

Eschatology: The Present Age

A large portion of our series on eschatology has been dedicated to correctly understanding the significance of the Destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This has been an important step because many texts that are commonly thought to apply to the second coming of Christ are actually fulfilled in his first coming, which culminated in the destruction of the temple and of the city of Jerusalem.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, we are still expecting the second coming of Christ, which will be a physical return to earth. We are also looking forward to the resurrection of the dead, the rapture of living, and the judgment of all men. Last week, we looked at the eternal state of believers. When Christ returns, he will unite heaven and earth into the new heavens and the new earth, and we will dwell with him forever. Next week, we will examine the Biblical doctrine of Hell and the eternal judgment of unbelievers.

The Present Age

This week, we are going to look at our present age in which we live. So far, we have looked at eschatological texts as being fulfilled in either the first coming or the second coming. However, there are many eschatological texts that are being fulfilled in the present age. Such texts are gradually fulfilled throughout history over a long period of time.

As our present age is framed by the two advents of Christ, we best understand these texts in reference to these. The first coming of Christ inaugurates, while the second coming consummates. Our present age represents growth, development, and partial fulfillment. Theologians use the principle "already/not yet" to describe such fulfillments. The first coming of Christ inaugurates and some of the promises are already fulfilled in part. However, because the second coming represents the consummation, some promises are not yet fulfilled.

<u>First Coming</u>	<u>Present Age</u>	<u>Second Coming</u>
Inauguration	Growth	Consummation
Already	Already/Not Yet	Not Yet

The Kingdom

One easy example is the kingdom of God. At Jesus' first coming, he preached the good news of the kingdom.

Mark 1:14-15

Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand. It had been inaugurated. However, the kingdom of God was far from being completed. At his second coming, the kingdom will be complete. When Jesus returns, he will usher in the perfected kingdom. It will be consummated. In the meantime, we live between the already and not yet. The kingdom has already come in one sense

Colossians 1:13

Matthew 6:9-10

In another sense, the kingdom not yet come in its fullest. However, the present age is not a static age of waiting for the kingdom to be completed. We are to pray that the kingdom would come. As we live between the two advents of Christ, we see how the kingdom is growing, but we do not demand perfection. This is how we will see eschatology affect our daily lives. We are optimistic, in that we expect the kingdom of God to continue to grow, but we are realistic in that we do not expect perfection until Christ returns. While already/not yet is a helpful tool to understand some passages, there are many promises that will find their primary fulfillment in this present age.

The Reign of Christ

One example of this is the reign of Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3; Psalm 110:1

At his first coming, Jesus was inaugurated as king. Presently, he is already reigning as king, but his reign is not yet perfect. The Father's intention is that Jesus reigns until all of his enemies are defeated.

Hebrews 10:12-13; 1 Corinthians 15:23-25

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Jesus will remain in heaven ruling until his enemies are defeated. After this, he will return. Again, our eschatology affects how we view this present age. Because we do not yet see all of Jesus' enemies defeated, we do not expect Jesus to return yet. This is the opposite of how most contemporary American Christians think. Many view the world as getting worse and worse and assume that this means that Jesus will return soon. Yet, the exact opposite is true. Jesus will not return until all his enemies are under his feet. If we see evil triumphing on the earth, this is not a sign that Jesus' return is getting closer. It is a sign that Jesus is not done ruling from heaven.

The New Heavens and the New Earth

Another crucial passage that applies to our present age is Isaiah 65.

Isaiah 65:17-25

God says that he will create a new heavens and a new earth. Look closely at how this is described. While many see this as a description of the eternal state, at least two events described do not fit: giving birth (v 20, 23) and death (v. 20). In eternity, there will be no birth and no death, so this passage must be describing the present age. The best way to understand this is by applying the already/not yet principle. At Jesus' first coming, he inaugurated the new heavens and the new earth. However, we do not yet the consummation of the new heavens and the new earth. Again, this passage invites us to take a long-term perspective on the present age. We do not appear to be anywhere close to seeing Isaiah 65:17-25 fulfilled, which means that the return of Christ must be a long ways off.

Eschatological Optimism

These are just a few of the texts that should point us in the direction of eschatological optimism. That is, we believe that Christ will triumph over the world through his church.

Psalms 2:6-9

Jesus will rule over the entire globe, so that the ends of the earth are his possession. When necessary, he will crush the rebellion of the nations.

Isaiah 2:2-4

Isaiah prophesies about a period of unprecedented peace, when weapons will be used as tools. This passage is describing our present age, although we appear to be a long ways from fulfilling this.

Isaiah 9:6-7

This familiar Advent passage promises an increase in the peace of Christ's rule. Peace can only increase in history.

Isaiah 11:1-10

This also describes a condition of unprecedented peace, when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Yahweh. Yet, notice, that this is not describing eternity, but the latter stages of our present age.

Summary

Throughout this series on eschatology, we have slowly been building a case for eschatological optimism. That is, Christ will triumph over the world through his church. Jesus is presently reigning in heaven, subduing his enemies. He is renewing the earth, causing the rule of heaven to gradually descend upon the earth. The church is fulfilling the great commission, discipling the nations. All of this will produce a period of peace and joy and harmony that the world has not known since the garden.

As we look at the present state of the world, it appears that Jesus is committed to a long-term plan. For many, such long-term thinking may be disorienting. As one pastor quipped, we may still be in the early church. That is, we generally think of the early church as the first few centuries after Christ's first advent. However, if the present age last for say, ten thousand years, then our distant descendants will regard us as "early."

In two weeks, we will look at how to apply this eschatological optimism to our lives and what role we should take with regard to our present culture.