

Eschatology – Renewing Service

Module: End-times isn't the destruction of the world. End-times is a world serving church.

This module looks at end-times from two perspectives. Firstly, it undoes the popular view that God is anti-world, that he is going to destroy the world and take his people to heaven. This is the negative view of eschatology (meaning end-times). It's also a detached view: Christians can detach themselves from the sufferings of the world, because they don't matter in the end. This is completely opposite to the nature of God revealed in the coming of Christ. These notes go through a few passages in the scripture that are often misunderstood to support this negative view, concerning a soon coming end to this world and rapture of the church out of the world.

The point of this module is, once removing this negative impediment to good teaching, to build a few of the concepts of genuine biblical end-times truth concerning the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is in the world to renew it entirely. God is not going to destroy the world, but he has sent Christ and the church into the world to bring down his enemies. So the questions are, who are these enemies? Are they people, or are they self-centred interests that work within all our lives, which are taken out of us through the gospel?

This module gives a quick overview of Daniel, Isaiah, Genesis, Romans, Israel's history and call, and millennial teaching, to bring out a few main themes from scripture. The module concludes by showing that the primary point of eschatology is not date setting, or predictions of events, or identifying enemies in the world, but it is service. The notes conclude by defining the term *apocalypse* as the unveiling of God's nature in Christ, and the continuation of this revelation in the world through the church's self-giving witness.

Last Days Destruction

A common way of seeing the scripture is to believe that the last days before the second coming of Jesus will be days of destruction. Often, texts from the Old Testament about the coming judgment on Jerusalem, which were fulfilled in the first century AD, are misinterpreted to be about the days we live in now. These passages about the last days were not speaking about the second coming of Jesus, but about the judgment on Jerusalem that marked the end of the Old Testament age.

Associated with the belief in a last days' destruction, is the belief that in the last days there shall be a falling away, and the church shall greatly decline, and that the enemies of the church shall greatly increase. The church is then characterised more by an enemy consciousness and a militancy towards the world in which we live. The church's negative view of prophecy becomes self-fulfilling. The church withdraws from the world and the world around us becomes more and more dark.

The passage from Thessalonians, which describes the Son of Perdition, the sacrilege of the temple, and the falling away, has for years, in recent times, been applied to our modern era. This man of perdition has been looked for in the political world in which we now live. I remember, as a young man, it was considered the Son of Perdition would come out of the Soviet Union, or from the papacy in Rome. In more recent years it has been suggested that the Son of Perdition would come from Iran.

Wherever he would come from, it is commonly believed that we are in that day today, and a falling away of faith in the world is our only expectation. The people we suppose the Man of Sin will come from, become our enemy as a whole, rather than people to be loved. Our ideas on this usually align with our political enemies.

However, it is clear that in Thessalonians, Paul was speaking of the coming Roman invasion of the temple and city of Jerusalem in his time. He was speaking of something that was imminent in his own generation. He was speaking of something that Jesus had clearly predicted would happen in that generation. Paul knew this, and Jesus's prediction was the basis on which Paul was preparing the believers of Thessalonica for what was coming in their own day.

Matthew 24

Let's have a look at some of the New Testament texts that are wrongly interpreted. Matthew 24 is greatly misunderstood. This chapter comes after a long discourse in which Jesus is shining light on the life styles of the Jews in that generation. In Matthew chapters 22 and 23 Jesus shares parables about their coming troubles and claims all this shall befall that generation in which Jesus was then speaking. Jesus concludes saying that the temple of Jerusalem shall be destroyed.

This shocked the disciples and they asked a question. The question is only one question (as in Luke's version), but in Matthew it has three parts. They ask, "When will these things happen, what shall be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age." This is where our interpretation goes wrong today. We think the disciples were asking Jesus about his second coming, but there is nothing in this text that says that. Their question was about the destruction of the temple that Jesus said would happen in their time: in that generation then.

The first part of the question is plain enough: "When will these things happen?" That refers directly to the judgement on Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple Jesus said would happen in that generation. But the next part of the question is where the confusion in our day comes in: "What will be the sign of your coming?" The Greek word for the disciples' question about the coming of Jesus is *parousia*. This word was often used in the Old Testament and it referred to God's appearing to judge a nation or city. The Old Testament used symbols of judgement, like God coming on the clouds with lightning (e.g., see Psalm 18:7-24, this was about David being rescued, and so Jesus' prophecy was about the early church being rescued from the Jewish persecution.) This was the question the disciples were asking: "When will this judgement against Jerusalem take place?" There is no reason why Jesus' statements in Matthew should be understood by a different interpretive principle than the same statements in many Old Testament passages.

The third part of the question was about the "end of the age". Some translations say "the end of the world", but the question referred to the end of the age, not the end of the world. This again was referring to the end of the Old Testament temple era. It was about the fall of Jerusalem and the fall of the temple, and also about what Jesus called the coming of the new kingdom of God era. When would his kingdom come? Jesus said the kingdom was then at hand, in the disciple's time.

Jesus said that the kingdom was at hand then, that it was coming in his time when he was preaching. He said that the kingdom comes without observation, but it comes within our hearts. He spoke many parables about the kingdom and said it is like leaven expanding throughout the whole world. This kingdom began with the cross and resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The purpose of this kingdom is that through the gospel it shall spread and renew the entire world.

The entire chapter of Matthew 24 was about the generation in which the disciples lived. That was the generation in which all of Jesus' prophecies in that chapter were fulfilled. Jesus said, "This generation shall not pass away till all these things be fulfilled." It is plain that Jesus meant the generation he was then speaking to. One has to do a lot of "gymnastics" to claim that Jesus meant the generation we are living in today.

Jesus claimed that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness and then the end will come." The world he was referring to was the Roman world (see the Greek word Jesus used). This is the world in which the Jewish diaspora lived. The diaspora would have one generation to hear the gospel and repent, before judgment would come against their nation. The *end* Jesus was referring to was the end of their temple and nation which began in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Jesus gave signs that would precede that destruction of Jerusalem then. These would be wars, famines and false Christ's. There would be a great falling away among the Jewish people. Read the Book of Acts and the Jewish historian from that time, Flavius Josephus, who records all these signs being fulfilled in the period just before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Josephus described this terrible falling away and the great increase of debauchery and murder among them at that time. Josephus even records Christ warning his disciples to flee Jerusalem before its fall and escape the destruction, which Jesus' disciples did do.

2 Peter 3

This is another passage that is often taken to mean that God is going to destroy this world in the near future. Peter speaks of the heavens dissolving and the elements disappearing.

In 1 Peter, Peter said "the end of all things is at hand." Statements like this have to be taken in their Hebrew, and also in their historical, context. It wasn't a literal statement. It is wrong to interpret Peter's statements by the way we speak in our current day. Peter was referring to the near end of the Jerusalem age. He was a Jew and he ministered to Jews, and he was speaking about the fulfilment of prophecy regarding their people and nation. The Greek for end is *telos*, which means goal or fulfilment. Peter was speaking about the fall of Jerusalem, which makes way for the new kingdom era in the world. It is close to the word *teleios*, which means complete, fully mature, or perfect. It is what Paul said about the gospel fulfilling the Old Testament shadow.

In 2 Peter, Peter was speaking about the fulfilment of Jesus' prophecies about the fall of Jerusalem. He said the fulfilment was at hand in his day. Either Peter was wrong about this, or it did come to pass in his generation. Peter said God was waiting till all had the chance to hear the gospel. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 24, referring to the Jewish diaspora in the whole Roman Empire. John and James also spoke about this in their epistles, noting the fulfilment of the signs Jesus listed relating to the destruction of Jerusalem in that generation. All these apostles were referring to the same teaching of Jesus about that generation.

Then Peter spoke about the heavens melting, which is a reference to the dissolving of the material universe. This was likely a quote from Isaiah 34, which uses the same symbols for the fall of Edom. Referring to the stars and moon was common symbolism in Hebrew language for the rulers of a people, nation or city. See Joseph's dream about the stars, sun and moon bowing to him, for example. These symbols are never taken literally in the Old Testament, so there is no reason why

they should be taken literally in 2 Peter. Peter was writing in the same literary tradition as the Old Testament prophets before him.

The prophecy in Isaiah 34 about the fall of Edom also symbolised the fall of Jerusalem. Throughout Isaiah the sins of Edom were related to the sins of Jerusalem, which city, Isaiah said, shall come to the same end as Edom. Edom was also held to be a type of the sinful world, meaning all the nations of the world. So the text in 2 Peter has wider reference. Not only does it refer to the fall of Jerusalem, after which the kingdom of Christ and new temple shall continue to fill the earth, but also the ongoing fall of all the sinful nations, in which God's kingdom shall eventually renew and transform the whole world.

So instead of 2 Peter speaking of the destruction of the material universe, including this world, it is speaking of the renovation of the sinful world, by the growth of God's kingdom through the gospel. Our nations are being transformed and changed by the gospel: sin is being judged and Christ's rule is transforming and renewing the creation.

Rather than this passage in 2 Peter 3 being a negative passage about the destruction of the world, it is a positive passage about the call of the church to be in the world, as God extends his new kingdom in all nations and communities through our lives. This is the church's call. It is very important that we understand the scripture the right way, or we miss our missiological call and purpose in his new kingdom renewing our nations.

The Soon Coming

Here we look at the Book of Revelation. This book is a big topic, but what we are discussing is the notion that the world is soon coming to an end, and we will try to keep our comments related to this topic. We refer to the book's statement, "Behold, I come quickly."

We could note several applications of this statement in the Book of Revelation. First, it was written to the Jewish audience of the first century, to the same generation Jesus spoke to in Matthew 24. There is too much to go into in this short discussion here, but there is a growing amount of evidence that shows Revelation was written by John during the reign of Nero, before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Therefore, one part of this Revelation is concerning this first century context.

The opening of the Revelation can be understood in this way. The text quotes from Zechariah 12 about the judgement of Jerusalem. It says the Lord is "coming" quickly, using the same word as is used throughout the Old Testament (Septuagint) about his judgment on a city or nation. Then Revelation says, "Every eye shall see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn for him." This is a clear reference to the Jewish nation. The word used for tribes is the word that is used for the tribes of Israel, and the word used for earth is the word used for the land of Israel. The text is not referring to the gentile tribes of the world. This doesn't mean that the Revelation isn't also speaking to the whole world, but that its first and more immediate concern here was with that generation of Jerusalem.

This coming, or judgment on Jerusalem, was to be very soon when Revelation was written, and in this way the language about the immanence of this judgement makes sense. "Blessed is he who reads this book... for the time is at hand." (Rev 1:3) This makes no sense if we read Revelation as speaking about an Armageddon in our generation today. There is no way an Armageddon today, in our time, would have been in any sense at all "at hand" when John wrote this Revelation, and sent it

to be read in the seven churches of Asia in the first century. There is much more we could say about this, but here isn't the place for that.

"I am coming quickly" could also be referring to an immanence, more generally, in which the fullness of Christ's kingdom is now at hand for all of us. Our lives are short. Soon we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. In this sense the immanence of the judgment upon Jerusalem then, is the same as the immanence of his judgment upon all of us now. All through the scriptures, God's dealings with Jerusalem are a shadow of his dealings with the world. If you take out the idea that after death we wait for a long period in some other place, before the judgement, then the full manifestation of Christ's kingdom is indeed immanent for all of us now, and at any time.

"The Coming Tribulation"

We are referring to the "abomination that makes desolation", mentioned in Jesus' prophecy of Matthew 24. In Revelation it is known as a 3 & ½ year period, or 42 months. It is more commonly known as "the Great Tribulation."

It is often held today that this "Great Tribulation" is still to come in the future. It is asked, "Will the church be raptured before, during or after the tribulation?" But this whole way of understanding the tribulation is foreign to the original text.

Jesus was speaking of the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem in that century. Rome put a siege around Jerusalem that lasted for 3 & ½ years, and this siege ended in AD 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed.

The abomination probably had something to do with the pact between the rulers of Jerusalem and Rome, through which the rulers of Jerusalem tried to save their positions in Israel. The abomination is referring to this unholy alliance between God's bride and another husband. That is, Israel, in becoming unfaithful towards God, had taken Rome as their security and hope instead, to secure their wealth and positions of power. This is why Revelation refers to Israel as Babylon, the harlot. They had prostituted themselves out.

This theme in Revelation goes back to Israel's founding, in which Israel wanted a king, like the nations around them, for their security and wealth. God told Samuel that they had not rejected Samuel, but they had rejected God himself. I believe the church repeats this mistake today, when we seek to become kingmakers within our nations, hoping to secure our interest through such alliances. These alliances usually lead to a compromise in the nature of the church, as followers of the Lamb of God. We compromise God's image, and take on the image of our earthly king, even if the king claims in some way to be Christian.

The abomination in Jesus' day had something to do with this "fornication" with Rome. Flavius Josephus spoke of this period and the treachery of the Jewish rulers in much more detail. Some people say the abomination was a Roman-Eagle placed in the Jerusalem temple area. I believe the "abomination" describes the unholy relationship between Jerusalem and Rome, which brought about civil war and destruction within Israel at that time. As Paul said, "They shall be saying 'peace and safety', when destruction shall come upon them suddenly." "Peace and Safety" was a motto of the Roman Empire in those days. Jerusalem believed they would have peace and safety through Rome, but because of their greed and refusal to help those in need, it led to civil war.

Another meaning of the tribulation is that which Jesus fulfilled himself. Jesus identified with Israel. This means he took their curse and he suffered their punishment and exile from the land. Revelation depicts Jesus in this way, “treading out the winepress of God’s wrath.” He took the wrath of Rome, to which Jerusalem was appointed, upon himself. The same Roman government that destroyed Israel, crucified Jesus. The Armageddon to which Jerusalem was appointed, and which they passed through in AD 70, was first taken up by Jesus in his passion. This way Jesus partook of the sufferings of his people, and made intercession for them.

So Armageddon first refers to Jesus’ sufferings for us, and secondly it refers to Jerusalem’s sufferings for their own non-repentance, and lastly it refers to all who refuse to care for others. All those who serve themselves in greed and fail to care for the needy, will end up being destroyed by their own ways. The Armageddon of Israel passes to all nations who follow them. (Matt 25:31-46)

The Great Tribulation does not refer to a future period of 3 & ½ years, in which an antichrist shall rule, and after which Jesus will return. The Bible did not use the term “Great Tribulation” in this way in which it is often taught today. This doesn’t mean that the world won’t pass through periods of great trouble. These periods of trouble will continue to come while we behave in the ways that the nations behaved in the first century.

The Antichrist

The Antichrist is mentioned today in different contexts. The term appears in the epistle of 1 John. There it says we know we are living in the last-hour because many antichrists have come. The “last-hour” that John is referring to is not the end of this world, and it is not the second coming of Jesus. It would not make sense to suggest that John was referring to either of these, because if he was then he was wrong. If he believed he was in the last-hour of the world, or the last-hour of the church age, 2,000 years ago, then he was mistaken.

John was referring to the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24. Jesus said that before Jerusalem falls, that is, the last-hour of the Old Testament temple age, there would be false Christs coming in his name. This was referring to the fall of Jerusalem in the first century, in AD 70, and it has nothing to do with Jerusalem today. John was clearly referring to this prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24, and saying that it was being fulfilled in his generation then. Just as the Book of Acts said, and just as the Jewish historian of that century, Flavius Josephus, said, many people came prior to the fall of Jerusalem, saying they were Israel’s Messiah.

Looking at “antichrist” more broadly in 1 John, we see it isn’t one particular person who comes at the end of time, but any person who teaches against Christ. In particular, it means anyone who once knew Christ and the truth, but who turned from it. This subject is not related to what we are discussing here: that is, the teaching today that an Antichrist figure shall appear in the last-days just before Jesus returns. John was not addressing this idea.

So where else would we get this idea of an Antichrist from? In recent end-times teaching, this idea of an end-times Antichrist is taken from the Book of Revelation. There, a man appears with the mark of the beast. The “beast” is the Roman Empire that rises out of the sea. The mark of the beast concerns one who comes from Rome.

It is clear that the people of the churches of Asia, who John wrote Revelation to in the first century, were to identify this person/beast in their own time, by what John told them. John said to those

churches then, "You will know him by the number of his name." This makes no sense if we believe the Antichrist appears today. How would the people alive in the first century know him, as John said, if he doesn't appear until 2,000 years later? It just makes no sense to read the Bible this way. We should read the Bible first from the perspective of the first intended recipients of that time.

John said the number of his name was 666. Languages like Hebrew and Latin gave a numeric value to the letters of their alphabet. The numeric value of Emperor Nero in Hebrew is 666. We think Revelation was first written in Greek, but we aren't sure about this. It is full of Hebrew grammar and Hebrew idioms, loaded with Hebrew references to the Old Testament, more than any other document. John was a Hebrew apostle. Given the Jewish context of the early church, it makes sense that John would identify Nero by the Hebrew alphabet when writing such a document concerning Israel and its judgment, and also the fulfillment of Israel's promises through Messiah the King. They had taken a false king in Nero, but John declares the new real King of the earth. Further, there was an ancient Latin Vulgate Bible in the second century, in which the number of the name of the beast isn't 666, but 616. In the Latin alphabet, 616 is the number for Emperor Nero. This is another confirmation that John was referring to Nero.

But the point is that John wasn't referring to a person in our time today. There is no coming Antichrist in our time, that Revelation referred to, such as a leader of the Arabs, or of Russia, or of any other political group we claim to be our enemy. This "enemy" way of reading the Bible, or looking for an enemy of the church, or of Israel, in our time, and then claiming we are living in the last days before Jesus returns, and then claiming God is going to destroy these enemy, antichrist people, is violent and ungodly. We have heard many people interpret the scripture in this way, and like Jesus said to the apostles, they "don't know what spirit they are of."

The church in Revelation followed the Lamb. They bore his identity and mark. They did not partner with any powers on earth against those they believed were their enemies. They loved their enemies, and did not love their own lives, even to death, and in time their enemies were transformed. This is our call today.

Another passage people use to speak of the Antichrist is in Thessalonians, where Paul mentions the "man of sin." We have spoken about this in a previous section, where Paul's passage refers to the Roman invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in the first century of the church. That passage has no direct bearing on biblical prophecy today.

Millennialism

Millennialism has been a big problem ever since it began. Many Jews in Jesus' day believed it was the time in which God did battle with his enemies, so his kingdom could come on the earth. Those people were often called Zealots, and they believed violence was a part of God's plan. What was not understood was that the battle of God was fought on the cross and the enemies he defeated were sin in our own hearts, and death.

Many millennialists today believe what early Zealots believed. This type of millennialism is currently very popular among Christian churches. Part of the idea comes from Matthew 24, "there shall be wars and rumours of wars." It is held that these wars are necessary as a prelude to Christ's second coming and his reign on earth. These wars are often eagerly anticipated and encouraged. There is an entirely wrong concept of evil and also a wrong concept of how God deals with evil. Jesus pointed out that when we believe in violence, evil dwells in our own hearts. God deals with evil on his cross,

and he calls the church to face and overcome evil the same way, as his followers. If we seek to overcome evil with evil, we become like evil ourselves.

Millennialism has come up again and again in church history, associated with large scale violence. The scenarios are the same: "God's kingdom is coming to earth, but first it is necessary to make way through the extermination of evil." Looking at the build up to the First World War we see this. Every main power in Europe then, on both sides, believed they were God's people ushering in the millennium through their war effort. The same can be said of the war in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein. One popular "prophet" said on television, "God is using America to take back the Garden of Eden before Jesus returns." It's hard to believe that such things can be said and so widely accepted.

Biblical millennialism actually refers to an entirely different kind of movement. It is about the reign of Christ, but through the hearts of his people. These people are the virgin bride of Revelation. Their reaction to violence is opposite. Violence is associated with the beast, meaning the powers of earth that fight for greed, or for self-preservation. The rule of the Lamb of God is expressed through the nations by the Lamb's people who serve. They are breaking their swords into instruments of service. They are building an entirely different type of kingdom: an eternal kingdom.

Millennialism tells us that the teachings of Christ don't apply to our own time. It is said that the Sermon on the Mount is about Christ's kingdom when it comes at his return. It is claimed that before Christ's return, we aren't to live by what Christ taught, but to live by the more "practical" principles of our current world and age. Things like turning the other cheek, giving our shirt to the person who sues us for our coat, and loving our enemies, are not to be taken seriously in our current age, it is claimed. This type of millennialism, which is the most popular type, completely overthrows the teachings of Christ about his true kingdom, which is to operate in our hearts by faith now.

Christ's purpose was that through his teachings, applied in our lives today by the Holy Spirit who lives in us, his true kingdom is to spread in our current communities and nations. This is the only biblical millennialism.

Babylon:

"All her children they are slain in a day
No more will you hear the sound of buying and selling
The smoke of her burning is there for all to see

No more will you hear her soldiers in a victory procession
All her parades they have come to an end
Even her language is taken away from her
Scattered is her power for evermore."

The "children" are the profiteers of our world today, who sell people and even whole nations for a dollar. All such inhumane commerce is gone forever.

The "language" of propaganda, of demonising our intended victims, which goes before our armies today, is gone forever. The power of selfishness is forever broken in the city of God.

What a picture Revelation paints! It's difficult to hear this song by Chris Delvan without weeping. The symbolism of Revelation fills us with hope, meaning and direction for our current lives. The picture describes how God's followers live now, and the kingdom we point to, which has already dawned in our lives. Revelation depicts a God who calls his followers away from violence, greed and oppression of others, to share with and to support the "other".

The millennium depicts the reign of Christ in our hearts, of a people who beat their swords into instruments of service, for friend and for enemy.

Reading the Right Signs

In recent times there has been a big end-times emphasis focusing on the nation of Israel, which often appears contrary to the kingdom that Jesus spoke about and lived out. The modern focus is about politics and race. The kingdom that Jesus spoke about is one where we love our neighbour, no matter who they are, and our enemy. The parable of the Good Samaritan especially highlights Jesus' kingdom, and the way it comes and flourishes in the world. It doesn't come through political coercion, but through care for others, especially those displaced, marginalised and our enemies. A political or racial focus on kingdom issues, or end-times issues, always sidelines what Jesus taught us. Genuine kingdoms are established and maintained through the care of others. This is to be our focus in the world.

The kingdom of God doesn't come through great signs and events. Many have tried to date end-time events, and this has been especially prevalent in relation to the modern state of Israel. In the nineteenth century many new religious movements started in the West, with a focus on dating end-time events, including the second coming. All of these have been wrong. Yet the dating of these events remains popular today. All these sorts of issues about dates, the Jubilee date, the 3 & ½ years, the Sabbath dates, all the dates associated with Israel under the Old Testament, have all been fulfilled in the New Covenant. They are all fulfilled in Christ. It is a mark of cults to carry these dates over into modern-time speculations about kingdom events. It's like "reading the tealeaves."

The kingdom does not come with observation, nor with great signs in the heavens, nor with great cosmic events. These are not the "signs of the times." Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites because they could tell by the sunset today what the weather would be tomorrow, but they refused to read the social conditions in which they lived. Not caring for "others", for sinners and for enemies today, means the breakdown of society tomorrow. This is what Jesus called the "signs of the times." The future is easy to read; by the way we behave towards others today. And we know that if we change this behaviour we change our future. These are the "signs" the church is called to look at and act upon with mercy and compassion.

Jesus spoke about how his kingdom comes in the Sermon on the Mount. He said his people are the light of the world. To the Hebrew listeners, this was a reference to Genesis 1, to the light in creation. Jesus was saying his light has appeared in the hearts of his people, to bring about a new creation: change from the inside out, to our communities and world. This is end-times. The whole Sermon on the Mount is a new-creational declaration. This is why Jesus mentioned the "sons of God." Adam and Eve were the first sons of God, set over God's creation, to bring his shalom and special presence to fill the world. Now it's the peacemakers, not the war-makers, who are God's end-times people. The message was clear to Jesus' Hebrew audience, which is why they didn't like him much. This wasn't the messiah they wanted. But it's the Messiah God sent to us.

Not long ago I was in a church and a man asked if I had heard about the "blood moons." I had heard about this. It was said by some that because there were several blood moons appearing that year, this was a special sign of the soon coming of Jesus. The man said to me, "These blood moons show us we are in the last days, and that God is calling America now to launch a pre-emptive nuclear attack against all the Arab nations to wipe them out for Israel's sake, before Jesus comes." Think

about it: the millions of people – fathers, mothers, children – he was calling for to be killed, just to fulfil some imagination he called prophecy. And we say Christianity is not violent!

The Prophets

It's common for us to dredge through the Old Testament prophets, looking for "end-times" passages and then apply them to things that are happening around us today. The Jews in Jesus' time were among the early groups to do this. The practice continues to our present time. But this is the wrong way to read the Old Testament prophets.

It's true the prophets spoke about a new kingdom that was coming and would spread over the world, but this kingdom came 2,000 years ago, and has been spreading ever since. The main issue the prophets spoke about was the nature of this new kingdom. They spoke about injustice and justice: the injustice of the kingdoms which God was bringing to an end through the gospel; and the justice that God was bringing to the world through his Messiah and the Messiah's people.

In the Western world, Christians have moved on from days of struggle to better times, and our current way of looking at our faith often reflects our position in society. In missions to other nations, we have promoted a Western style individualism/ material gospel, which now floods through regions like Africa - rather than a community faith. This contrast in life styles was the main message of the prophets. This is God's heart: "Remember that you were a stranger and slave in Egypt when I had compassion on you, therefore have compassion on others." This is at the centre of the gospel, of the prophet's message and of Jesus' ministry.

We should be scouring through the Old Testament prophets, not to nourish our end-times speculations, but for what they taught about the nature of God's kingdom, about living justly and extending this to our neighbours and to our enemies. This was their call and mandate to us. The prophets don't tell us to suspect the Arabs, to claim they are the enemy and then neglect them, or support aggression against them, as a fulfilment of last-days events. The prophets of the Old Testament are not to be used as a speculative resource about our enemies. We should be helping our enemies, instead of believing they are a sign of Jesus' immanent coming.

The prophets speak to us as God's people, about our repentance and our way of living in our communities. In using the prophets speculatively, we are missing their redemptive, reconciliatory purpose in our lives and relationships with other groups of people. We have been using them to build walls, to endorse our feelings of enmity towards others, instead of bridges.

The prophets tell us to look past our nationality and faith groups, to help refugees, and those who are destitute and who need support. The prophets tell us, that in doing this, our days in this world will get better. They tell us that in this way God's kingdom will come among us, as the people of the Messiah spread his light and reign from our new hearts to the entire world. They said that in this way Christ's kingdom will be leaven and salt to the world. This was the message of the prophets, and it will yet come to pass in the earth, through people like you and me.

So let's change the way we read the Old Testament prophets. Let's not look through them to find out when our enemies will perish, but instead look through them to find ways we can beat our weapons into tractors, to feed the hungry, and to bring peace to war-torn regions by helping the poor. End-times speculations set one group against another, raise up political and economic barriers

between us, and extend sufferings to multitudes. Instead, let's extend Christ's grace to all people in service.

This is the call of the prophets: to come out of our cosy slumber, from our isolation, from which we demonise others and predict their end, and instead help them in their suffering, and in doing so, showing and living out the love of God and gospel message we profess.

Human government is dictatorial. The book of Genesis is a prophetic corrective: speaking of the priesthood of all believers, the image of God in all humanity, male and female. It wasn't until the kingdom of God birthed by Christ that this began to become a reality.

Looking at ancient human religion, you see it provided a service. Offerings were received to clear people's minds from guilt, or that they may receive blessings from the gods. Religion was part of the market place. There was nothing in these religions about a restored humanity and a new type of kingdom in this world. Nothing about a new way of living, that challenges the very fabric of dictatorial natures that keep people in bondage. The religion rather served these systems. And the religions helped the people from different nations to stay against each other. There was nothing in the religions to draw the people together into a healed humanity, restoring our current cultures and world.

The kingdom of God seen in Christ is exactly what these religions didn't think of. The Sermon on the Mount is exactly what religion doesn't think of. It is exactly what brings about God's new creation.

Daniel

We know about the dream that Daniel interpreted. In the days of the pagan empires, God would set up a new kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar saw a stone "cut out without hands" strike the statue, grind it to powder and fill the earth. A stone represents the corner stone of God's temple. It being "cut out without hands", means a temple not made by human hands, not a material building. It is a new temple that the apostles spoke of, made up of God's people, filling and renewing the nations.

We may initially interpret this vision violently. The statue is struck; it is ground to powder. But this violent interpretation is due only to our preconceived ideas about kingdoms and the way they usually work. God "strikes" the statue with a new non-violent kingdom.

This is the very point of the vision: God is not like the kings of this world. He grinds the statue to powder, in the sense that he renders it useless. He takes away its power. He does this by defeating death. He takes away the fear of death, which is the power of the kings over people.

He grinds the statue to powder by being ground to powder himself. He took the crushing of sinners against himself at Calvary. When he dies he defeats the power of sin over us, and empowers a new people who live a new-kingdom way. This, through service, brings down, transforms and renews the powers of the world inwardly. This is the gospel Paul preached, about the church renewing and transforming powers. It's Daniel's vision.

Many Jews of Jesus' day believed this vision from Daniel would have a violent fulfilment. Their model came from the Book of Esther and from the Jewish Maccabee revolt against the Greek powers. They didn't understand that Jesus' kingdom comes through service and not through violence. Jesus defeated the powers by serving on the cross. He taught this to the Jews in parables. In his kingdom,

the birds of the air (Israel's enemies) come and lodge under the branches of our trees. His kingdom grows as we support our enemies.

Many of us today hold the same interpretation of Daniel that the early Jews held. We may think we are God's people, but actually be worshipping a different Jesus. Jesus impressed on the people of his day, that if we try to deal with our enemies in a violent fashion then we aren't his followers and aren't part of his kingdom. This was his plain message in his day. We are to take up our cross and follow him, overcome the world the way he did: love our enemies. The new temple Daniel spoke of is cast into the sea (the nations) to serve and renew it.

The way we are to renew the world is through our self-giving. It isn't through our standing back from the world, in self-preservation, correcting it. By caring for the world, the world sees our gospel message lived out. As God gave himself in incarnation and visited us in our homes when we were against him, so he calls the church to impact the world the same way. How else will the world see the gospel message, unless it is lived out in the flesh before them by God's followers?

Isaiah

The message of Isaiah is the same. A new kingdom takes root in the nations and grows and fills the whole earth. And the way this happens is described the same way.

You can hear the groan of God in this book of Isaiah. All through he is lamenting the oppressive nature of humanity and the consequences of this upon people, especially the weak and needy. This is what we mean by the "anger of God." It isn't a legalistic anger, it's not an anger because we have broken his law. It isn't an anger that we have gone after other gods, and he is jealous, and his ego is offended. That is not his anger. It is an anger at the consequences. It is an anger about the harm that comes to people. It is anger at the suffering he sees.

And God's anger isn't expressed the way we think. It is expressed on the cross. Not an anger meted out against his Son. But an anger in which God comes himself in the flesh and suffers for his creation to reconcile and redeem it: to change our inner heart, so we would turn things around. The anger of God is expressed through his own suffering on the cross, which his own creation meted out against him. This is what God decided to do about the injustice: to take it himself, forgive it and call us to the new kingdom he builds. His anger is expressed in his personal suffering. It is expressed through his passion: anger becomes compassion for those who are being trodden down. *Compassion* means to suffer with. This was Jesus' passion. This is the heart of the prophets. This is the way we express anger as God's people: through love and mercy in action.

God's lamentation in Isaiah is about the governments of this world, but not just these governments: this same carelessness for others runs through all our hearts. The image in Daniel, the issue in Isaiah, is not the pagan empires, but our own natures. We are Daniel's statue.

So God sets out to plant a new government within the world, in our hearts, which will supplant from our heart all selfish forms of government and overrun all the world in its transformation. "To us a child is born, to us a son is given... and of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end."

Isaiah, like Daniel, is speaking about a kingdom that has come now, in the church age, in our current time, and is now expanding through the world and will renew all things. This is what "end-times" is about. We have no dates for it; no specific timelines or charts. It isn't about such predictions. It is

about a new heart, which works through the church to our neighbours. This is the point about “end-times;” a new way of living now, in our present world, not when we get to heaven. If we want to consult the prophets about the “last-days”, this is what they say, “A new heart I will give you... I will write my laws upon your heart.” The prophets don’t give dates; they just say God renews creation.

We have almost turned Christianity into a private religion about going to heaven, and disconnected it from what God is doing in renewing his world. God’s purpose is that we sever ourselves instead from the world’s values. The world has said the gospel is outdated, “not relevant, keep it for heaven”, but what’s really outdated is the present value of the world of “us first”. The current world is old, out of date and is passing away. God’s gospel is about Christ refashioning his creation. That isn’t out of date. That is making a future of care for others.

Isaiah shows very plainly a new government taking root in our hearts, and from there changing the nature and behaviour of mankind throughout the nations. This isn’t at some convenient date in the future, when it suits us. It is in the inconvenient present. And it starts with us personally. It isn’t hypothetical, or for someone else to do:

“Look, a righteous king is coming! And honest princes (his people) will rule under him. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a parched land.” (Isaiah 32:1-2)

What a contrast from the lament of God throughout Isaiah. God’s lament and anger turns into this song of beauty and healing. It starts with his own demonstration of love and mercy, unbelievable to our human cultures by contrast, so stark and shocking when it was revealed in Christ, that the God of all creation, the Almighty, should humble himself to serve his enemies on the cross ... and from this beginning, from his resurrection within our hearts, this newness and healing extends throughout all the nations, community to community, from the bottom up, from the lowest who is healed first.

Instead of the way the world currently is, we each become a shelter to our neighbour. This doesn’t depend of who our neighbour is. Any refugee, any nationality, any faith, any widow, any orphan, any person without a job, or sick, or without hope: just our neighbour. This is how we live when God puts our heart right; not when Jesus comes again, or in some future planet or universe. It is now God has put our heart right. If the gospel hasn’t put our heart right, then what will? What are we waiting for? When are we going to live for people above our private, economic, nationalist, denominational, faith, family policies? When?

This is what creation is waiting for, and creation is not going to change until our hearts do: until what is said about his church comes to pass in us. So now, when we are praying for God to change the world, we know what to pray. What a turnaround. From our current selfishness concerning the plight of others, to a care for the wellbeing of a stranger, a local, a foreigner, as if he or she were our own flesh, because they are our own flesh. This might seem a bit rough, but listen, it is what Isaiah is saying. He is speaking about all of us. This type of change within us, and then expressed outside of us to all others, could only be called one thing: New Creation. This is the purpose of the gospel.

Genesis

The rot set in a long time before Isaiah. Isaiah just continued the narrative of oppression. From the time that the serpent tempted mankind to reach out for themselves, the strong began to over-

power the weak. Adam would “rule” over the woman, governments would become self-serving, anyone with an advantage over another would use it to the full.

Instead of being his brother’s keeper, Cain slew Abel, who was in the way of his ambition to build a name and place for himself. Cain needed power from God, to achieve his goals, and if Abel had God’s favour he must be removed. Manipulation of the deity and deities to achieve our purposes was well underway.

Reading Genesis we see a steady decline, into the scenario of chapter 6, where mankind does only evil, only what pleases his own pleasure and lust for power. Again, women, the weak and the creation become the main casualties. All in power are blind. And after the flood, again the empires rise. Pharaoh uses the famine to become master of the world. At the end of the famine, Pharaoh owns all the land, all the livestock, and he owns all the people, from the top to the bottom of Egypt. All humanity are slaves to Pharaoh. He does nothing to restore the people to honour.

Even in the tribes of Israel, women have no inheritance and little honour. Judah sleeps with Tamar, thinking she is a prostitute unknown to him. Later he discovers Tamar is pregnant and calls for her execution. When Tamar reveals Judah is the father, he confesses she is better than he, for she had a reason: she needed a seed to secure her lineage. Her selfish brother in law had refused her rights to inheritance, and society did nothing about it. But was Judah punished for what he did? No.

It impossible to describe the fall and self-centredness of the human heart and cultures during this time. The grief in the heart of God must have been enormous. Sit down one day and put on a recording of the book of Genesis and listen to it. Get the broad sweep of the narrative. May the enormity of what has happened to the human heart and culture touch us all.

What is the story? The strong take advantage of the weak. This is the exact opposite of what Isaiah describes concerning the new kingdom, the coming to this world of the Messiah. All the teachings of Jesus address this narrative of Genesis and offer us the solution. This gives us a biblical perspective on the gospel, on what a change of heart means, and the difference God intends this to make in our current world.

This is what “end-times” is about. In Acts it was a new community, who didn’t call what they possessed their own, but used it to alleviate the welfare of others. This is part of the plain gospel message. Jesus took bread and said, “This is my body, divide it among yourselves.” This is our new life, dividing God’s blessings with others. Then Jesus took the cup and said, “This is my blood, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me”, i.e., live for each other. In the same meeting Jesus washed their feet and said we are to wash each other’s feet in remembrance of his example. The early church community was a body in which baptism meant our lives are given for one another, as Jesus gave his for us.

The gospel is about restoring the poor and the weak to community. This was Paul’s point when he rebuked the Corinthian “communion”. Their meal neglected the poor. Rather it endorsed the classes of Roman society. This so moved Paul that he plainly said that their gathering was not in fact in the Lord. “This is not the Lord’s table.” One of the most central issues to Paul’s teaching was that we are one table in the Lord, from all our different backgrounds, and in no sense can the Genesis culture of the advantage of one group over another be allowed to make a resurgence. This is what so moved Paul at Antioch, when he met with Peter, as described in Galatians. Peter was dividing the Lord’s Table. Paul would have none of it. Paul was against any power, whether social, economic or religious, dividing the Lord’s Table.

And just in case we still call this communism, we can see this is central to James' letter. James was speaking about the conditions of society in the days leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. "The Lord is at hand", he said, "The Lord of Sabaoth stands at the door to judge", because people had held back the wages of the poor. This was the reason for the Lord's "coming." This was the last-days of Jerusalem, and the reasons for this judgment were plain. They had told a poor man to stand in the corner, while giving the rich a good seat, because of advantage, so the rich man will give money. What, said James, has not the poor been purchased by the same blood of Jesus? Are we devaluing his blood? James' answer? The Royal Law, that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. This would turn the situation in Jerusalem around and bring healing to their land. This is the Promised Land, God said would come through the gospel.

We have an "end-times" picture given us by Jesus in Matt 25. "When the Son Man shall come in his glory and be seated on his throne, he shall gather the nations before him." This isn't speaking of his second coming. This was his ascension to glory on the clouds, spoken of by Daniel in Dan 7, and witnessed in Acts 1. Daniel said the Son of Man is then seated at the right hand of glory, "to rule the nations." This is what Jesus is describing. So how does he rule the nations? He calls them one after the other and says, "I was hungry and you fed me." And to others he says, "Depart from me, for I was a refugee and you did not take me in." This is the fall and rise of nations in our current time, as Christ rules the world according to the values of his kingdom. He is taking the world from Genesis to new heavens and new earth, through his current reign over the nations. We better watch out!

"End-times" is a change of heart through the gospel, in which our nations and economics, our corporations and politics, are transformed from the image of Pharaoh, where winner takes all, into the image of Christ, the new Messiah: from slavery to Jubilee, from oppression to honouring the image of God in the weakest. This is how God is refashioning our hearts, our church communities and our nations towards being our brother's keeper, as he rules over and renews the world. This is "end-times."

Destruction

There is no doubt that in the first instance the Book of Revelation refers to the suffering church of the first century. As Jesus said, "When you see the armies surround Jerusalem, look up for your redemption draws near." One of the main sources of persecution against the church, i.e. Jerusalem, would be cut off, but first the church had to wait and suffer until many of their enemy came to repentance. This is a large part of the symbolic narrative of the Revelation.

Revelation draws symbolism from Isaiah 34. There, Edom was about to come under judgement. Isaiah says its streets will turn to burning pitch and the smoke of its judgement will rise up forever. It was a terrible end for Edom. And it was from events like this that symbols for the "lake of fire" came into being. Rivers of molten pitch (tar), or even a lake of it, became a symbol for destruction and end. But visit Edom today and look: you don't see the smoke. When scripture says "the smoke of its torment", or "the smoke of its judgment", shall rise up forever, it means that the judgment is irreversible. It is apocalyptic text. It means the judgment is everlasting, not the smoke or fire.

Gehenna was another symbol of destruction. Jesus sometimes used it in his teaching, when he referred to hell. Gehenna was a valley just outside Jerusalem. When the Assyrian army died, while sieging Jerusalem in King Hezekiah's day, the whole army was thrown into Gehenna, and there it was consumed. The fire did not go out, nor did the worm die, until the bodies were fully destroyed. After

that, Gehenna took on symbolic significance for the destruction of God's enemies. This is where Rome threw the occupants of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Revelation depicts the destruction of the church's enemies. But it's not the enemies we think. The enemies of God are death and destruction themselves. God's enemies are not people. Its true people are destroyed, but only because they join with death and destruction and refuse to let go. God calls them constantly, but in the end God allows people their own way. God doesn't destroy anyone. People are destroyed because they join themselves to destruction.

Revelation is the symbolic story of the church overcoming destruction. It is a story of love, where God's character is seen in his Son, who gives himself for the world; and in his church, who follow in the same spirit. They overcome because destruction cannot not destroy the transforming spirit and love within the church. Instead, the church and God's recreation plan flourish.

God's promise to the early church was that they would be delivered from their enemy. God would set his people free. But first they must learn patience and love and become like Christ, who served the world in this manner. God must bring the church into his own loving character, in which we share with and serve our enemies in the midst of persecution. Destruction must be destroyed in our natures before we can be set free from it.

The images of the church's enemies being thrown into the lake of fire depict our final deliverance from persecution. They depict Jerusalem's end in the first century, and the end of its persecution of the church then. Beyond this, all God's enemies shall come to an end, not by God's hand, but by the same way in which Jerusalem brought destruction upon itself. Death itself, the last enemy, shall be thrown into the lake of fire: death and destruction shall be destroyed.

Destruction is a name for the devil. He is called the accuser. Revelation also calls him Apollyon, the name of the Greek god of destruction. He destroyed the firstborn in Egypt, Israel in the wilderness, Job's household, and sought to slay the baby Jesus and infant church. God's aim in Revelation is to destroy Apollyon and all suffering: to wipe away every tear, fulfilling his promise of new creation.

Revelation shows God in a completely opposite way as we think. He brings us into a new community, where destruction is taken out of our hearts. He doesn't bring us onto the "right side" against other people we may call enemies, but onto his side, where we have no part in the destruction of others. Christ is seen over Jerusalem with a sharp sword going out of his mouth. This is his gospel, renewing our hearts and renewing the world, as destruction destroys itself. He fights by giving his own life in the winepress of his wrath, which, it turns out, is God's saving, reconciling love for his creation.

Fundamentalism sees in Revelation a God who uses Christian nations to kill, or un-righteously curtail our enemies. Followers of Jesus see hatred, greed, violence and destruction overcome by a counter-cultural movement of healing for all people. There is something in Revelation for everyone, depending on how we read it. The challenge in reading scripture rightly, isn't just a hermeneutical one, but it's about knowing who God is.

A Theology of Wrath

We have two ways of looking at end-times. One way is through the lens of a theology of wrath, the other is through the lens of new creation. The theology of wrath really took off in the intertestamental period, during the Jewish era of the second temple, or Herod's temple. "Gog and Magog" was the big theological view of that time. A people, or nation - the Jew's enemies - was

identified as Gog and Magog and it was expected that God would soon appear soonest to slay the enemy and bring in the new era.

This world view is largely intact today. Many Christians still follow it. There is a multitude of scriptural verses used to back it up. But it depends on how we read the Bible. If we have an end-times mindset of this nature, we will read that into the scripture, without even realising we are doing it.

Like we do in Paul. For example, when he said in Thessalonians, “The Lord will slay the enemy with the brightness of coming.” This was a reference to the then coming judgement on Jerusalem in AD 70. But we misread scripture badly when we don’t understand how judgments like this are fulfilled.

In the Old Testament God often used other nations as his instruments of judgement. And his purpose for judgement was always to set the oppressed free. His judgements were always on the behalf of the weak. When God wanted to stop oppressors, his judgements consisted of removing his hedge and allowing another enemy nation to come in and take the oppressors out. The other enemy came with covetousness and brutality. These are not God’s attributes. God simply lifted the hedge of his grace that held back the destruction of the oppressors. This is God’s wrath, described as him coming to judge.

We see this in the book of Job. When Satan asked for Job, God finally said, “Behold, he is in your power, only do not touch his body.” Satan went out to slay Job’s family and the scripture said, “Fire came down from God in heaven.” We know this fire wasn’t from God. But this is how the Hebrew expressed it. It means God removed the hedge and allowed the destruction to come. The phrase represents God’s sovereign rule in heaven. But it was Satan who was the destroyer. God simply removed his hedge.

So when we read the same language in Revelation we see the same thing. “Fire came down from heaven and consumed Gog and Magog.” We traditionally read this the way the Jews did in Herod’s day. They saw it as their call to kill the enemy in God’s name. Paul did not read the texts this way. He saw God’s judgement as he explained in Romans 1-2. It is simply God giving men over to their own destruction, giving men up to their own ways, to reap the harvest they have sown. His judgment, his anger and wrath is terrible and to be feared. It is simply God allowing our conscience to harden, allowing us our determined choice, removing the striving of his Spirit of conviction, and removing his hedge of grace protection. This indeed is a terrible wrath.

This judgement is described by terrible symbols, but this is what the early apostles meant by it. They didn’t mean that God did violence against anyone. They meant the opposite to that. They said that God took violence against himself instead. The cross of Christ was God’s only action against evil, which he took from others upon himself. God had no part in any destruction. It was the devil and those who followed the devil that destroyed, and them alone. All fires of destruction came from the enemy, allowed by God as he stepped back. This is the symbolism.

God’s way was the way of self-giving, and this is the way the Revelation and the apostles called the early church to follow. So, in Thessalonians, when Paul describes the coming judgement, he called the believers to a life of love and service instead. This was to be their armour. The only armour against the enemy, was to remove from themselves the ways of destruction. This way only, would destruction have no power over them. So Paul called the church to love their enemies, and never to harm or destroy any of them, but rather to give the thirsty enemy a drink.

In Revelation we see a church that follows the Lamb, and this is the nature of God that we see. We don't see a God who destroys his enemies or even the church's enemies.

The vision we do see in Revelation is this. God raises up a new people to follow his nature and ways into the world. This new people is bringing healing waters and healing leaves to the nations and through them the world is becoming new. This way the world is becoming the kingdom of his Lord and of his Christ. Not through the violence and wrath of God in destroying others, but through his church which renounces the destructive way of life. This is end-times. This is how God renews his creation.

How we read Revelation depends entirely on our mindset. How we see end-times depends on what we are looking for. End-times is not about a God who destroys the enemy, but about a God, gospel and church that loves our enemies.

End-times is not about an onslaught of violence coming from God upon the world. It is about an onslaught of service coming from the church. God has an army. God has a vengeance upon this world in the last days. It is a vengeance of service, a vengeance that is cross-like. Not against people, but a counter-move against evil, lived out through his church, making peace and changing hearts, just like the cross did, and revealing the glory and nature of God. This is the Revelation.

So let's begin to see end-times in a new way. Let's stop seeing it as the day of comeuppance upon our enemies. Let's instead view them with the eyes of compassion, as Jesus did on the cross. Let's see end-times as the day of the church, bringing the message and life of Jesus, and God's justice of mercy to a hurting world. Let's see the church as God's healing agent in the world as we suffer instead (in the place of those who need to repent), as we take up our cross as our Lord did. It's not about our enemies dying for us, but us giving ourselves for our enemies, as God brings forth his healing love and power in our nations. This isn't the way the Jews thought in Jesus' day, but it is the way Christ showed them, and showed us. This is our end-times, as the people of God.

Renewing Nations

In Matthew 25 Jesus shares a scene from his kingdom rule. He says that when the Son of Man comes in his glory he will be seated on his throne and will call the nations before him and separate them as sheep and goats are separated. Those nations that have served the weak shall enter into eternal life and those nations which have oppressed or neglected the weak shall be cast into eternal fire.

We have traditionally interpreted passages like this as being about the second coming of Jesus. We are not writing here to deny the second coming, but nevertheless, is this what Jesus was speaking about here? The parable is about "the kingdom (or rule) of heaven." It speaks of the entire period in which Jesus is Lord over his kingdom. Many interpreters recognize this is what Jesus taught here.

In Isaiah 34 we see the judgment of Edom. There are many parallels to Isaiah 34 in the New Testament. Isaiah uses metaphors, like the heavens dissolving and the stars vanishing. His metaphors about judgment are used by Peter and by John in the Book of Revelation. Let's look at what becomes of Edom:

"And its streams shall be turned into pitch, and its dust into brimstone, and its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; its smoke shall go up forever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever." (Isaiah 34:9-10)

Pitch is bitumen, from which today roads are made. It is an oil product, and when hot it flows like lava on fire. Isaiah depicts a fiery judgement which will burn and destroy. He describes this lava as running in streams, like rivers of fire. This is the imagery from which the "lake of fire" in Revelation is taken. Isaiah then says, "The smoke of its burning shall rise up forever." Revelation also directly quotes this statement, but in Isaiah it is clear what this Hebrew expression means.

So what does this statement mean, "The smoke of its burning shall rise up forever?" If you walk past the region of Edom today, you will not see the smoke. The fire and smoke did not quench while Edom was being destroyed. After that the smoke stopped. The meaning of terms like this in the Hebrew prophetic language, especially in apocalyptic language like this, is that the judgment of Edom will be irreversible. The judgment is eternal or forever. Eternal judgment, shown in this context of Edom, means everlasting destruction. It does not mean eternal conscious suffering in fire.

We can say the same about the use of these images in Revelation. Babylon is "tormented", which, Revelation said, means it is destroyed. The torment is an image of its destruction. The same is said of the beast and the false prophet. The beast is the Roman Empire. Its torment is an image of its eternal destruction. It shall be thrown into the lake of fire, and destroyed, just like every other beast before it. The same is said of the false prophet, which was Jerusalem of the first century, the harlot, who was unfaithful to God and who persecuted the saints. Revelation was encouraging the saints, by showing them that the kingdom of heaven is everlasting, and those who seek to destroy it will be taken out of that kingdom, just like Edom was taken out of the world.

This is what the imagery means in Isaiah 34. Edom was about to be removed from the earth as an empire and force. Like Babylon later, it was "weighed in the balance and found wanting", and its days in God's sovereign rule over the earth were numbered. Isaiah shows the earth as under God's rule, in which God is taking out of the world that which offends, that which oppresses the weak. These kingdoms are being cast into the fire, or being destroyed, taken out of the world, for the relief of the weak.

This takes on a greater significance in Jesus' parable in Matthew 25. Jesus is announcing his kingdom rule. Though he will be killed as a man, he will rise, ascend to heaven, sit on his throne, and rule. This is the new kingdom God promised, and this kingdom has a commission from God to renew the world. Jesus is fulfilling God's call to Israel, to bless and heal the nations. In Christ and his church, God has joined heaven and earth together, to carry out God's promises for mankind in fixing the creation. In Matt 25, Christ is depicted on a throne, carrying out this renewal. As he does so, every kingdom on earth that oppresses the world, that is contrary to God's Lamb-like rule and care for people, will be given over to its own destruction. Eventually the kingdoms of this world become the transformed kingdoms of Christ, as all enemies are put under Christ and the new earth flourishes through the gospel age.

In the parable of Matthew 25, Jesus was quoting from Daniel 7:13-14. There, Daniel has a vision of the ascension of the Son of man to heaven. He "comes on the clouds" to heaven and is seated on his throne in glory, and given an eternal rule over all nations of the earth, and, as Revelation depicts, his saints rule with him. In Matthew 25, Jesus is depicting the fulfilment of Daniel's vision in Jesus' own ascension to his throne in heaven. This is why he said his "kingdom is at hand." It was about to begin in the days in which he preached. From the time of his ascension he was given rule over the nations, to bring under his feet every enemy, as he renews the nations of the world.

So even though Matthew 25 depicts Jesus' judgment and authority over all people, and how we respond as individuals in care to others, it also depicts Jesus' reign over the nations which began in

his ascension, and through which he carries out God promises to take out of his kingdom rule everything that offends, bringing about an emerging new creation. This emerging new creation, in the days of Christ's rule, is the era we are living in now.

Ezekiel 34:17-31 depicts the Lord separating the nations like sheep and goats, based upon how they treat the people of the world. His goal is to cleanse the earth of destruction. Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 is related to this passage in Ezekiel. That is, an answer to the deteriorating moral condition in our nations today, would be to look at our care for others in general. A disregard for the care of others brings about the hardening of our hearts and a self-destruction within our own societies. This self-destruction, what we bring upon ourselves through hardening our own hearts, is the judgment the parable is speaking about. Not only are the participants of this hardness and oppression judged before God in this world, but they also miss out on eternal life.

Pleaded again and again in Deuteronomy: "You should love the foreigner, because you were foreigners." The world is yet to catch on to this smile emoticon. That's why we are called... "Is there anyone else to whom God has been so kind and good, that you should not be good to others?"

He Shall Slay the Wicked

This new kingdom is depicted in Isaiah 11, and as we said, begins in his incarnation, resurrection and ascension, from which time it is said, "of the increase of his government and peace, meaning in this world, there shall be no end." (Isaiah 9:7)

"But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked." Isaiah 11:4

See here his rule, as in Matthew 25, it is for the poor and meek of the world. This is the mark of his kingdom rule, and the same nature is within his people. His concern is our concern, on the earth in our current lives.

"He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth." Many of the Jews at Jesus' time supposed that these prophecies were to be fulfilled violently. But when Jesus came in peace and gave his own life for sinners, we saw what was entirely unexpected. The surprise was that the God of all might, would overcome evil with good, not by taking up the weapons of evil, but through his sufferings. This is still not often understood today.

The rod of his mouth is his word, meaning his gospel message. His striking the earth is his renewing impact in our nations through the gospel transformation of our hearts. It's powerful, like a strike, as the Lamb of God strikes and renews our inner man. Jews in Jesus' day refused to acknowledge this fulfilment of prophecies, which they thought would be fulfilled in violence.

"With his breath he shall slay the wicked." The breath refers to his Spirit, by which we are renewed and regenerated. This is how God slays wickedness in the earth and removes it from our nations. We need to see the gospel as our weapon against sin and wickedness in the world. Throughout Isaiah, Isaiah is depicting the power of the gospel in making a new creation. This is the language he uses when describing the way Christ's Lamb-rule works in our world, overcoming Satan and darkness by light. So when we see Jesus acting against wickedness in the Gospels, we see him forgiving and healing. This is the work and rule he calls his church to.

He takes violence out of our hearts, as his correcting and transforming rod (word) and breath (Spirit) work in our lives. We thought it was our enemies he struck violently, but we are the ones that are smitten, we the unbelievers, God's enemies, who are now coming to faith and to his new creation.

Isaiah continues by describing the coming of Christ's kingdom, as a lamb and a wolf eating straw together, and a baby and a snake playing together. In Psalm 23 also, we eat together at one table with our enemies, just like Jews and gentiles do in the gospel. This is what happens when God's kingdom rule comes into our hearts. Instead of us attacking our enemies, or cursing them, Jesus told the early church to behave the way God behaved towards us; forgiving, loving and showing healing care to our enemies. This is how God's rod acts in transforming our hearts and lives. It's a rod of correction that strikes our most inner being with change. And it often hurts us. Many in Jesus' day couldn't take that rod of correction and rejected it.

David continues, showing how this change in our world comes about. "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." We normally take verses like this to be about the benefit to ourselves. "The goodness and mercy is for me." But that is not the point. "My cup runs over," for those around us. We know when a snail has been past, because it leaves a trail behind it. The trail follows the snail. So, goodness and mercy follow us. Goodness and mercy are the trail we leave behind, for others, for the world in which we travel. This is how a table is prepared for us and our enemy. This reconciliation through the Messiah's cross-kingdom is what the Psalm is about.

It's what Jesus said, "God doesn't want sacrifice from us, but mercy and justice to those around us." That is, God doesn't want our religious protests, but he wants our care for others. He wants us to pick up, help and restore those who are in trouble, not pass religious commentary on their lives.

So Isaiah is showing us that his kingdom is one of mercy and care for others, and he judges and rules by restoring our hearts to these new kingdom values. Isaiah shows us that when his kingdom comes it restores enemies back together; it comes with reconciling powers and calls us to a new way of life and a new way of looking at and treating others, including our enemies. This is how "he judges for the poor and for the meek," by turning our hearts towards to each other, to restore our whole communities, not just our own corner. This was how John the Baptists presented Christ's kingdom rule: turning our hearts away from our own interest and back to each other.

These blessings shall not come in their fullness until Jesus' final return, when all enemies are put under him, but Isaiah calls us to live in this kingdom even now, and show out its transforming powers in our hearts and relationships today. The kingdom has already begun, it has already dawned in Christ's resurrection and in our hearts. New creation has begun. We are called to be heralds of this new creation, by our living today.

God calls us to slay the wicked by inviting them to our table, by extending mercy and kindness to the sinner, restoration and reconciliation to our enemies. In short, he calls us out of the logic of the kingdoms of this world, where people try to overcome each other, and winner takes all, and into the logic of his kingdom, which is his cross. This cross is designed to turn enemies to God. It is how God confronts evil. This is the church's call of neighbourhood and world renewal.

The cross transforms the scripture as it fulfils it. It transforms prophetic texts about God's wrath into a Lamb-like conqueror. It transforms God's crushing of others into a servant who is crushed. This transformation, this dawning upon the apostle Paul, which changed his whole life, from a zealot into a servant, happened as Paul met this suffering-conqueror himself. In Colossians 2:15, Paul contrasts God's way with the way of our brutal world. As Jesus was naked on the cross, he made Rome's bankrupt morality naked for all to see. The powers were undressed. The wooden cross, that was an

implement of defeat and shame, became a chariot of victory, in which Christ rode with all the rulers of this world in a procession of defeat. What did the cross expose? It is the world that is violent, not God, and it is the Lamb that conquers, not human power. This will change our hearts, and our religions, from violence to world renewal. This is God's victory.

Romans and End-Times

Reading Romans from Paul's first century perspective opens up to us a whole new understanding. Paul is tracing the fulfilment of God's promises to the Jewish people, through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It starts with the fall of Adam and Eve. They were to rule over God's creation. Paul refers to this rule as "glory": partnership with God in his blessing to the nations. The fall of Adam and Eve is described as a fall from this glory. See Psalm 8, which describes man's restoration to rule over creation in Christ, as a return to "glory". That is, when Paul speaks of glory, "whom he justified, those he also glorified", he is not speaking of going to heaven, but of resurrection and ruling with Christ over a new earth creation.

Paul takes up the gospel story through the lens of Israel. Israel receives Adam's renewed mandate, to bless the nations, to bring healing to the world. But they too fail in this call. So, God brings up Jesus from Israel, as the one to fulfil the promises. Jesus fulfils Israel's calling, thus restoring humanity's rule over a renewed world. This is the meaning of "sons of God" in Romans 8.

Paul traces the fall of Israel in Romans 7. They are given the law, which can be summarised by one word, as Paul says in Galatians, "to love our neighbour as our self." But the inclinations of our flesh are contrary to this good law, and Israel found, as we all do, that the law became a tool that made them captive to condemnation. So, with Satan ruling over us through the law (as we reject ourselves and then others, who we believe are rejecting us also), sin is increased, as we saw in Israel's history, culminating in our anger at God and rejection of his free grace.

But in Romans 8, Paul shows that through the grace and love of Christ we are released from condemnation and indwelt by God's Spirit. God's Spirit then makes our mortal body "alive." That is, he helps us in our weakness, so that we can love neighbour as our self. This is what Paul means by a "walk in the Spirit." It is walking by the Spirit's will. His will is shown in the law, as stated above, and in the cross of Christ, where God gives himself for his neighbour. To walk in the flesh, on the other hand, is to please ourselves.

We have the Spirit as a deposit, or first-fruits, towards this new way of life. Eventually our body shall be redeemed fully from corruption, in the resurrection, when all death and corruption are swallowed up by immortality. But before this, the Spirit helps us renew our communities, by helping us to love our neighbour and enemy selflessly, as Christ did. This is what Paul means by the "love of God filling our hearts by the Holy Spirit" in Romans 5:5. This is the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which commands us to love. It is fulfilled in us by God's grace. We join the Israel of God, doers of *shema* from the heart, through a new circumcised heart.

Paul goes on to describe the fulfilment of the gospel in our lives. The commission of Israel can now proceed and be fulfilled. This commission is world renewal, or what Paul calls, creation being set free from its bondage to corruption. It is self-will that spoils our creation and communities. It is self-giving that sets our communities free from bondage to destructive life styles, and renews our neighbourhoods. The law of Jubilee that Israel received, with which they were to renew the nations, is now fulfilled in our lives. This is why we are called the "sons of God."

Summarising Romans chapters Rom 6-8, we see that “walking in the flesh” is pleasing self, our own group, economic interest, or nation, above others. “Walking in the Spirit” means love of neighbour. The Spirit sets us free from the former dictatorship, to do the latter, both now in this life, and fully in the resurrection. The result of this is new communities, new creation. Man's act of self-taking in the Garden became the destructive principal of this creation. God's reciprocal act of self-giving on the cross became the principal act of a new creation, first in our hearts and then spreading to our societies. We see this salvation being lived out in Acts, when the new people of God loved each other with no divisions. In doing so they fulfilled the teachings of Christ in the Gospels. Here, we see that Jesus' teachings and the gospel Paul preached are one and the same.

So, in Romans 8, we see the same eschatology as we described in previous sections above. Western, or Greek style eschatology, has picked up a wrong vision of the future. In the Greek style vision, salvation is eternal life in heaven, while being lost is eternal suffering in a literal lake of fire. The gospel is boiled down to this false afterlife vision, and divorced from the world, communities, neighbours, and reconciliation with enemies, we are called to carry out on this earth. Our sonship over this earth is ignored. Adam and Israel's calls are cancelled out. But in Paul's writings, the gospel is taken from the Hebrew background, which is about God fulfilling in us, or restoring, the Adamic commission of ruling over a blessed, or in our case, a renewed creation.

The vision of biblical eschatology is of a new kingdom that God is building now. This kingdom is a united heaven and earth, renewed and healed. Our destiny isn't to leave earth and go to heaven, but to rule over this new creation in partnership with our God. In the end God shall be fully with us on earth with his special presence, as he originally designed in his commission to Adam and Eve: his temple (meaning not a building, but his personal presence) would extend from Eden to the world. This is fulfilled in Revelation 21-22.

Hell, in this biblical vision, isn't eternal conscious torment in literal fire, but expulsion from God's eternal renewed kingdom. Anything that harms is finally kept out. This expulsion isn't carried out by some act of violence by God, but by man's own hardness of heart, in which destruction overtakes their own lives. God calls us out of this destruction into a circumcised heart and into *shema* by his gospel. The gospel isn't grace to continue living an old life, but grace to live his new kingdom life. If we live in the old life, in the flesh, for self, we shall die. But if we walk in the Spirit, live for one another, we and our communities shall be renewed and live.

Hebrew End-Times

One of the starting points in Hebrew eschatology is God's covenant with Abraham. As a friend of ours pointed out, God's promises to Abraham were about family, land and his seed extending blessing to the nations. This certainly gives context to the gospel we should understand and believe today.

Number 1: Is our gospel about one united family, from all backgrounds, sharing love and care for one another, overcoming barriers, selfishness and prejudices?

Number 2: Is our gospel about land? Or, is our gospel a disjointed gospel, which is spiritual only. Is it a Greek gnostic gospel, which is about our personal, spiritual blessing in heaven? The promise of God to the Hebrew people is that God would bless them in their land. This gives context to all that Jesus taught.

Number 3: Is our gospel about bringing salt and light to our communities, societies, and nations? Is our gospel about renewing the world, or is it about escaping from the world to heaven in a rapture?

These three questions locate biblical eschatology. If our eschatology isn't focused on these three promises to Abraham, it isn't biblical.

We could add to this one more promise to Abraham: "You will possess the gate of your enemies." Our enemies are not people. They are condemnation, sin, death, fear and selfishness. When we possess the gate of these enemies, we reconcile with others and build a better land. This is what Jesus taught about. He showed that true freedom wasn't overcoming the enemy without, but the enemy within. This enables us to live in the Promised Land, to renew our communities. Laying down our lives for our enemies, overcoming greed and self-preservation, to do what Christ did when he gave his life for his enemies, is the only way to overcome the real enemies of humanity.

In our Greek past we have dislocated the Hebrew gospel. The gospel is about fulfilling what God promised the Hebrew people. He would use them to renew the nations. He would give them peaceful habitations in their land, here on earth. Many people have scoffed at the Greek gospel we have embraced, saying that because God was unable to fulfil his promises to the Jews, because he wasn't able to defeat the Romans and all the others, the first apostles changed the gospel to a spiritual one. The "gospel of Jesus Christ" as we know it in our Western background, is something different to our Old Testament roots. It is like a sudden shift or change of perspective, out of the blue, with no Old Testament background to it. In our Western gospel, the Old Testament is used simply as a source of proof texts for Jesus's divinity and coming, but the actual calling of God to Israel that Jesus fulfilled is jettisoned.

"Well", you might say, "does this mean you believe in modern Israel, with its return to the land? Is this a fulfilment of God's promises to the nation about their land?" No, I don't believe that. The reason is, because it isn't what Jesus taught. Jesus didn't teach that we inherit the land by coercion, by displacing others, by force, by politics, by fighting off our enemies. These were all the strategies of many of the people in Jesus' day, and Jesus quite clearly refuted them. He was very much opposed to them. This was very clear in his ministry. This is why he was rejected. It wasn't what they wanted to hear then.

Jesus taught us that the land is possessed through the law, just like the Old Testament prophets taught. By this he meant, to love God with all your heart, and your neighbour as yourself. He taught that the land is possessed by reconciling with our enemies, by going the second mile, by caring for those who oppose us, by trying to meet their needs and include them in our plans for the future. All of his teachings were along these lines. All of his teachings were Promised Land teachings. He was saying, "This is how you dwell in the land, not by overcoming your enemies, but by serving them. Your enemies are redeemed, like I am redeeming you." This is the gospel Jesus taught, one about land, a Hebrew gospel.

Moses spoke of this day in Deuteronomy 30:6. He said God would circumcise their hearts and then they would keep the law, and because of that they would then live securely in their land. That is, with a new heart that could love neighbour as self, they could keep the shema (of Deut 6:4-5) and keep Jubilee towards their neighbour. This would heal their land, from the inside of our heart out. So the gospel isn't just about a changed heart, but a changed behaviour towards our neighbour and this doing, or action, is the path of life that heals our land. This doing/action is what Paul meant by "walking in the Spirit" in Romans 8, that brings life and peace to our communities.

But this land isn't limited to the boundaries promised in the Old Testament. It isn't limited to any race of people. It is for all people, and for all the world. Thus, Abraham is heir of the world (the whole cosmos - Rom 4:13). That is, the promise of land to Abraham, according to Paul, wasn't just that Promised Land in the Old Testament, but through Christ, the utmost parts of the earth become his possession, and all the nations and people to the ends of the world. We are all joined into Israel and her promises and gospel by faith through Christ. Thus Isaiah said, "Stretch forth your tent pegs, and the habitations of your dwelling, for your seed is too many for this land." On and on Isaiah speaks about this, expanding God's temple presence, his good renewed land, to the ends of the earth. Through Christ, Israel is fulfilling Adam's calling to extend God's temple/garden/land presence to the world. This is the vision of Revelation 22-22.

That is, if our gospel and end-times isn't about this world, isn't about land, isn't about setting the oppressed free in our nations, stretching out the law of liberty and Jubilee from new hearts to all our neighbours in the world, then it isn't the Hebrew gospel of God, in which we have become joint heirs in Christ.

The Exodus – A Paradigm of End-Times

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come." (Luke 4:18-19)

In the Hebrew mind the Exodus was one of the main events that gave them identity as a people. Throughout the prophets of the Old Testament, the promised Messiah, and the deliverance God promised to them through the gospel, was consistently communicated to Israel using Exodus themes. Their coming out of Egypt in the Exodus was a paradigm to them of the work of the Messiah. In the above quote from Jesus, in announcing his ministry in Nazareth, we see the same paradigm being used to explain the nature of his gospel.

So, let's look at the Exodus history to see what God meant to achieve in Israel's life through that event. This is what he has achieved in our lives through the gospel, and this is where the gospel is taking us to in our future days. This is God's plan, for our end-times.

The story in Egypt begins with the enslavement of the people. During the days of the famine, people bought grain from Pharaoh, first with their money, then with their livestock, then their land, and finally with their lives. By the end of the famine, Pharaoh owned everything, and he owned all the people, from the top of Egypt to the bottom of Egypt. After this, it seems, Pharaohs took no action to restore the dignity of humanity, made in the image of God. The Pharaohs ruled over mankind and exploited them, to fulfil their goals in empire.

This is obviously speaking to us about empire. God doesn't like empire, because of what it does to people. As he said to his disciples, "The governors (whether political, or corporate governors) of this world rule over the people, but in my kingdom it's not like that, you will lead as servants, of the least, from below." This wasn't a suggestion. This is the change of heart and action that the kingdom of God came to make in us, and this is how God's blessing is to pass to the world, liberating people, as he liberated his people from Egypt.

We have often seen the gospel in spiritual and individual terms only. This is especially convenient for us if we are among the blessed nations of the world. But is this the way the gospel is seen in Hebrew

literature? Let's have a look at what was said to the Hebrew people when God brought them out of bondage in Egypt.

One of the key paradigm texts is: "You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:21) This would get to the very heart of the law. And this one like it: "When you release a male servant, do not send him away empty-handed. Give him a generous farewell gift from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress. Share with him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were once slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you! That is why I am giving you this command." (Deut 15:13-15)

The Pharisees saw the rituals at the heart of the law. Jesus didn't. Jesus saw texts like this as the heart of God: how we treat orphans, widows and the weak. Jesus didn't spiritualise the gospel. It was about these core issues of the law. Any time Jesus spoke about the Spirit of God changing our hearts, this is what he said.

That is, the point of the Exodus, the point of the law given to Israel, was that God was on a de-Pharaoh-ing mission in the world, which today starts from our new hearts. He delivered Israel from Pharaoh, and then he set out to deliver Pharaoh out of the heart of Israel. Now, this second part was the difficult part, as we have heard, "You can get Israel out of Egypt, but can you get Egypt out of Israel?" Israel was to be God's new partner, in spreading a new way of doing nation and community.

Getting selfish-interest out of their own heart, knowing what Pharaoh's selfishness did to them in Egypt, Israel would now partner with God in bringing a new way of life to the nations around them. Love and kindness would be restored to people on an individual level. A person's value would no longer be seen by their potential contribution to the empire, corporation, an intuition, or to our personal goals. Pharaoh saw people only by how many bricks they could make. God wanted to bring a new people into the world that will begin to change this. He wants to change "the bottom line" in how we value others. This is getting back to the issues that corrupted our hearts and relationships from the time of Adam and Eve.

So, God gave Israel a law code that would begin to change these things. Their hearts were hard and self-centred, but some changes could be made, even then. They would let slaves go free, forgive debts, give rights to the poor, give aid to those in need, show kindness and help to foreigners and refugees, return property to those who lost it, enable a fine to redeem lives from the death penalty... on and on, the new laws would bring into the world a new people, influencing nations far and wide. Though these changes were limited, they revealed the heart of God, where he was changing the world, as his kingdom began to come back into our hearts and refashion us. When Jesus came, he would reveal the heart of God fully. Jesus is God speaking to us about his likeness and our lives in this world.

But Israel never obeyed the Jubilee, not once. In Jubilee, all debts had to be forgiven, setting all debtors free. This way, these people, who had fallen on bad times, could have a chance to rebuild. Or, if their parents had lost everything, the next generation wouldn't go on in perpetual poverty. They could break out of the cycle. Israel never obeyed this Jubilee. It wasn't in the interest of those in charge. Jesus taught that this Jubilee was to come into our lives, through new birth. It wasn't just to be spiritual, but it was about treating all people as brothers, seeking to lift one another out of our destruction, whatever the need may be. Our brothers are not just "spiritual brothers."

When Peter asked Jesus how often we are to forgive our brother, Peter thought he was generous by saying "seven times." But Jesus answered "seventy times seven." This is the number in Jewish

culture for Jubilee. (See Dan 9:24-27) We are freely forgiven of great sins by God: we are to extend this full and free forgiveness to all people. Why? For our joint restoration. The gospel is at its core a celebration and full sharing of Jubilee. Imagine, if we forgave our enemies, loved them and tried to help and restore them, even in the ongoing process of forgiving them seventy times seven. Imagine today also, if banks forgave all debt, just once. Whole nations would be set free. House prices would plummet. But, when we are gnostic, we separate spiritual things from the rest of life, and change Jesus's teachings, so we too fail to obey them. Even the Sermon on the Mount is spiritualised, to remove its force.

The prophets of the Old Testament took on this same message of Jubilee. They called it mercy and justice. By justice, they didn't mean prosecuting all the "bad people", the ones on the bottom rung. They meant that those in a position of power, should make sure they bring the weak into a place of restoration. The justice the prophets spoke of was restorative, i.e. mercy to rebuild their lives. This is the justice that resembles the Messiah and his gospel. If we call for retributive justice, then surely that applies to us and our sins as well. God's restorative justice (mercy) is the message of the prophets. This is the mark of God's character. If we don't bear this mark towards others in our local or wider world, then it is doubtful we have seen the gospel and mercy of God ourselves.

So this is how God brings justice to the world: through his people showing mercy to others, not normally known to them, not normally their friends. This is the purpose of church. It's the place where people, who wouldn't normally meet, from different strata and backgrounds, now come together at one table. Their new lives together, their new conversations and getting to know one another, their new spirit, their new care, is the beginning of a new justice in the world.

The church is to facilitate people who genuinely meet together and learn about each other's lives. The early church was one family, from all backgrounds, breaking down barriers, caring for the real needs of each other. Bankers, labourers, Romans, Ethiopians, all found out what society was doing to each other, and sought to correct that by caring instead. Eating together at one table is the first step in a new justice-shaping community, making a new world in mercy.

Today, these groups have mostly separated into different churches, along racial and class lines, because the former relationships became awkward: i.e. they became a distraction from our focus on individualism. Churches then take on the politics of race and class, instead of healing each other across former social barriers. Early fellowship was a stark contrast to the empire of Rome, a challenge to the rulers, because it showed what merciful justice is supposed to look like, and challenged our uncaring separation. If our churches are not stark in contrast to the empire in which we live, we are not the church. Addressing people mercifully is the basis of peace within our communities.

Jesus said the gospel is good news to the poor, because it changes our heart in new birth, and changes the way we live towards others, towards our neighbour, to open our eyes and our homes, to lift up one another. It brings us out of our national, racial, and economic groups, and presents us to our neighbour, and says, "We are one another's keepers."

So, God's end-times program is revealed to us throughout the scripture. Starting as far back as the Exodus, in the laws that made a new type of nation in the world, in the utterances of the prophets, and in the ministry of Jesus, we see the image of God renewing us from our hearts. This end-times program gathers more steam, as God calls his people to be a genuine family: "restorers of the breach, to repair the ruins of old."

Romans - An Eschatological View

Eschatology, meaning the last things, or what is called by some end-times, is central to the writings of Paul in the letter of Romans, but not in the way we may expect. That is, the letter is about the kingdom of God which Jesus spoke of in the Gospels. Often, it has been said that the message of Paul and the message of Jesus were in some ways different. Some have said Jesus preached the law, to lead people to faith, and that it is in Paul that we find the real gospel expounded. That is not the case. Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom, and that is the same gospel Paul preached.

Paul's theme in Romans is this kingdom. Paul is writing about the promise of God to Abraham, where God said that through Abraham all families of all the earth would be blessed. This is the eschatological vision of the kingdom – people of all the earth coming into Abraham's family, to become Abraham's seed, to inherit Abraham's promises through faith. This is what eschatology is about: the gathering of people throughout the world into the family of God, and further to this, that through this family, that is, through Abraham's seed, all the world shall be blessed. And when we go to the prophets, like Isaiah, we see what this blessing entails. It is the renewal of creation: the renewal of the nations. This is the biblical vision of eschatology.

So, we can see here the theme of Romans. It has often been held that the theme of Romans is soteriological, meaning the doctrine of the salvation of the individual. Many times our Bible College curriculums follow this view of Romans. It goes like this: the individual is lost; cannot be saved by the law; can only be saved by faith; is then sanctified by faith; is then glorified, meaning, sent to heaven at death. So here, faith and the individual are seen as the central themes of Paul. Then we can add other blessings to this faith, like healing and prosperity. This is often the package through which the gospel is presented in our times. It reflects the individualism of a prosperous Western culture.

But this is a far cry both from the teachings of Paul and Jesus. Throughout Jesus' teaching we see the community centrality of his kingdom message. It is good news for the poor; it is caring for our neighbour; it is breaking down divisions; it is loving our enemies; it is service to others; it is taking up our cross to serve, as opposed to a gospel of personal blessing. In fact, blessing in Jesus' teaching is the opposite. We are blessed when we are persecuted and left out. In other words, in Jesus' teaching, faith is about building family, reconciling the marginalised, healing our community. It isn't about the individual's advancement. It is about following God, who in Christ was rejected and suffered, so he could bless others.

When we come to Romans we see the same message. The centre of Paul's theme is ecclesiology, not soteriology. Ecclesiology is about the family of God. It is the believing community, not being a blessing just to themselves, but being a renewing impact in the nations, to their enemies. In our traditional Bible College curriculums, teachings of faith for the individual have usually come first and have taken up most of the program, then studies about the church have been tacked onto the end, if we have time. It is unfortunate that this has given us a skewed view of the gospel and of our place in the world. The centre of Paul's message in Romans is this church, this family of people renewing the nations.

So, when Paul speaks of justification and of faith, he is speaking of what joins us together as one people. He is speaking of us receiving one another from different backgrounds, despite our different traditions, and views, and ways of doing things, because if we are not justified by works, then none of our works (our ritual differences) should alienate us from each other. Throughout Romans, Paul's intent is to build one table, at which all God's people, Jew or Gentile, come to share cross-shaped (self-giving) love for one another. And Paul's intent, is that this fellowship, that is Christ-like,

becomes our renewing witness to the world around us. This is what Paul is writing about in Romans. We see here, that Romans is about the kingdom of God. It is neighbour orientated, just as Jesus' teachings were. This love of enemy, love of neighbour theme, is the very crux of Romans, of the nature of Jesus, whom Paul loved, filling the church community and then passed on to our world.

This then, is eschatology in Paul. Paul's eschatology isn't the wild guesses we make today of the end of the world, or of war among nations, or of overcoming our enemies through God's judgement and our violence. It is, rather, of a church embodying family love for each other, and being filled with the Spirit of Christ, so that the world may see the sons of God, and seeing may be transformed. It is about God fulfilling his promises to Abraham, to fill the world with a new type of family, where its members lay down their lives for each other, showing the world in our own lives the Christ who died for us and rose again, and bringing the same resurrection to our dead world.

Eschatology in Paul isn't God taking saved individuals to heaven while God destroys the earth, but God's new community making all things new on the earth.

Romans – The Story of Israel

Romans is the story of Israel's commission. Israel had the call of God to renew the world. This was God's promise to them. They were called to be God's answer to the Adamic problem: to the fall of man and the impact of that fall upon God's creation project. God called Israel to carry his creational purposes forward. But throughout the letter of Romans, Paul weaves in the problem that Israel faced. They too were part of the Adamic fall. They too needed restoration. How could God use Israel to be the solution to the world's predicament, if they too were part of the problem?

Paul kicks off the letter by showing that Rome, contrary to popular persuasion, were not the custodians of God's world renewing commission. Despite their claim of "peace and safety", faithfulness and justice to the nations, despite their claim to be the gospel to the world (the same Greek word was used, claiming the reign of Caesar was the "good news" to all nations) and despite Caesar's popular claim to be the son of God with power ruling the world, Paul opened the letter with a clear debunk of this myth. Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, heads the government of peace, faith and justice. His Lordship is the good news to deliver the world from Satan's rule in the nations. Christ is given rule over the nations for their renewal through obedience. This is the subject of the letter.

There are two main stories in the history of Israel that define their mission. One is creation, when Adam and Eve are installed as servant-rulers of the world. The other is the Exodus, where Israel is born as a nation, with a mission of transformation, aka new-creation; to be God's second Adam, or ruling priesthood, bringing salt and light to the world. These are the two stories, along with the narrative of Israel's sin, fall and redemption, that Paul weaves into his letter to the Roman church.

The opening chapters deal with the sin of Israel. They were called to be light, but their fall is likened to the fall of Adam. They have become like the gentiles. They too have "fallen short of the glory of God." This is a reference to Adam's commission to rule. The 8th Psalm speaks of the restoration of this rule through the gospel, where man is crowned with "glory" and once again rules over God's creation. Paul shows that the gospel is the restoration of Adam's rule, and the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that his seed would inherit the word; that they would reign in life. (Rom 4:13, 5:17) All these themes are picked up again and again in the letter as Paul moves on. This is ultimately a reign on earth with our resurrection bodies, a theme which peaks in Romans 8.

Woven into the opening five chapters are two themes that link together, both about the law. The law leads Israel to hardness of heart, through which God actually fulfils his purposes. Opposite to this hardness, is the self-giving love of God, and this is how the atonement is understood. On the cross, God isn't satisfying his own demands for blood, for he has already accepted us (see the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son), but he gives himself to fulfil the demands of the law, of the accuser (e.g. the Prodigal's older brother), the demands of the covenant God made with Israel, and in the main, the demands of our own fallen sin-conscience which drove Adam, and all of us, away from God. The cross is a type of spiritual warfare, in which God gives himself as a ransom to rescue humanity. Through giving himself in Christ, God proves his love to us, setting us free by one act of love and grace, from so many acts of sin and self-guilt.

Sin reigned through the fallen conscience of Israel, especially after the law was received, and this brought them into captivity to self-guilt, anger, selfishness and violence, which was finally manifested in the Pharisees' way of life and in their handing over Jesus to die. So this is how Christ took our sin, not by God inflicting punishment upon him for us, but by man casting his own sinful actions against Christ, which he absorbed on the cross, and then forgave. This becomes the model of his church towards others. God builds a new kingdom, where evil isn't defeated the Pharisees' way, by violence against it, but by God's way of forgiveness and self-giving. On the cross we see the ultimate contrast between God's kingdom, which renews all things, and human kingdoms, which bring destruction.

We can see the theme of Israel's hardening throughout Romans. It starts in the first two chapters, and is brought into sharp focus in 5:20, "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more..." This is the main theme in chapter 7 and of chapters 9-11. Chapter 7 shows this hardening process, in which Paul speaks of himself as a representative of the nation of Israel, regarding how the law given at Sinai brought Israel down. In Chapter 9, Paul shows that this hardening was actually the point of their election. So election isn't a boast, but it was a hard service Israel provided to the world, because it was through this hardening that they handed over the prince of life, who brought life to the world. Therefore, Paul calls gentile believers to serve Israel, rather than to boast against them, now that we have come to faith. This is the nature of election. Election is mentioned here in the context of Israel's story, their call to serve the world, which God loves and is setting free. This servicing and forgiving others will bring us into suffering, like it did for Christ, but through this suffering God will be conforming us also to his image, to rule his way.

Romans 6-8 moves us, with Israel, through their story of the Exodus. They pass through the sea of baptism, coming out of the world (this theme is duplicated in 1 Cor 10). This Spirit baptism gives us a new heart. Instead of living for self in the Empire, we have a new love for our neighbour and for the world God is setting free. In Romans 7, Israel journeys on to Mount Sinai to receive the law, but finds that instead of bringing freedom, the law brings Israel into further bondage, unable to inherit the Promised Land, unable to fulfil their commission to be sons of God, (new Adams) renewing the world. But as God becomes a man, he joins us to his resurrection life, enabling us to walk out the inheritance of life and rule in the world, setting the whole world free from its corruption, not by violence, but suffering service.

Romans 8 returns to Israel's problem in the earlier chapters: their lack of good works. God is going to judge the world in righteousness, granting eternal life to those who do good, and allowing destruction to come to those who do evil. The purpose of the gospel isn't to exempt us from this, but to renew our works. The purpose of the law was that Israel should do it and live. It is the doing of the law, that is, doing the right things – basically, service rather than greed - in our hearts, lives and communities, that life comes to our homes and societies. It isn't just by "faith", but faith that

produces the works that renew our creation. This is how the world is renewed in Romans 8. The purpose of the law is finally fulfilled, being written on our hearts. We now walk by the Spirit, meaning in the self-giving nature of Christ towards his enemy and neighbour, rather than in the flesh, pleasing ourselves. If we “come to Christ” and yet aren’t transformed and don’t do these works, we and our nations will die.

Chapters 12-14 move on with practical matters on how our world is being changed. The powers and governments of this world are being renewed by seeing the new people within the empire (see also Eph 3:10). Paul takes up Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as the basis for our new actions towards others, including our enemies: “overcoming evil with good.” Caesar has nothing to fear from this new community, which is called to respect all men and powers. We aren’t trying to take over, but to renew from within, by obedience and self-giving lives. We expose governments, not by taking them on, but by refusing their oppressive life styles, by instead serving the weak, the poor, the marginalised, the enemy. Finally, Paul comes to the goal of his letter in Romans 14: Jewish and gentile believers at Rome sharing one table in love and cross-shaped community, receiving each other despite their different backgrounds and traditions. This unity and care in love, this obedience to Christ’s Lordship, is our witness that Jesus is Lord of the world. This is the Isaianic vision of new community: enemies becoming one, replacing the curse in our nations with the blessing of a new kingdom of peace.

I guess it is here that we can understand the term Paul uses: *the righteousness of God*. He means the gospel story, in which God has proven his faithfulness to the world he created and to the Israel he called. This faithfulness, or righteousness (literally, covenant faithfulness) was demonstrated by God on the cross. And seeing Romans as the story of Israel fulfilled in the gospel, and not as a systematic treatise on soteriology (the doctrine of personal salvation alone) helps us realise it’s true focus: ecclesiological eschatology - one family, renewing creation.

Eschatology – Service

What is the big revelation of eschatology? What is the big scoop? Is it about this date, or that event, or about a particular evil nation or person? No, eschatology is not about any of these things. There is only one main point of eschatology. Eschatology is the age in which the church displays the character of God that was revealed in Jesus Christ: the character by which he set aside his own status and served the good of his enemies. Eschatology is about this type of church displaying who God is in the world, thus revealing the gospel, which transforms individuals and also nations. There is no time-line to this that has been shown to us; no dating, nothing in prophetic text by which we can predict the future ebbs and flows of history. Such predictions miss the point of eschatology. The point is a church that looks like Jesus: that serves, and the new world this is bringing about. We don’t know when this new world will fully appear, but we do know some of its characteristics, and we, the church, can point towards that world today through service. That is prophecy.

There are certainly a lot of mysteries in biblical prophecy. Not mysteries in the sense that we don’t understand God’s big picture and our part in it. But the details of how these things will be unfolded in the future are not known by anyone. Certainly, the way Jesus’ first coming in the Gospels shocked prophecy interpreters in the first century, should sober us in making our own predictions today. Most people in that century were expecting a God of violence to destroy their enemies. Many of the Old Testament predictions, even of Paul’s statements in his letters, and John’s in the Revelation, on first reading look like they depict a God of violence. But the huge surprise was, and is today, how the

gospel itself fulfils these violent texts. Jesus took our violence on himself, and showed his love instead by forgiving us. God fights evil with different weapons than man.

So eschatology, or end-times, isn't trying to predict what is in the future. That isn't the point. Jesus plainly told us that, "It isn't for you to know the times that the Father has kept in his own hands." We spoke about the "signs of the times" earlier in these notes. In this case Jesus wasn't speaking of end-times events, as they are commonly called today, like the end of the world, or his second coming. He was warning the people of his generation then, that if they kept living in selfishness, then destruction would come to their community. And when Jesus spoke of the earthquakes, and other like events, he was again speaking of things that were to come to pass before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Applying those things to our current day is unfruitful guess work and also out of step with their intended meaning at the time Jesus spoke them.

We have heard the word apocalypse. It is usually associated with end-times, with the book of Revelation and an idea of coming destruction. Hollywood movies portray apocalypse in this way. This isn't the way *apocalypse* is primarily used in scripture. The word means to unveil, or reveal. What God is revealing through the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ is his new kingdom, and his new King. What is being unveiled is how God's fights and overcomes his enemies: how God's kingdom is established, in contrast to other kingdoms, and how Christ becomes king in the world. God doesn't do this through violence, as was expected, but through service, through giving his own life in Christ on the cross, thereby defeating the accuser and destroyer. This is the big surprise, the condescension and humility of God to serve his creation, even when it hates him. This is the primary meaning of apocalypse: a surprise revelation about the nature and character of God.

Apocalypse is associated with violence and destruction, but not from God. This destruction comes about through those who refuse God's love and who refuse to turn from their personal or group violence. The destruction is self-perpetuated. It is called the judgement of God, because in the end God's grace is removed and people are left to their own will. God doesn't compel repentance.

A primary text in which we see the meaning of apocalypse is Philippians 2. Here, the humiliation of God in Christ is shown. Though he is God, yet he comes as a man and humbles himself under his creation, to serve, even to die a slave's death on the cross, in order that through love he might set us free from sin, self-love and death.

Through this act, God births an apocalypse-church. That is, God coming in Christ wasn't just a once-off act for our redemption, but the act which also set the character of his new kingdom on earth. As Philippians 2 tells us, we are to "let this mind be in us, which was in Christ Jesus." The revelation of the character of God in this apocalypse isn't to stop with what he did. God's revelation of himself continues on in the world through the church, exhibiting the same character of God we see in Jesus. Christ is to be followed by all who know him. This is what all the injunctions in the scripture to "follow God", or "follow Christ" mean. The church is to preach the gospel in the world, not just in word, but in flesh, taking on this revealed nature of God, which he showed to his world and enemies, through self-giving service. Jesus stripped himself of his rights and served others. This is the apocalypse. This is the church. Philippians 2 strikes at the very centre of God's revelation of who he is and what his kingdom on earth is about.

This is the very essence of what end-times is about. It isn't about a church on the margins of suffering, dictating as to what is wrong with the world, waiting for God to act against evil on its behalf. It is a church that goes into the evil in the world and serves, thereby revealing the God who

died for the world and rose again to set it free from death. The church is God's apocalypse, unveiling to the world the nature of God in Christ.

Post-Millennialism

When we discuss God's plan for the world, to renew it and bring all nations into his full blessing, it is sometimes thought we are promoting a form of eschatology called post-millennialism. We wish to make it clear here that we are not promoting post-millennialism.

Post-millennialism started growing in popularity after the Enlightenment in Europe. The view fitted in with both an empire stance and the belief in modern culture and technology. The idea was that "advanced nations" would spread their culture and technological blessing to the world, ridding the world of witchcraft, diseases and other ailments that spread due to ignorance. Science would be the great deliverer. Along with this went the idea of empire. When nations conquered other nations they believed they were sharing their blessings with the world, getting rid of roadblocks to change. Empire, as always in the past, was again legitimized by the call to the improvement of mankind, though this time using Christian themes. Many Christians still hold to this kind of post-millennial view of eschatology today, though they may not realise it, and may mix it with other views.

Post-millennialism may also promote the idea that progress is made in our nations by Christians working within governments to impose a Judeo-Christian law upon society. This is a kind of triumphalism, where it is believed that if Christians can get enough political power, the will of God can be implemented upon the world and God's millennial, or kingdom blessings, will take over. This comes with harsh penalties towards those who resist the Christian view, and therefore this millennial vision can end up looking like the revolution in Iran. Jesus plainly said that his kingdom is not of this world. That is, it doesn't proceed by the use of these worldly powers and means. Another problem is that the Christians who do this may become just like the system they are fighting.

This doesn't mean that God's law has nothing to do with the gospel and with his kingdom blessing the world. It does, but not in this Pharisaical way. The law is written on our hearts, so that as the Holy Spirit renews us, our lives change and reflect the values and love within the law. Then our communities are transformed by our new lives shared with others. It is the same God who gave the law, who also gave us a new heart in the gospel. And the reason he did both was for the renewal of our world.

And this doesn't mean that government doesn't have a place. But the primary role of government is to serve the people, not to be harsh. When we visit the Australian government house in Canberra we find it rich in symbols of messianic serving government. The house is not on a hill, so that the government will not be above the people. Texts from Isaiah are employed to show the government is to serve the welfare, not only of its own people, but also, wherever it can, the weak and suffering of the nations. So government isn't to serve only its own national interest. Government is to help, in using its gifts and powers to serve, not in harshness. Government is also to be renewed by the messianic vision of Isaiah.

So how does this happen? How do we get a government like this? The answer to this is throughout Paul's preaching. "God has chosen the foolish things, and the weak things, to bring to nought the (harsh) powers of this world." Paul says this weakness is God's wisdom. This is the nature of his kingdom: not overcoming the world by power, but by the cross. "God's plan is that through the church, God might reveal to the political and commercial self-centred powers, the multifaceted

wisdom of God.” (Eph 3:10) Corinthians highlights this. Chapter by chapter Paul takes on all the powers of self-centeredness that work in our own lives. In Romans 12-13 he takes them on with the Sermon on the Mount. There, the children of God are salt and light serving, not fighting the powers.

How do we overcome the covetousness and corruption in the world? By being examples of people and communities that don’t live by those values. How do we overcome the self-interest in our commercial and political world? By being those who live for the interest of others. Peter explained this is how the gospel spreads and this is how, by being ambassadors (pilgrims) of a different culture, we change our world with respect: “When they see your way of life and ask the reason for your hope (what is our hope, since we have forsaken the secular hope of self-interest?), then we explain our hope with respect, using Jesus’s sufferings for us as the prime example.” This is fruitful evangelism.

The eschatology of the scriptures doesn’t present an inevitable progress of civilization. It doesn’t discount the nature of man and bent towards evil. It doesn’t give us a timeline for inevitable progress in eradicating poverty, war and corruption. These things are always ready to increase and swallow up many lives, especially now we live in a nuclear age. Biblical eschatology shows that God’s way is to use his church, led by his Spirit and following the Lamb of God, as a pointer to his new world. He calls us to serve each other and our enemy, to point to God’s kingdom, which is already among us, which is already renewing the world, and will one day restore the nations with the biblical hope: justice for the least, whoever they are.