theology, of course. But in reality, the book of Romans itself is a letter, which means it's addressing pastoral issues that the apostle Paul believed were happening and needed to be addressed in the church in Rome. And if you look at the book of Romans this way you discover rather quickly and rather obviously that it's not an abstract, timeless, systematic theology, but rather it's a letter written to address certain needs. And if you think about how Romans works its way out, the need apparently, or the dominant concern Paul had in that letter was the relationship, oddly enough for Paul, the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers in the church in Rome.

You know, we often start off thinking of chapter one as talking about the doctrine of general revelation and total depravity of all people and those kinds of things, climaxing in Romans 3:23: All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Well, that's true enough. But the reality is the first three chapters divide between what Gentiles know and what their condition is based upon general revelation, and then what the Jews know and what their condition is based on the revelation of the law in Moses and the prophets. And so even that very first part starts off with the Gentile-Jew distinction and, in effect, in chapter 3 he ends up saying everybody is in the same situation whether you're Gentile or Jew. And in fact, he expresses even in Roman 3:23, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God", being justified by faith, meaning that everybody in the church here at Rome, whether you're Jewish or Gentile, you've all been justified by faith. Because you're all sinners. We are all sinners. And when you go to chapters 4, 5 and 6 and so and so on, he constantly refers to this distinction that is happening in the church between first class-second class, Jewish-Gentile Christians, and debunks it, and he proves it over and over again that Abraham was justified by faith prior to his circumcision, which means that Jews and Gentiles can have the same experience of God. You don't have to be circumcised first. And so, on and so on it goes: all in Adam, all in Christ. And even the more practical chapters like chapter 14, they deal with issues of ceremonies and the observances of ceremonies that were common among the Jews versus those that were not among the Gentiles.

And so, the book of Romans in one sense, let's say at the lowest level, the least abstract level, its theology is pastoral. It's addressing felt needs in the Christ at Rome as the apostle Paul was seeing it and trying to fix those needs. But now if you think about the book of Romans, you know that something's behind it. I used to give this exercise. I used to say take these three verses out of Romans 1 and tell me on the basis of these three verses, what are all the other things that the apostle Paul had to

believe in order to have said those three verses? And the students would come up with lists and lists of and lists and lists of things he had to believe in order to have been able to say just what he said in those three verses. Well that's the reality. What Paul says on the surface, that sort of lowest level, the least abstract level at which you could look at Romans, assumes all kinds of beliefs, all kinds theological beliefs, as well as beliefs about humanity, as well as beliefs about language, as well as beliefs about culture, as well as beliefs about you name it! Just tons and tons of layers and layers of things that were in Paul's mind in order for him to have been able to write that very practical theological letter. And what biblical theologians do, just like systematicians, is they tend to infer those layers that are behind or, as it were, above what is actually written in the letter itself.

I mean, what was behind? What did Paul have to believe to say what he said about Jews and Gentiles in the first three chapters, for example? Well he had to believe all kinds of things about God, and about revelation, and about people, I mean just all kinds of things. And typically, biblical theologians of the New Testament will focus less on that on-the-ground pastoral theology and they'll focus much more on the sort of abstractions that lie behind it, or lie above what Paul says in this letter. And so, when they do that, then they can join the abstractions from this letter and that letter and that letter and that letter, and bring those abstractions together into a system of theology, a way of looking at theology that was characteristic of Paul.

I mean, when you compare Galatians and what it says on its surface with 1 Corinthians, they are very, very different. I mean, Galatians is emphasizing how salvation is by faith and how salvation is not about circumcision; it is not about the law, not about the law, not about the law, not about the law. Now you could summarize Galatians that way. But if you took Paul's theology and just built it out of Galatians and just did the abstractions out of that, you would have a very different theology than what is said in the book of 1 Corinthians, because in 1 Corinthians the apostle is very concerned that the Corinthians obey the law, that the Corinthians be observant of the morality of Christianity, and he's all the time questioning whether or not they're really believers on the basis of what they're doing; not on the basis of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but on the basis of what they're doing; not on the basis of whether or not they're requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, because that wasn't even an issue for them, though he does mention it here and there. But the real issue for them was, are you going to fail in the wilderness — 1 Corinthians 10 — like the first generation of the exodus did? Now you don't find that kind of talk over in Galatians, but you do find it in 1 Corinthians.

So, if you're going to build Paul's theology, you have to move to the abstractions behind what was necessary for Paul to believe behind 1 Corinthians to have said that, and what was necessary behind or above Galatians for him to have said that, and then you've got to bring those together into a unified perspective. What did he have to believe in order to be able to believe these things to have said those in those different letters? And then when you take his thirteen letters and try to do all of that at once, you can see how much you're building upon, building upon and building upon. And

that's the way New Testament biblical theologians get the theological perspectives of New Testament writers. In effect, what they're doing is asking what did that writer have to believe in order to have said all these different things that he said in all these different gospels, or histories, or letters, or whatever it may be? That's the key. It is a matter of abstraction, but the abstractions occur out of the text in those ways.

**Student:** So, it seems then many of the circumstances that Paul is dealing with throughout his letters really don't apply directly to our lives today, and so, if I hear you right, we should spend more time looking at the abstractions, looking at the presuppositions behind those events?

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, inferring what theological beliefs Paul had that allowed him to say those things or even compelled him to say those specific things. I mean, how many people in your church are really so lazy that they're not working? Probably not very many. There might be a few here and there, but it's not widespread in your church like it was in Thessalonica. I mean, they believed that Jesus had already come or was about to come, and so they stopped working and became busy bodies. And so, Paul says those that don't work don't get to eat. Oh, well, that's great. Well, that was his pastoral application of something that was deeper, and it's that something that was deeper, that theological conviction that was deeper — meaning things like being responsible, serving God, those kinds of things — that has to be then applied to the church today in its various positions and situations. In fact, in some churches, what you might want to say is just the opposite of what Paul said to the Thessalonians. You might want to tell people stop working so much. Out of the same theological conviction that led Paul to say to the Thessalonians, you've got to work. And so, it's very interesting how that happens, but it's those theological levels that biblical theologians are concerned with as they try to decipher James' theology, Peter's theology, Paul's theology, Matthew's theology. And it's very rich when you can do that. And through the decades, biblical theologians have done a lot of work in this. It's not like you and I have to start off with a blank slate and figure this out. They've done a lot of work, and we can begin to build and refine on what has been done before in these areas.

**Student:** But you're not saying that on the surface, the surface level text doesn't apply even though the situations are different. Just for instance, I'm thinking in Ephesians, Paul tells the person who steals to steal no more but to go out, work, and give. Is there an application of that verse to every believer?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, in the sense that you'd tell everybody in the world, don't steal. But if you don't have people in your church that are stealing, then you probably wouldn't even bring that up. Okay? How's that? So the question might be raised, well what led Paul to say that? And what theological convictions did he have — like the authority of the law, things like that, thou shalt not steal — what were the theological convictions that led him to say that specific thing to those people? And now if we have people that match that, yeah, we say it again. But if we have people that are in a different situation, then we may be saying something very different in application in

our day. It's a wonderful thing that biblical theology opens up, because it does not leave us with a simple way of just read the verse and do what it says. It asks the question, what was the theology behind the verse? Now live out of that as God wants you live now where you are today.

### Question 6: What is eschatology?

**Student:** So Richard, you talk a lot in this lesson about eschatology, and for the most part what I heard in the lesson are things that I'm not hearing from the pulpit on a regular basis. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, what is eschatology? It's a problem, because when biblical theologians talk about eschatology, they're talking about something that most people don't really understand. Most evangelical Christians don't. I mean, eschatology basically means the study of last things. So that much we've got. But Jean, when people think about the study of the last things, what kinds of things do they normally think about?

**Student:** The end times, the rapture, the millennium, the antichrist...

**Dr. Pratt:** What's going to happen to Israel and so on and so on. You know, are we about to have...Is this it? Is this it? I mean, if you watch Christian television at all, they are all the time talking about how everything's ready for Jesus to come back and those sorts of things. Yeah. For the most part, that comes from, believe it or not, the tradition of systematic theology, because eschatology is sort of the last category in traditional systematic theology because it has focused primarily on end time events, or for Christians, the second coming of Jesus and things that are associated with that. And that's where biblical theology has expanded the idea of eschatology almost to the point that it can hardly be recognized.

So that's why this lesson talks about eschatology or the study of last things in what might feel like a very strange way, and I think probably the best way to go about this is just to sort of start at the beginning with eschatology and just kind of sketch it out for a moment to see how biblical theologians came to this view. The word "*eschaton*" is a Greek word that comes from several different phrases in Hebrew but one that's especially important in Deuteronomy 4 is "*acharit-hayamim*", in the latter days or in the latter part of days, and that expression that Moses used in Deuteronomy 4 is used again by the prophets of the Old Testament. The reason for this is because they had view that the world's history was going to come to an end; it was reaching a climax, a culmination. And Moses spoke of those latter days as the time when Israel would come back from exile, and that's what the prophets used it for as well. They spoke of in the latter times or in the last days Israel will come back from exile. And that is the Old Testament background to what Christians think about.

And often Christians do associate the latter days with something happening to Israel. Now in my opinion, most of that is not correct, but that's what they do. And that's where it comes from. It comes from the fact that the Old Testament itself relates the *eschaton*, or the culmination of history, to the Israelites returning from exile, restoring the kingdom, and God's blessings being poured out on them and wonderful things happening all over the world. And it's that basic idea that the world is going somewhere and it involves the restoration of Israel after the exile that the New Testament picks up on. And the New Testament uses that terminology, however, in ways that surprise lots of people. When they think only of the second coming of Jesus as *eschaton*, or eschatology, the New Testament doesn't think that way. The New Testament thinks of all the history of the New Testament beginning with John the Baptist, Jesus' birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his second coming — all of those things are eschatological, because they all represent the culmination of history that Moses was talking about and the prophets were talking about.

And that's why when you look at eschatology from the perspective of New Testament biblical theology, you're not looking just at what are the signs? Are we close to the second coming? What are the things that are about to occur? How shall we interpret this war or that war, or this earthquake or that earthquake? Instead, what you're talking about is the whole New Testament, because the New Testament uses the term latter days or last days to refer to all of those events. It does not discount the second coming — no, that's a part of the last days — but the whole of what happened from John the Baptist until Jesus comes back in New Testament vocabulary is called the latter days.

**Student:** So, Richard, is this a matter of terminology then?

**Dr. Pratt:** In some respects it is. But what biblical theologians have done is they have actually identified the main or central concern of all New Testament writers as explaining how the *eschaton* unfolded in the life, death, resurrection, ascension and second coming of Christ, how the whole New Testament history is about eschatology. It became the biblical theologian's central concern of understanding how New Testament writers explained that, because it was not the way people expected it to be. And so, when you think about New Testament biblical theology, in some respects, it's all about eschatology, all about the latter days, because it's all about the New Testament.

### **Question 7:** **How did the doctrine of eschatology develop?**

**Student:** Now Richard, you mentioned that the doctrine of eschatology developed diachronically. Could you speak a little bit more and help us to understand that?



**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, the reason I said that was because we understand, I think, that most of the other doctrines that we normally think of — the person of God, the character of God, those kinds of things, the morality, the moral standards of the Bible, various things like that — developed as the Bible went forward. They developed diachronically. But unfortunately, we don't understand that the same kind of thing happened with eschatology. Eschatology was not something that was said once and then was just left alone forever. Instead, the concept of how the world would come to its culmination actually developed over time, all the way back — let's say you could start at Eden if you wanted to, because before sin came into the world, basically God tested humanity to see if humanity would go out there and be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion over it. And theoretically, or hypothetically, if they had done that rather than rebelling against God in the garden, then it would have been a rather short trip and the *eschaton* would have come.

There was built-in eschatology even in the beginning so that what happens at the beginning aims toward that culmination. Of course, sin came into the world and disrupted things, and so the way the world would reach that goal of God's kingdom coming to the earth, it's different now than it was before sin came into the world. And then when you come to the time of Moses, let's say. I mentioned Deuteronomy 4:30, but when Moses said "in the latter days," he now picks up a technical terminology in many respects and associates the end of time or the culmination of history with the return of Israel from exile, like the prophets did.

The prophets didn't think of things like the first coming of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus, what the apostles would do, this, that, this, that, and separating all those things out. Instead, they thought of the end times coming to a culmination just like Moses had said, and it wasn't until you come into the later prophets, especially someone like Daniel, where changes occur again. I mean, if you think about what Moses said, he said basically you're going to have the exile, then you're to have the *eschaton*. The latter days will come after that, a time of great blessing, eternal judgment, eternal blessing, that kind of things. When you come to the earlier prophets, that was their view. Basically, we're going to have this exile that's going to come, but when it's over, things are going to be great. We will have reached the last days, the latter days.

Now Daniel in Daniel chapter 7 is facing a problem, and the problem is that they are near the time that Jeremiah said the exile would be over. Jeremiah said in chapter 25 and 29 that the exile was going to last 70 years. Well here's Daniel in exile around 70 years, but nothing's happening. So, he prays to God and he says please go ahead and bring us back and all these things, even though we're sinners; I know we haven't repented like we should have — because that was part of the requirement for the latter days to come, that Israel would repent — but he says please do this for your name's sake and for the sake of Jerusalem and those sorts of things. And God sends a messenger, Gabriel, who basically says, no way, it's not going to happen. Even though Jeremiah had said seventy years, Gabriel says no, it's going to be seven times

seventy years. So, it's going to take about five hundred years for all these things to work out and for the end time to come.

### Question 8:

#### Did the prophets ever predict things that did not come to pass?

**Student:** Okay, so wait a minute. Are you saying then, in the case of the Minor Prophets, that they actually predicted something that did not come to pass?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, yes. In fact, in the case of Jeremiah, it did not come about as Jeremiah had said it would. Jeremiah was predicting that the new covenant and all these wonderful catastrophic and cosmic events would occur after seventy years, and that did not happen. Now the book of Chronicles and Zechariah both say that when Israel, a few of them did return, that this was in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, but not everything that Jeremiah said would happen happened. I mean, the culmination didn't occur, and so the words to Daniel were, it's not going to find its culmination in these seventy years like we first said. It's going to be multiplied seven times. And Leviticus 26 explains that, because God said in covenant with him that if you don't repent of sins, he'll multiply the punishment seven times, seven times, seven times, seven times, so you have the seven times extended even to the exile.

So around 539 or so Daniel is learning that it's going to be another 490 to 500 years, and of course that brings us up to the time of Jesus. Well, okay, so if you were John the Baptist and you believed that now we've come to the culmination, we've come to the *eschaton*, and that Messiah, the son of David is coming, and he's going to do certain things, you would have the expectation that Daniel had given you and even that Jeremiah had given, that once it came, it came. Period! Put a period at the end of the sentence! That it would come dramatically, it would come catastrophically, that judgment would occur along with the blessing of God, the eternal judgment and the eternal blessing would come together. And that is exactly what John the Baptist preached. He preached that the axe is at the root, it's ready to chop down the trees and throw all the wicked into the fire, and the blessings of the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the earth, and everything will be wonderful. That was his view. Of course it was. That's what he had inherited from Old Testament prophets. And this, of course, is the crisis of New Testament faith. This is what makes it all happen. This is why the whole New Testament in fact was written, and it is the fact that when Jesus came, he did not bring the culmination the way John the Baptist expected it. And so even in Jesus there's the development, and then there's the development of understanding even among the apostles as they write the New Testament. So that's what I mean when I say that the doctrine of eschatology developed through the Bible.

### Question 9: Why was John the Baptist surprised by Jesus' ministry?

**Student:** Now is the development that we are seeing in eschatology from Old and coming to the New Testament, is that the reason why John the Baptist, for example, was very disappointed when Jesus did not do what he was expecting him to do?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, it is utterly the reason, because John the Baptist was preaching and teaching that the end was near — he framed it in terms of the kingdom of heaven is near, the kingdom of God is near — and he said that this was going to involve both the chopping down of the trees and throwing them into the fire as well as the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which was something that the prophets had said like in Joel or Isaiah. And it's extremely important to understand the crisis that John the Baptist faced, because here he is, the man who baptized Jesus, here he is, the man who called him the Lamb of God, here he is, the man who staked his whole life and his whole ministry on the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. And so he naturally expected Jesus to make it happen.

Well what happens to John the Baptist? He ends up in prison about to have his head chopped off. And in Luke 7, while he's in prison, he sends two disciples to Jesus, as you know, and he tells the disciples to ask Jesus are you really the one or should we be expecting someone else? That's a natural question to ask, because John was not the only person who believed that once the Messiah came, he would do all of the eschatological judgments and blessings. Everybody believed that. Every God-fearing Jew believed that. They believed that the key event that had to occur was the coming of the great son of David, and the great son of David would eke out judgment on the earth, and he would also pour out his blessings on the earth at once, and John the Baptist expected that. So now he looks at Jesus' ministry. He is the servant of Jesus, and he's about to have his head chopped off, that doesn't make any sense at all. In fact, Jesus is going around doing things that are nice enough, you know, healing people, those kinds of things, feeding thousands of people. That's nice enough, but it's not what the Messiah is supposed to do from those frameworks, from the framework of the Old Testament prophets as understood by John the Baptist and everybody else in the day.

This is what's so critical. It is that John was surprised that Jesus' ministry did not unfold in this sort of catastrophic or cataclysmic way, and so he sends his disciples to Jesus and says, are you the one? And of course, Jesus responds by saying, well, go back and tell John the Baptist, and he quotes Isaiah, that the lame walk, the blind see, and the gospel, the good news is preached to the poor, the downtrodden. And in effect, as I said in the lesson, what Jesus is telling John the Baptist is, look, I understand that I haven't done everything you expected. I haven't done everything that everyone around me expects, but I have done enough, I have brought enough of the end time blessings — lame walking, blind seeing, the gospel being preached to the downtrodden, the poor — I've done enough of this for you to believe that I'm the

one and that I will do the rest. And in some respects, that's the essence of Christian faith. The essence of trusting in Jesus is not that Jesus has done everything, because he hasn't. If what we see today in our world today is everything that Jesus is ever going to do to the world, then we picked the wrong savior. It's really that simple. But Christian faith is this: it's believing that Jesus has done enough of what was hoped for in the end to believe that he will do the rest in the future. And I hope that you feel that way about your own Christian life. Rob, do you have any difficulties in your Christian life that might make you think that there's got to be more to it than this?

**Student:** We don't need to start that list.

**Dr. Pratt:** It's a long list. But you know, let's face it. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ is not raised, then we're the most foolish people of all, we're the most pitiable in the world. By in large, American Christians don't understand those passages. And why not? Because we have it easy, we have it nice. In fact, to be a Christian in modern America, for a long time, has been sort of the way you get ahead in life. It's the way you become a good person, a good citizen, so you get all these wonderful blessings. So, we really don't have all that much staked on the idea that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that he's coming back. That's not that big of a deal to us. If he doesn't come back and if we find out he wasn't resurrected from the dead, then we would have to agree with Pascal, we still made the best bet because it made our lives better.

But that's not the way it was at Corinth, and it was not the way it was for first century Christians. They staked everything and endured suffering because they were committed to the idea that Jesus had done enough for them to believe that he would do the rest. And the resurrection was the proof he was coming back, you see? And so, we really are the most pitiable people in the world if we are living for Christ in ways that bring suffering, as it should. If we are living for Christ as godly men and women, we will endure suffering for his name's sake. And so, the loss that we have makes our faith in his resurrection and his return absolutely essential. And so, we lose if he is not coming back, which is of course the essence then of Christian faith.

### Question 10:

#### Will we be surprised by the details of Christ's return?

**Student:** I think I know the answer to this question, but do you think we will be surprised at Christ's return?

**Dr. Pratt:** Like John the Baptist was?

**Student:** Exactly. Is it going to unfold the ways that we expect?

**Dr. Pratt:** My own personal conviction is I think we're going to be surprised. Now I don't know what the surprise will look like. When you think about Old Testament prophecies, about the end times and things like that, and you would think about John the Baptist, the greatest of the whole Old Testament period Jesus says, they were surprised. They would have been utterly surprised. If Isaiah were to see Jesus, like John the Baptist, he would have been surprised that this was the way it unfolded. Not that it was contradicting of what he said, but it's not what he would have expected to have happened. And I think probably in our day, because we have so many Christians speculating about how this event is going to lead to that event, and this thing's going to happen, we even have books written on it and movies made about it and things like that. Christians by in large have a long list of expectations of what they think is going to happen.

And for American Christians, it's often tied into American history, that America is somehow the last nation that's ever going to exist, or the last empire that's ever going to exist before Jesus returns. We might be surprised in a hundred years to find out that America was just one of those empires that came and went like every other empire came and went. And Jesus didn't come back just because America collapsed, and that will shock a lot of American Christians. A lot of Western Christians in Europe were shocked when Europe sort of collapsed, as it were, from its central position, and they wondered how in the world could this happen. We know that Christians in World War I thought that was the end. Christians in World War II thought that's the end. Christians with every major step that occurs in history think this has got to be the end. And the reality is that it never has been yet, and so we will probably be very surprised at the sorts of things that will prelude Jesus' return. And it probably won't even be us. Who knows? It may be our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, but whatever the case, we do need to be ready to be surprised, because John the Baptist needed to be ready to be surprised so that his faith in Christ was not shaken just because Christ didn't bring the end the way John the Baptist and everybody around him thought that the Messiah would bring the end.

### **Question 11:** **Why didn't the end times unfold in the way the Old Testament prophets had predicted?**

**Student:** So, what did cause Old Testament predictions about eschatology to unfold in unexpected ways?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, they certainly did. Let's say that, okay? Because if you were to look at Old Testament prophecies as a whole, the prophets were true. They didn't say anything that was wrong. They said the correct things, what God inspired to say, and they're reliable because they are inspired prophets. But what they said about the end times didn't unfold exactly the way they said it. Now we have to remember first — let's just make this point — that from the very beginning there was always this

endpoint that history was aimed toward, and the endpoint was that the earth would be made into a place that was appropriate for God to come and display his glory. That's what the New Testament calls the kingdom of God. Okay. So we know that that is the ultimate end of history. Moses and the prophets associated that with the return of Israel from exile. Daniel learned that that return from exile was going to be extended quite a bit, 490 years, 500 years or so. John the Baptist expected, okay, we're here now, here's the Messiah, so now what's going to happen. And then Jesus and the apostles had to explain, no, no, that the end time is going to come stretched out over time in ways that John the Baptist had to learn to believe in, that it was going to come with Jesus's first coming — that we call the inauguration of the kingdom of God — the whole period that we're in now that I call the continuation of the kingdom, and then the second coming of Jesus, the consummation of the kingdom. So, what the New Testament says about the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy was unexpected. You can't find Old Testament prophets who say, don't worry, the end times are going to unfold, inauguration, continuation, consummation. That's not what they said. They looked at it as one big package, and the New Testament then has to explain why it didn't come like they and John the Baptist thought it would come.

Well what caused those things to occur? What caused those changes to occur? It's a principle about biblical prophecy that we often don't realize is in effect every time a prophet speaks, unless a prophet gives an oath from God where God swears he's going to do something. Jeremiah 18 tells us that if a prophet says blessings are going to come to a group of people, any group of people, any nation, any time, that if those people rebel against God, then God may reverse what he says or delay what he says, or do any number of things in Jeremiah 18. He also flips it over and says if God says he's going to curse someone — a nation, a people, any time, any place — he can actually decide not to curse them because of their repentance.

As New Testament Christians, what we often read in the Old Testament as condemnations to judgment and promises of blessing, which is culminated of course in the *eschaton*, are really not condemnations and promises. They are threats of judgment and offers of blessing. So when prophets spoke, often what they were doing was threatening and offering, not condemning and promising. That's a very important principle to understand, because the way people react to a prophecy often affects — not always — but often affects the way the prophecy unfolds, how the prediction unfolds, as God reacts to human reactions. Just like God reacts to prayer, or God reacts to rebellion, things like that. Just because a prophet says I'm going to bless you doesn't mean that you're necessarily going to be blessed, because if they shake their fist at God, the blessing is off. And just like when Jonah went to Nineveh and he said in 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed, there's a threat of a curse. That didn't mean Nineveh had to be destroyed in 40 days, because when the people repented, God said, okay, I won't do it. Well the same kind of thing works with all of these prophecies about the end times. The end times will come one day because God's kingdom will come to the earth just like he said at the very beginning when he commanded Adam and Eve to fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over it for his glory. It will happen, and that's what the book of Revelation says will happen.

So the whole Bible is committed to this idea that one way, in some way, somehow, the kingdom of God will come to earth as it is in heaven. But the responses of people throughout history to those predictions and to those prophecies affect how that happens, and the New Testament is especially committed to this idea that it began with the first coming of Jesus, continues now, and it comes to its climax when Jesus returns. But that is very much a question of how and when, not a question of whether or not the *eschaton* that the prophets promised was going to come.

### Question 12:

#### Do historical contingencies continue to apply today?

**Student:** So, does that mean that those historical contingencies, do they apply to us today?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, they are historical contingencies, not in the sense that God doesn't know they're going to happen, because God knows everything and God's in control of it all, so it's no surprise to him. I mean, from the beginning he knew that the *eschaton*, or the culmination of history, was going to come in those three steps or those three phases. So, he knew it but he hadn't revealed it to us, hadn't revealed it to people. So, the question is, alright now, here we are, the inauguration has occurred and here we are in the continuation of the kingdom of God, and we're looking forward to the consummation of the *eschaton*, or the kingdom of God. Do contingencies affect this? I mean, what we're in now, do they affect New Testament history also? Well, there would be disagreement among evangelicals over that.

For some reason, a lot of evangelicals believe that once you come to the New Testament, there are no more contingencies, there's no more factoring in human response. I've heard that from people before and I'm sure that they have their reasons for believing that. I don't. I can just tell you right up front I don't believe that. I believe that the New Testament offers a lot of things about the *eschaton*, or the great time of blessing and judgment, eternal blessing and judgment, that are postponed and affected by the continuing rebellion of people and by the repentance of people, Let me just give you an example: Jesus said to Jerusalem in Matthew 23, and he looked over Jerusalem and he wept over Jerusalem and he said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not." Now that's an historical contingency. Jesus came and made the offer of salvation to Jerusalem to exalt his people if they would repent. Well, what he says of course in Matthew 23 is you didn't repent. I would have protected you from the onslaught of the Romans, which is what he is talking about there, 70 AD. I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks if you would have just come to me, but you didn't, and so 70 A.D. is coming.

Another thing that the New Testament frequently seems at least to be saying, and operating on the assumption of, is that Jesus' return is offered to Christians as a soon-to-come-about event. It's very difficult for me to read the New Testament and not see that New Testament believers thought Jesus was coming back fairly soon. Now I don't think that had a watch or anything, a stopwatch to say, alright, we've got five more minutes, or anything like that. But, you know, when the revelation of John ends by saying, "come quickly Lord Jesus," and Jesus responds, "I will, I'll come soon," I don't think he meant by that that he was saying to John, "Sorry John, it's going to be at least two thousand more years." I think that he was offering to John and offering to the church and imminent return. Now the imminent return didn't occur. It hasn't occurred yet. It's been over two thousand years since Jesus said those words to John, and it's still not happened. Why not? Well, I think when you look at Peter and you look especially at 2 Peter 3 where, you know, that famous verse: "He is not slow as some count slowness, but is patient toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." Because repentance is the key for the great consummation, right? And what I think Peter is saying there is, look, the imminent expectation has been offered to us, but don't take the delay of the Jesus' second coming as a curse. It's really God's blessing to us because he's giving us opportunity to come to this fuller repentance that must precede his return in glory.

So, Peter is actually saying to the church it's a gift that he hasn't come back yet. I mean, how else do we explain that people in Thessalonica that Paul writes to believed that Jesus was coming so soon that they had stopped working? And even some of them thought that maybe they had missed it. I mean, they were thrown into a theological conundrum by the fact that people were dying who were Christians. So Paul has to say to them, don't worry about the people who have gone before you. Those that have fallen asleep won't be ignored. In fact, on the resurrection day, they're going to be raised up first. They're resurrected before you and then you follow them. So, he's comforting people that their mothers and their fathers and the children in Christ who had died had not missed the blessings of the *eschaton*. But why did they think that they had missed the blessings of the *eschaton*? It was because they expected an imminent return. It's just difficult to read the New Testament without that kind of expectation.

And so, when people ask me why hasn't Jesus come back yet? I have to admit I don't know the answer except for some of these clues that the New Testament gives us. But those clues are we're messing it up. We are the reason for the delay. I mean, what should have been a bonfire, the gospel, that should have consumed the world had the Christians given the gospel to the world the way they were called to do it — it should have just taken the world like a great fire — this bonfire has actually ended up becoming a ring of fire. You know how you start a fire in the middle of a paddock or a field? If you've poured the whole thing with gasoline, it would all just go up, okay? But if it doesn't burn fast enough, then what happens is this one little fire in the center becomes a ring of fire as it goes through. So, you have charred ground, then you have fresh ground, and you have the fire that's moving out like that. And isn't that the history of the Christian church? I mean, you can go to places — I often do, in fact —



you can go to Turkey, and if you come out of the airport in Istanbul, there will be buses waiting for you that will have signs on them saying “Come see the churches of the Book of Revelation.” Well, you hop on the bus — I’ve done it before — and you’re taken to all these different cities that are mentioned in the first three chapters of Revelation. I remember one time asking the tour guide, “Well where do you think the church of Smyrna was?” And she looked at me and she said, “Probably over there on that hill.” And I in my skeptical way said, “Why do you think it was over there?” And she said, “Well because that’s where the oldest mosque is.”

So, you understand what she was saying there? In other words, the Muslims had come and they had taken Turkey, and the Christian church didn’t exist, so they built their sanctuary, their mosque, where the old Christian sanctuary used to be, which was the style and the technique. Of course, when Christians came back, they built them on top of the mosque and so on, back and forth, back and forth. But the fact is the churches of Revelation in the first three chapters that were apostolic churches, churches established by apostles, they do not exist. I mean, we are sending missionaries to places like Turkey, and there is the church there, but it’s not the churches that were once there. And so, there’s a charred ground behind the gospel as it goes forth. And as the church is faithful, the fire burns hot. But when the church loses its fidelity to Christ, the fire burns down.

Now you can think of this in terms of how the gospel went to Europe, and it’s basically passed through Western Europe at this point. I mean, there are Christians there, faithful, loving of Christ, but the fire is not there like it once was, and the influence of Christian faith. You can think of North America and the same thing. We see in our own day that the fire is burning out and that the ring of fire is now moving to places like Africa and the Far East, Southeastern Asia, places like that. That’s where the fire is burning. Now our hope of course is that the ring will continue and come back to us one day. But I’m sure that eventually Christ and the Father will be kind to us and merciful to us, and Christ will come, because Jesus, when he comes back, he will make all things new and he will take care of everything we have left undone. There’s no doubt that that’s the case. That’s the hope of Jesus’ return. But prior to that, our goal is to do as much as we can with the gospel and not let this bonfire just burn into a ring of fire that just passes by, and then passes by, and then passes by.

Our hope would be that through repentance and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that we would see an awakening that would not just be in one part of the world or two or three parts of the world, but would be all over the world. That would be a wonderful way to welcome Jesus back. But if that doesn’t happen though, he’ll come back, and he’ll fix everything. But our goal must not be to do the minimum. Our goal must be to do the maximum. And if we are repentant and humble and faithful, then that historical contingency will reap blessings for us and blessings for the gospel. That’s why Peter says, “How then should we live in light of this great judgment that’s coming?” He said we should “live holy and godly lives,” hastening the day of God. So, we bring this about by our activities, by our faithfulness or by our infidelities. And I just think

that's the reality we have to face. So I think historical contingencies do apply not only to the Old Testament but to today as well.

### Question 13: Has the new covenant come?

**Student:** Okay, I'm a little bit confused about the new covenant.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. You should be. We all are.

**Student:** In Jeremiah 31 he talks about the new covenant, the law being written on our hearts, but as I look around the church, it doesn't seem like that has taken place. So, has the new covenant come or not?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, I think we are persuaded by the New Testament — we call it New Testament because of the association with the new covenant — that the new covenant has come, but I think that we have got to understand that while it has genuinely and actually come, that new covenant was one of the ways, one of many ways, that Jeremiah talked about the *eschaton*, the time after the exile when the glory of God would fill the earth, when the people of God would be blessed, and the wicked would be destroyed. Now that's the way Jeremiah looked at it. As we've said, that's what they believed was going to happen, that's how they understood it, but because of the effects of the intervening historical contingencies we've been talking about, what people do, the ways that prediction was fulfilled come out in different ways and unexpected ways. So new covenant is just one of many things that the Old Testament says is going to be characteristic of the *eschaton* or the end time.

The New Testament then tells us that the new covenant has come, but I think we understand if you look at what Jeremiah says is going to come with the new covenant, that everyone is going to know the Lord, everyone's going to have the law written in their hearts, that our sins are going to be gone from us as far as east is from the west. We realize that we have to take the concept of new covenant and take it through what the New Testament says about all other aspects of eschatology, and that is that it has come with the death and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into heaven. I mean, that's what Jesus said when he said, this is the cup of the new covenant which is in my blood. Okay, so clearly Jesus is saying I have started the new covenant. But the new covenant continues now in us and in our lives and in the church's life, and the new covenant will come in its fullness, however, only when Jesus returns in glory. So, when you ask questions like, has the law been written in their hearts? Well, the answer is yes, to some extent. But perfectly? No. Do we need for people to tell us to know the Lord? Well, will you know them from the least to great the greatest? Well, a whole lot more people than ever knew the Lord know him now, but not everybody that's one the planet.

**Student:** Well Paul also says, “How shall they know if they’ve not been told?”

**Dr. Pratt:** That’s right. They’ve got to be told. Exactly. So, this is part of the mission effort. So it’s started, but it hasn’t been completed during the continuation, and it will only be completed at the consummation, because in the new world, the only people that will be here will be those who are saved in Christ, so they will not need to be told, repent, know the Lord, anything like that. And so, the new covenant unfolds in those three ways like every other aspect of eschatology.

It’s sort of like this. The New Testament describes the Old Testament term “new creation,” or the “new heavens and new earth” in this way. The prophet Isaiah said along with this new covenant is going to come a new creation. Well, has the new creation come? Well, yes and no. Jesus comes as the light of the world, John chapter 1, Jesus comes bringing in new life, new creation. He introduces it in his first coming. 2 Corinthians 5:17, every time people because Christians they become new creation. “If anyone is in Christ, behold new creation; old is gone, new is come.” But the book of Revelation tells us that the new heavens and the new earth, chapter 21, comes with Jesus returns.

So, you’ve just got to always think of these Old Testament eschatological promises as unfolding in these three ways. All of them unfold in one way or another in these three ways. No matter what the issue is, you can almost be guaranteed that it will have unfolded in these three ways in the New Testament. And lots of people would prefer saying that the whole new covenant has come in all of its fullness and all of its glory already. I don’t know how you can say that empirically or by reading the New Testament seeing what they said about it. At the same time, we don’t want to say, well, everything’s so bad that nothing’s happened. It has happened. It’s come, but it’s still unfolding, and it’s still spreading around the world. And it will come in its fullness when Jesus returns.

### Question 14:

#### Does the New Testament contain different eschatologies?

**Student:** Now Richard, you talked about how the New Testament writers synthesized their theologies and how they have different theologies. As far as it is relating to eschatology, do they have different theologies? Are there different eschatologies in the New Testament?”

**Dr. Pratt:** That’s a great question. Are there different eschatologies in the New Testament? That’s a great question. Remember how we talked about each book of the New Testament sort of has an on-the-ground theology and then you can infer things behind that that were necessary to believe, behind that, behind that, behind that, and the more abstract you become, the further you get away from all of the specific things they say in their books? I think as you move down that ladder, you find more

diversity among biblical writers, among New Testament writers. Matthew's version of Jesus's life on that level, on that very low level of his pastoral concerns, what he was trying to prove, what he was trying to emphasize, that is very different let's say than John's. I don't know how a person could say anything else other than that. John's theology of Jesus' life at that low level of the pastoral, immediate concern he was trying to accomplish was different than Matthew's.

But now when you start extrapolating or inferring up to the higher levels of implicit theological beliefs, what they had to believe for those things to be true, then what you begin to find is that the writers move closer and closer to each other that they're not disagreeing on these higher levels of theology. For example, they all believed there was one God. That's rather abstract, and you really don't find that emphasized too much down here on the ground in their actual letters, but they all believed that. They also believed in the authority of the Old Testament, and that's a rather abstract, maybe middle-range sort of thing that they believed in. And so, as you take all these different writings of the New Testament, more diversity is down lower, not up higher, not in the more abstract things. And the ways that New Testament biblical theologians look at this is basically that Jesus' teaching about the *eschaton* was so dramatic and such an upheaval, such a shock to the system of Palestinian eschatology, that this was a compelling force that drove and unified all the writers of the New Testament together. Now they express it in different ways, but as they moved into these things that Jesus taught about eschatology, then they have much more conformity or much more unity among them.

So, this basic structure that Jesus came and started the last days, that the last days will continue until he returns in glory at the consummation, that is something that I think we would say — and certainly New Testament biblical theologians do — they would say that this is something that unifies the theology of the New Testament. In fact, one of the ways I think we can summarize the whole New Testament is to say that New Testament writers were explaining and applying the eschatology of Jesus. That's what they were doing. I mean, Jesus spent much time in his parables, like the parable of the mustard seed, explaining that the kingdom of God is not what you expect it to be; it's like the smallest seed that will one day grow into the greatest seed. Because the Jews in those days thought when the kingdom of God came, boom! It's here completely. All at once, judgment and blessings. It's done. But he went over and over this idea that the kingdom of God is going to be small and grow; it's something precious that only a few people get. It's a secret thing that will one day extend to the entire world. Over and over and over Jesus says this because it was such a hard, such an unbelievable concept.

And so, when Jesus does this correction, as it were, of eschatological expectations, this became the heartbeat of New Testament Christianity, of the first century church. I mean, this was it. They were staking everything, even their physical lives on this belief that Jesus was right about this. And that's radical, because, you know, the Jewish zealots were telling them what we need to do to get Messiah to come is get swords and pick a fight with the Romans, and if we pick a fight with the Romans then

Messiah will have to come and rescue us. The Pharisees were saying the way you get Messiah to come is by obeying the law, and if we're all just good enough, and if we could just all keep the Sabbath just once, all of us everywhere we are, well then Messiah would come. And the list goes on and on as to what they thought would bring Messiah. But the Christians said the Messiah has come and he's away from here now; he's up in heaven ruling from his father David's throne right now, putting all his enemies under his feet. And you can hear the skeptical Jews in Palestine going, "Yeah, right. Whatever." Because that's a convenient thing, that Jesus has disappeared on us, and now we've got this church that's growing and going around causing trouble. But you keep on hoping that Jesus is coming back one day to rescue you."

Well the skeptical Jews would look at that and just say that's ridiculous eschatology, but the New Testament church based its whole faith on that. It was everything for them. Just like Christians often today will say that we based everything we believe in Jesus, every hope we have we put it onto Jesus. Well, that's true. It's a nice shorthand way of saying something that the first century church would have said — we're putting all our hope in the Jesus and what he told us about the end times, what he told us about the way God's blessings and judgments are going to come, that the blessing comes by trusting him now, and following him now, and enduring with him now, completing his sufferings now, so that you can enjoy the world to come, which was the Christian message.

So, I think in many respects, the eschatology of the New Testament is unified but with different emphases depending on what letter you're reading and even what author, what terminology they'll use. Some people, for example, have argued that the gospel John and the Johannine Epistles, that eschatology is more vertical for him. It's the world above coming into the world below, as opposed to Paul, which is a little more linear. Well, that may be true. I don't know enough about it to have an opinion. But people have tried to make those kinds of distinctions, but those distinctions would be minor compared to the basic phasing out or unfolding of the kingdom of God that all Christians believe in.

**Student:** Sometimes in the church today there is a lot of emphasis sometimes on the book of Revelation as the ultimate — when we think of eschatology — there's a lot of emphasis on the book of Revelation. So, what you're saying is that there should be an understanding of the Gospels, the Epistles, the book of Acts and to get a complete, very good understanding of...

**Dr. Pratt:** Absolutely. Just take Acts for example. In the beginning of Acts, Jesus is telling his disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes on them, they will become his witnesses everywhere, to the whole world. And the question of course is, well, did they do that? Well, by the end of the book of Acts when Paul's under house arrest in Rome, the gospel had gone to the whole known world at that time, the Mediterranean world. And that's why Luke is able to end his book in a rather abrupt way, but he ends it with the very last word of the whole text, the Greek text. The very last word is

that Paul was under house arrest in Rome, preaching the good news of the kingdom and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, and now the last word “unhindered” — successfully, without any hindrance. Even though from the outside it would look like he was greatly hindered because he was under house arrest, he was still proclaiming God's kingdom, and he was teaching about Jesus as the Messiah, and he was doing it unhindered. He was, as it were, the embodiment of the fulfillment of what Jesus had told the disciples to do; he had taken it all the way to Rome, the capital of the evil empire of that day, and that is what the New Testament is about. It's showing how much the apostles had accomplished so that we can then build on their work and extend that kingdom in our day and so that Jesus will come back in glory and in all things.

### Question 15:

#### What are some practical implications of biblical theology's focus on eschatology?

**Student:** So please talk for a second, what are the practical implications of the New Testament biblical theologians focus on eschatology?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's great, because it can get pretty heavy and seem very abstract. Let me see if I can put it this way. If you have a church as they did in the first century, that was primarily made up, at least the core of it in most places, was made up of Jews who had certain expectations about the ways that the end of time would come, that Messiah would bring the age to come, and everything would be made new. Alright, but the truth of the matter was, as Jesus himself said, it's not happening like you thought. I've started it in the inauguration; it's unfolding now in your day, and one day I'll come back and finish the job. That was a lesson that you can get theoretically, but when it comes to practicality, there are all kinds, I mean, a million issues that are not answered. And that's where you get a lot of the issues that come up in New Testament Epistles. I mean, the question of whether or not Gentiles need to be circumcised. That's a question that comes up. Okay, Jesus has come, and the gospel has gone to the Gentiles, but are they full members or not? They're not circumcised. What do we do? That's a question that comes up because the eschatological situation was unexplored. In fact, in that particular case Jesus himself, as far as we know, never commented on the question. It was a question that the apostles had to figure out — by the Holy Spirit, but nevertheless pretty much on their own without Jesus giving them an idea of what to do about it.

Another question that might up is this: Alright, if Jesus has brought the end of time, and if Jesus has brought this kingdom of God to the earth, then why are things still so rotten? Why does Rome persecute us? Why are we, the followers of Jesus suffering like we are? Why are they putting us up on crosses and lighting Rome with our burning bodies? Why are they doing this? Another question that could come up is: Alright, if Jesus has come and he's started the kingdom of God, then why did my

uncle die in the wagon wreck yesterday. Or why were my children crushed under the earthquake. This is one of the things it deals with in the book of Revelation, just the death of someone. How do I figure out all those things? And this is what the New Testament was written to answer, those kinds of very practical life questions. And you can see that they do this by, as it were, framing everything in terms of how the end times are here, but they're not quite here completely yet.

And you can imagine if you and I were in a congregation of early Christians and we were facing certain situations that we would want to say, well, this is because the kingdom is here. And then when those good situations disappeared on us, then we would be very quick to say, well, I thought this is what was supposed to come with the kingdom. For example, let's say you became a Christian in the first century and you've got a great job. All of a sudden, you're making lots of money and you're getting lots of respect in the community. Say you are in Ephesus and you're a wealthy person in Ephesus now after you became a Christian. Well, now you're naturally going to interpret that as being a proof that the kingdom of God has come, right? You were poor before you believed in Jesus, now you believe in Jesus, now you're getting all these benefits of the kingdom of God. Well that works very nicely for you until there's a famine or something, a plague on your fields and your crop doesn't come in that year, and all of a sudden now you're in the poor house. Now, how do you deal with that? And this was the reality of the situation that New Testament believers were facing.

And that's why, for example — this is a great example — this is why the apostle Paul writes such different things to different churches in the first century. Some interpreters, and I think it's right to say it this way, have identified at least three ways that Christians reacted wrongly to the first coming of Jesus, now the continuation and the second coming, because it's not obvious how you should react. Some Christians reacted by underestimating how many changes Jesus had already made, and one of those examples is the book of Galatians. Jesus had come, as Paul says in the first chapter and the first verse, he says, to deliver us from this present evil age. That was a Jewish way of saying to bring us into the kingdom of God. So that's the way he starts the book off. But then when he starts dealing with the issues in Galatia, he realizes that the people who are trying to make all Gentiles be circumcised don't realize that Jesus has changed the situation, that his first coming has actually opened the door to Gentiles, that Gentiles can now come in. This was the hope that the prophets had that all the nations of the Gentiles would stream to Jerusalem and find Messiah, and they would worship him and honor him, and it would be a great day when all the earth worshiped God.

Well, Jesus' first coming opened the door to that and it was happening. And so, you have in this little Jewish sect called Christianity, this influx, this flood of Gentiles coming in, and in fact, while most Jews were rejecting it, the Gentiles were the ones accepting it. And so no one really knew exactly what to do with this. Well, some decided what we need to do is make them Jews because the kingdom of God is not here completely, so let's make them Jews by circumcising them. And Paul's basic

argument in Galatia is you don't realize what Jesus has done. He has opened the door to all the nations, and now all the nations are welcomed as they are. Just like Peter had to learn with the unclean meat and the unclean animals. Eat the meat now. It's okay. You can go out there and be with the Gentiles. It's all right. You don't have to stay away from them anymore. And so, the radical change that Jesus brought in the inauguration of the kingdom was underestimated by the people of Galatia. That's why Paul thinks it's so important that he would actually call it a gospel issue, because the good news was Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, the change. And when you deny that change by reverting back to Old Testament ways, then you're denying that he did have a dramatic change in the earth. Okay, so that was the problem in Galatia, basically underestimating certain aspects of what you should expect.

One other example, if I can give it while I'm thinking about it. Another thing that they wanted to do in Galatia was to emphasize sort of stark determination to obey the law, that these Gentiles need to start obeying the laws and the customs of the Jews also. Well, what does Paul emphasize? He emphasizes that morality comes, moral living comes, by being filled with Holy Spirit, by having fruit of Holy Spirit, by keeping with Holy Spirit. When you sow seeds of the spirit, then you'll reap eternal life, that kind of thing. Where does all this emphasis on the Spirit come from? Well, it's that eschatological hope that the Old Testament prophets had about the presence of Holy Spirit. So, in the Christian church there is this awareness and conscious dependence on the power and the fruit of the spirit at work in you in ways that was never before, because Holy Spirit had been poured out in such abundance. And so Paul's saying again, if you think that Christian morality is a matter of keep these rules and let me add some extra ones to you to make it even harder, then you're missing the boat. You've missed the dramatic change Jesus has brought. Okay, so they underestimated what Jesus had done.

The Corinthians, however — many of them, not all of them because it was a mixed group — had overestimated what Jesus had done. They were like you when you became a Christian. You got the good job and started making money, and you started moving up in the societal ranks, and you became an important person in Corinth, and people liked you. They wanted to be around you. You could throw money around like you wanted to. You had nice clothes on, drove a nice car, those kinds of things. And so, you were absolutely convinced in that condition that God really loved you, and that the kingdom of God that Jesus brought has really just been poured out in your life in ways that everybody else hasn't even experienced yet. So, you're way ahead of the game. So, they were overestimating how much of God's blessings of the kingdom they had received. And because they were overestimating, they began to think that the fact that I'm rich means that God really likes me. But the reality is that wealth and fame and popularity and status are not proofs that God likes you necessarily, but they are proofs that God is testing you — to see what you'll do with it, which was what Paul says to the Corinthians. In the last chapter of 2 Corinthians the apostle tells them that they are in Christian if they pass the test. And that's the question, are you going to pass the test or not? Because status and wealth and those kinds of things are not God's blanket approval, they are God's way of testing us to see where our hearts are.



Are we really in Christ or not? So, when bad times come, do we think God has deserted us? You know, when you don't have good health, do you think somehow the kingdom of God hasn't come? That's the problem.

And so, the Corinthians, many of them, had overestimated what was going on in their lives and how much of the kingdom of God was present with them. And I think that if you just take those two books, Galatians underestimating, and Corinthians overestimating, you can see the practical problem with New Testament eschatology. It doesn't answer the question. It has to be determined on an individual case, on a local case, in a church life, because things go up and down, left and right, sideways, upside-down all the time in the continuation of the kingdom while we wait for Jesus to come back. And so, it becomes a very practical and pastoral issue. Have you ever known people that think they have gifts of the Holy Spirit, for example, that set them above all other Christians? You ever known people like that? Like who? Like what kinds of people?

**Student:** I don't want to name names.

**Dr. Pratt:** Not individuals? You can talk about movements.

**Student:** Sure. Charismatic movements.

**Dr. Pratt:** Charismatic movement is one of those. I was once charismatic, so I can say this very plainly and very easily that many charismatics, not all, but many Pentecostals and charismatics think that they are somehow a class above all other Christians who don't speak in tongues and who don't see prophecies and don't have miracles happen every Sunday in their church. Well, that's not necessarily the case. In fact, if those things are happening in a person's life, they are the blessings of God, to be sure, but it's not a blanket approval of who you are and put you ahead of everybody else. That would be overestimating. Instead, it's a test to see what you're going to do with it. Which is why Paul tells the Corinthians, you know, if you speak in tongues without an interpreter, just do it at home; edify yourself at home, don't bother the church with all of this. Now, I know of other groups, though, that are equally guilty of overestimating how much of the *eschaton* they have in their lives, and that would be Christians who focus on doctrine and who think that somehow having the right doctrinal system makes you a first-class Christian, and everybody else that doesn't understand all the deep doctrines that you understand are somehow second class. That's also over-realized eschatology, which Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians. You remember how he does that?

**Student:** In chapter 13.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. He says that we know in part just like we prophesy in part. And our knowledge, our theological insights are just like looking in a dim mirror at the truth. You know, it's just a fogged-up window. You're not really understanding things as much as you think you are. Now we all ought to do the best we can, but it

doesn't set us up as better Christians just because we may know a little bit more. In fact, the apostle says that whether you speak in tongues or prophesy or have all the knowledge, all the wisdom and everything, if you don't have one other thing then all of that is just a bunch of trash.

**Student: If you do not have love...**

**Dr. Pratt:** If you do not have love. Now, can you imagine why he says love? Let me remind you of what he says in 1 Corinthians 13; He says knowledge will depart, knowledge will pass away, tongues will pass away, prophecy will pass away. So all the things that we think make us so special will pass away, but he says three things abide: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. Now, why is love greater than faith and hope?

**Student: It will last. We will not need faith and hope.**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. You see, faith will one day pass away because it will be sight. Hope will pass away because when Jesus comes back it will be realized. It won't be hoped for anymore. It will actually happen. But the one thing, the one ethical moral standard and reality that is both now that Jesus has come, in the continuation, and will continue even after Jesus returns is love. And so, what he's basically saying to the Christians in Corinth is if you really want to be a first-class Christian, you need to love. And don't put it on the prophecy. Don't put it on the tongues. Don't base it on your wealth. Don't base it on your knowledge. Don't base it on all these other things that the world judges things by. Base it on your sacrificial love for others. And if you've got that, then you really do have the end time into your life. And is there any better example of that than Jesus himself, the eschatological man whose life was full of love for others? And even the apostle Paul who gave his life for others? And we're called to do the same. And so, it's just very important to realize this is how practical the eschatology becomes in the New Testament, that how do you decide that faith, hope and love are the three things that continue but that love is the better of these three? It's because of your eschatology. It's the one thing that goes all the way through this unfolding of the eschatology. And so, it becomes extremely important.

You know, when you start thinking about, for example, people that underestimate the coming of God's kingdom in this world today. We have people who do that, too, who want to not just as we said with knowledge and tongues and prophecies want to think they're high class, they also want to say nobody's high class, everybody's low class, and what you've got to really do is get back down to being serious about your religion which mean what? Obeying. And then on top of obedience to the laws of God in the Bible, they start adding more and more and more and more and more rules, and this will prove that you're a real Christian. Well see, people who load up others with more and more and more rules are actually denying that Jesus has come and changed the world because, as Paul says, we are set free from those kind of bondage, we are set free from those kinds of things to live in the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

And so, when you find church traditions that have practically no place at all for the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit, for the conscience of the believer, for the believer seeking a personal walk with Holy Spirit and empowerment and filling of Holy Spirit, what you're finding is Christians who are denying that Jesus has changed the world. Now how many times have you seen churches like that? Like every day? I mean that's exactly what we do. We call people to Christ and say come to Christ and he'll save you from your sins; now let me give you all the rules. And now the rules are good, the ones that are in the Bible, they're good and they're helpful to us. But when we start adding the others on top of them — like the way you should dress, the way you should talk, and the way you should live, and so on and so on like we do — we somehow get this false piety that really imprisons people and denies that Jesus has come and gives his Holy Spirit to believers to empower them and lead them. And so any church that diminishes the role of Holy Spirit is diminishing how much Jesus has changed the world.

And so these things are very practical in the New Testament. And that's where the New Testament gets all of its lovely, wondrous, practical lessons. It comes out of, it flows out of that eschatology. Be careful because between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ, it's a balancing act that you constantly have to readjust, because life's circumstances are not what you expect them to be. And so when you get sick, when you become ill or your child becomes ill, I know that's not what you expected Jesus to do for you, but you've got to be able to face it. When you become wealthy, you were hoping he'd do that, but when he did it, you've got to be ready to face it like he wants you to. And so, eschatology is extremely practical if we do it the way the New Testament does.

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**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host)** is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.