

## Romans 8:18-30 Eschatology – the study of the end times & Christ's return

A fourth theme in Romans 8 is eschatology, the study of the end times and the return of Christ. When I first became a Christian I was filled with God's Spirit, and one of the first things I became aware of was Jesus' Second Coming. I can only account for this as a work of the Spirit. However it is easy to find out about it in the Bible as well (e.g. Matthew 24:29-31)!

There are many ideas and theologies around concerning the end times, and some of them are pretty wacky. Harold Camping predicted the Second Coming on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011, and if you search Wikipedia<sup>1</sup>, you can find a long list of people who made predictions ... and got them wrong! This is perhaps not surprising, because Jesus made it clear that He wasn't going to share times and dates with us, even if He knew them (Acts 1:7). So we need to approach this subject with humility. We consider:

### Why is the coming Kingdom of God important?

First of all it's important because it's in the Bible. Paul's worldview was rooted in eschatological hope of the Messianic kingdom in the Scriptures, and brought to life by the resurrection of Jesus. This is why he could say,

**Romans 8:18** *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

And it is why he spoke so confidently about the hope that is not seen (Romans 8:24). We all need hope, and without hope, the *sufferings of this present age* are likely to crush us. The loss of hope is one reason we have so much depression. The book of Hebrews speaks about Jesus who has destroyed death, *to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery* (Hebrews 2:14-15). This fear of death refers to the view that our three score years and ten are our lot, and that's it. If we take the view that this life is all that matters, when things start going wrong, it can become very hard to cope. But Paul has a completely different perspective because of the coming glory. For Paul, his present sufferings are just the training ground, an opportunity to be conformed a bit more into the image of Christ, in preparation for the coming kingdom (Acts 14:22).

### What is the coming Kingdom of God?

At about the age of 30 years, in the Synoptics, Jesus appears on the scene preaching the gospel. He didn't say, *believe in Me and you will go to heaven!* That's our watered down version of the gospel. He said,

**Mark 1:14** *The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.*

This is the real gospel condensed into a single sentence: repent from your sins, and believe the good news of the coming Kingdom of God. All the prophets preceding Jesus, and the Apostles after Him, preached the message of repentance, to prepare a people for the coming of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predictions\\_and\\_claims\\_for\\_the\\_Second\\_Coming\\_of\\_Christ](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predictions_and_claims_for_the_Second_Coming_of_Christ)

There is a beautiful although as yet unfulfilled prophecy in Isaiah 2:1-5 concerning the Kingdom of God and worldwide reign from Jerusalem. At the moment the nations are preparing for war (and there probably will be one.) But a day will come when the Messiah shall judge between the nations and an unprecedented era of peace will break out across the world, and the weapons of war will be turned into implements of agriculture!

Isaiah's vision was for *the latter days*, so in the meantime Isaiah encourages Jacob to *walk in the light of the Lord*. In Romans, we also, in the light of the coming glory, are to *walk according to the Spirit*, even more so that we have received *the firstfruits of the Spirit* (Romans 8:23, see Titus 2:13).

We can over-emphasise eschatology, leading to unhealthy speculation, predicting the future, or escapism; or we can under-emphasise eschatology, in which case we lose the foundation of our real gospel hope. We need a balance.

### **How will the Kingdom of God come?**

Paul gives a clue,

**Romans 8:22** *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*

Paul paints a picture of the whole creation being in labour, as in the pains of childbirth. Occasionally labour can be very quick (e.g. the MP who had to help deliver his baby in the living room.) But usually it's longer, and certainly Paul had the long view in mind, God's great plan for the ages. Labour pains come and go, but gradually intensify, reaching a climax, when the baby is born. Likewise the sufferings of this world come and go, but the picture is one of the sufferings gradually intensifying, reaching a time of intense suffering, before the ushering in of the coming Kingdom of God, the Messianic era of peace. The time of intense suffering is known as the time of distress, the time of trouble, or the great tribulation.

Jesus taught on the signs of His coming (Matthew 24, e.g. 24:7-8). I believe we are witnessing the intensification of the birth pains. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, called the bloodiest century, had two world wars and a 'never to be seen before' nuclear bomb. Although most of us have lived through a period of relative peace, we know that there are huge instabilities in the world.

God is moving history towards the climax and fulfilment of His promises when there will truly be peace on earth, and good will towards all men.

If we are an adopted child of God with God's Spirit living in us, then we have a share in the coming kingdom, as an heir and co-heir with Christ, at the resurrection. We don't know how it will all work out, but God said it will!

In regard to the present era, Jesus clearly said it would be a period of distress and perplexity (Luke 21:25-27). But this is why a biblically based eschatology is important. It's not for unhealthy speculation, but it is pastoral. It is about hope, which is especially important during times of personal suffering.