

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY No. 5

“The Salvation of the Nations” (and “Introduction to the ‘Millennium’ ”)

June 1, 2003

We have been considering the various “motifs” or central themes by which the Bible teaches us about the future, both the inaugurated future – that future prophesied in the Bible that has already come to pass – and that future prophesied in the Bible that is still yet to come to pass. The two are often mixed together in the Bible’s predictions of the future, as we have seen. So far we have considered the motifs of the seed, the land, and the Day of the Lord. We have found that each motif serves to unify the Bible’s teaching from beginning to end; each is fulfilled in steps and stages, with the earlier being foretastes of the later; each is presented in what we are finding is the characteristic idiom of biblical prophecy, viz. what is called *the prophetic perspective* or *prophetic foreshortening*, in which the future is often presented as a whole, an historical moment, which history proves to be, in fact, a succession of events. One of the virtues of this way of foretelling the future is that the emphasis falls on the overarching divine purpose, the meaning of history, and not simply on the succession of events themselves.

Tonight we take up the fourth of these motifs: viz. that of the salvation of the nations. Now lest you grow weary of too much repetition – for these motifs do tend to cover much of the same ground in somewhat similar ways – all the more given that we are only on our fourth motif and I mentioned at least 13 when I introduced them to you several Lord’s Day evening’s back, I want to begin to work into our consideration of them some of the specific and pressing issues of evangelical eschatology. Tonight, in the consideration of the salvation of the nations, I want to give you our first introduction to the question of the millennium. We will look at this issue later in the series in other ways, but here is a good place to begin.

But, first, let me summarize our data on the prospect of the salvation of the nations as a part of the Bible’s vision of the future.

1. From the very beginning, the biblical vision of the future encompasses the entirety of the human race. The seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent and hatred will characterize the relationship between the offspring of the serpent and that of the woman. We have the human race in an undifferentiated form in this earliest of biblical prophecies of the future.
2. In the great prophecy the Lord made to Abraham, as the chosen race begins to narrow to a specific nationality, at that very moment the reach of divine grace is emphatically broadened to include the entire world of mankind. “...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”
3. You have specific instances in the biblical narrative that follows of those outside Abraham’s seed being brought into the circle of salvation. We can think of the provisions of the Mosaic law for the inclusion of the alien in the people of God, the acceptance of Ruth, the Moabitess, or of Solomon’s prayer that the Lord would hear the prayer of the alien who had faith in Israel’s God. There are many such indications of the wideness of God’s mercy in the OT. While the door had not yet been thrown open, it was definitely ajar!
4. But, there can be no doubt whatsoever of how emphatic was the place of the salvation of the nations in the vision of the future given to the prophets of Israel and Judah. It would take far

too long to demonstrate this in the detail possible, but let me just give you a sampling of representative texts:

- a. Jonah, perhaps the first of the prophets who has a book named after him, is all about God's compassion for the nations that do not yet believe in him. A prophet was sent to Nineveh, of all places, that the Assyrians, of all people, might repent and be spared.
- b. Amos, in the great prophecy of hope that concludes his book, alludes to the salvation of the nations in a text that is interpreted by James at the Jerusalem Synod in Acts 15 as a reference to the salvation of the Gentiles then underway as a result of the gospel mission outside of the borders of Judaism.
- c. In the great messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11 we read of the ministry of the one who will come from the stump of Jesse and of the result of it: "The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." [11:8-9] We have a similarly famous text in Isa. 2:2-4, so famous it is affixed in great letters on the side of the United Nations building in New York City: "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."
- d. Isaiah has many texts like that and a number devoted to specific nations. I remember being very impressed by the fact that I had not really paid much attention to Isa 19, and its prophecy about Egypt, until we had an Egyptian Presbyterian pastor by the name of Sobhi Ouida, who drew our attention to it. "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt... In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. – remember, these were great enemies of Israel at the time – The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be a third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."
- e. In the great "Servant of the Lord" prophecies in Isaiah, we have such forecasts as this: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."
- f. There is even a gospel appeal to all the peoples of the earth in Isaiah 45:22: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other."
- g. And you have a whole class of texts like the one in Zechariah 14 from which the Lord Jesus draws in his teaching about Pentecost: "On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter. The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name. ... Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty..."

- h. It was frequently expressed, in Israel's worship, that all the nations belonged to the Lord and would receive his salvation. We sang the 98th Psalm in worship this morning. Its second verses reads: "The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations." Or, in Psalm 2, we sing of the Messiah, his Father's words: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession."
- i. The Lord Jesus affirms this expectation in his own teaching: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." [Matt. 8:11] And he made that statement in the context of contrasting the faith of the Roman centurion with the unbelief of the Jews around him.
- j. These prophecies receive a partial and paradigmatic fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost. Luke makes a great point of saying that "the whole world" was there when the Holy Spirit descended. To be sure, they were all Jews of the Diaspora, present for the Feast of Pentecost, but all the emphasis falls on the fact that they came from all over the world and spoke all manner of languages. For the Lord had already told his disciples, before his Ascension, that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.
- k. The rest of the NT tells the story of the Gentile mission and the establishment of the church of Christ among the nations.
- l. And in Revelation emphasis falls again on the international character of the people of God. The 24 elders sang of Jesus Christ: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth." [5:9-10]

God made the nations of the earth. He loves the world and gave his Son for it. Christ has saved a people from all the nations and his sovereignty in grace will someday be manifest to all, as the nations as a whole confess him Lord and Savior. What a marvelous hope that is and what a comfort to consider it in a day like ours! Especially when we are pressed by adversaries of our faith, it is comforting, and emboldening for us to remember the coming triumph of the Gospel in the world.

As I said, this is but a sampling of texts, but you get the point. Now, before taking up the question of how this expectation fits into the various views regarding the millennium, a word of caution and a disclaimer. Nowadays all sorts of folks have tweaked the older millennial views and, even if their view is broadly one of the three classic views, as is inevitably the case, whenever a particular point is made people are wont to say, "Well, that isn't true in *my form* of postmillennialism or amillennialism." There is no way that I can set before you all possible permutations of the millennial views that have been held by Christians or are held today. I am going to deal with historical and characteristic definitions of amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism. Frankly, I've read enough of these variations to know that I don't think any of them will solve the problems to which that view is subject or satisfy the objections of its detractors. They provide evidence rather of the fact that there are problems with each of the various views that definitely need to be fixed and these adjustments are simply the effort to fix them from within rather than abandon them for one of the other positions. Also, let me say that I am determined not to allow myself to get embroiled in barroom controversy. I'm going to be

resolute in fixing our attention on the spiritual impact of Biblical doctrine. Tonight is about as technical as we will get in this series.

Now, some introduction to the terminology. The term *millennium* itself comes from Rev. 20:2. It is a Latin word (later an English word) meaning a period of a thousand years. We just celebrated the change of the millennium as the clock turned over to A.D. 2000. A thousand year period (as we in the West reckon the years) had come to an end and a new millennium had begun.

1. The first thing we should say is that Revelation is full of symbolic numbers and 1000 is clearly a symbolic number. As one scholar puts it, “The sacred number seven in combination with the equally sacred number three forms the number of holy perfection ten, and when this ten is cubed into a thousand the seer has said all he could say to convey to our minds the idea of absolute completeness.” [Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, 654] We don’t need to get hung up on the actual number of years and hardly anyone does. No matter your eschatology, the number 1000 is likely to be understood symbolically; as suggestive of perfection and completeness. How long the millennium lasts is an issue of no concern.
2. Now, the problem is that though the term occurs only in Rev. 20:2, it has become attached to the considerable body of biblical material describing a golden age for the people of God. Only premillennialists hold that Rev. 20:2 refers to the golden age, but all three views employ the term *millennium*, even the amillennialists, or non-millennialists, who might better be described as the realized millennialists or the present-millennialists. So, when we use the term millennium in these discussions, we are referring to the question of the golden age, not first and primarily to the interpretation of Rev. 20:2. The term has been lifted from that text and given a life of its own. The result is that while, for example, postmils and premils both employ the term *millennium* in their description of the future, they mean quite different things by it. Premils think of a period of time inaugurated cataclysmically, by the appearance of Jesus Christ, and ruled directly by the Lord Christ, in the world in his glory, with certain supernatural features added to human life. Postmils think of a period of time in normal human history but with a much heightened effect given by the Spirit to gospel preaching, the Great Awakening magnified many times.
3. The three millennial positions are identified by the place of the golden age in their understanding of the unfolding of history, and, in particular, by the chronological relationship between the golden age and the second coming of Jesus Christ. So the premillennialists believe that the second coming will occur *pre* or *before* the millennium. The postmillennialists believe that the second coming will occur *post* or *after* the second coming. The amillennialists deny that there is such a golden age in history before or after the second coming, hence their name *a-* or *non-millennialists*.
4. To apply those definitions to the question of the salvation of the nations, then, the various views may be charted this way. All Christians believe, obviously, that the gospel was supposed to and has gone out to the entire world and that today one can find Christians in almost every nation on earth. But what of the time prophesied in the Bible when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? What of the time when all the nations of the world will stream to Jerusalem to worship God there? What of the time when the mountain of the Lord’s temple will rise above all the other mountains. [That is a specifically religious reference. Remember, in the ancient Near East, every God

had his mountain with a temple on it. This was a way of saying that the true faith would capture and control the hearts of the nations.] Premillennialists look for that day to occur *after and because of the second coming of Christ*, there will be a period of gospel triumph in the world ushered in by the Lord's return. Postmillennialists look for that day to occur *before the second coming*, and see it as being ushered in by the Holy Spirit's unprecedented blessing of the ordinary means of grace, that is, what Isaiah and the other prophets describe is simply the greatest revival in human history. The amillennialists have typically understood these prophetic predictions of a great day of salvation, unprecedented in human history, as descriptions of heaven not earth, of eternity not of time. That is, for example, the interpretation of Anthony Hoekema, a representative and very able amillennialist [*The Bible and the Future*, 177-178; or in R.G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 174] Or, they take them to refer only to the spread of the gospel as it has been spreading since Pentecost. Dr. Waltke, for example, sees the prophecy of the mountain of the Lord's temple rising above all the other mountains as simply a figurative way to describe the spread of the gospel through the world. So, in that sense, in the amillennial sense, nothing more needs to happen than has already happened to consider those prophecies of the salvation of the nations to have already been fulfilled.

Now, you will notice that I have omitted dispensational premillennialism from our consideration. This is a modern form of premillennialism with very distinctive features that really makes it a viewpoint unto itself. We will give a Lord's Day evening to the consideration of Dispensationalism, but I don't consider it a real possibility for us and will explain why at another time. Dispensationalism, in other words, has its own view of the golden age or millennium and we'll leave that to another time.

So, what we have are three different answers to two questions: is the salvation of the nations, the time of the gospel's triumph, an event in history or outside of history (is it in this world or in the new heavens and the new earth that it will be true that the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea?)? Postmils and Premils answer that the golden age occurs in history, many amils answer that it is a description of heaven not of a time on this earth. The second question is: when may we expect this golden age? Postmils say before Christ comes again; premils say after he comes again; and many amils say, you are seeing it right now before your own eyes. Other amils say that we will see that golden age only in heaven.

Now, the first thing we can note about all of this is that we are faced once more with the chronic problem of biblical prophecy: the idiom in which the prophecies are cast lends itself to conflicting interpretations especially of the chronology of fulfillment. We have already found that out in our consideration of the seed, the land, and the Day of the Lord. Just as some think that certain Day of the Lord prophecies have already been fulfilled and others think they are yet to be fulfilled, we have a similar problem with the golden age prophecies. The generality of those prophecies, especially of their chronological indicators, has made it inevitable that Christians would disagree about precisely when to expect the golden age, the time of the salvation of the nations. *It is, of course, a fair question to ask, whether the way the Bible was written is designed precisely to tell us certain things and to keep us wondering about others.* After all, the question of the timing of fulfillment is an obvious one. It is raised even in the Bible itself. If God wanted us to know the chronology, it would have been easy enough for him to put

somewhere in the Bible a chronology that removed all doubt: first this will happen, then this, then this, and finally this. These things will happen and in that order. But we have nothing like that in the Bible.

The second thing we should note is that, fully fixed in biblical prophecy as the salvation of the nations is, there is no general agreement *even in Reformed Christianity* as to precisely what that means. I would like to be able to tell you that the Reformed church through the years has been coalescing around one interpretation of the salvation of the nations, that it occurs at this point and not that, that it means this and not that. But, unfortunately, that is not the case. The different viewpoints are as vigorously represented, as confidently asserted, as hotly defended as ever. And every view is represented by an impressive set of authorities.

If you are an amillennialist, you have on your side, Augustine (making matters worse for premils, he was first a premil and *changed his mind*), Luther, Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck (the great Dutch theologians), B.B. Warfield, etc.

If you are a postmillennialist, you have on your side, Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202 – I mentioned him because postmils often get razzed for not having much early support), John Owen, Richard Baxter, and Thomas Boston, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, the great American Presbyterians (Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge) – which makes John Pribyl a postmil whether he likes the position or not! – the great missionaries (William Carey and David Livingstone), Iain Murray of the Banner of Truth, and the contemporary fellows known as Christian Reconstructionists (Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, Jim Jordan and their like).

If you are a premillennialist you can claim a number of the early church fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian – premils like to point out that Irenaeus, in his youth, sat at the feet of Polycarp who was a student of the Apostle John, so, if Irenaeus was a premil it must be because Polycarp told him that John himself was a premil!) – William Twiss, the president of the Westminster Assembly, Thomas Goodwin the great Puritan theologian, Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew Bonar, the celebrated Scot pastors, Charles Spurgeon the greatest of modern preachers, and so on.

Of course, the obvious fact is that if you hold to any of those views, the authorities who support the other views think you are a nincompoop! I do not like Augustine or Jonathan Edwards thinking that I am a nincompoop, so I keep my mouth largely shut! Unfortunately, John Calvin thinks John Pribyl is a nincompoop because he *knows* that John will think whatever Charles Hodge thinks. Millennial views are very hard on a Christian's self-image. Or, they should be! Alas it is not always the case.

The difficulty of these questions has not prevented men from being quite sure of themselves and quite dogmatic in their assertion not only of the correctness of their own viewpoint, but of the sinister implications of the others.

For example, postmils often dismiss premil and amil views as eschatological pessimism. Insofar as both views teach that we cannot look for the golden age and the salvation of the nations in this epoch, postmils charge that they defeat a spirit of hopefulness regarding the salvation of the

world. They point to expressions like that of the amillennialist Herman Hoeksema: “Scripture certainly does not sustain the notion that the Church will experience a period of great prosperity, antecedent to the coming of the Lord. The very opposite is true.” [*Reformed Dogmatics*, 817] Iain Murray, a postmillennialist, wrote a very valuable book some years ago entitled *The Puritan Hope* in which he set out the evidence for the fact that the expectation of the salvation of the nations in this epoch, before Christ’s return, was a motivating force in the great missionary enterprise of the 19th century. However, there is enough evidence in that book to indicate that the postmils were hardly the only ones who were committed to missions and evangelism. For example, we have this quote:

“David was not a believer in the theory that the world will grow worse and worse, and that the dispensation will wind up with general darkness, and idolatry. Earth’s sun is to go down amid tenfold night if some of our prophetic brethren are to be believed. Not so do we expect, but we look for a day when the dwellers in all lands shall learn righteousness, shall trust in the Saviour, shall worship thee alone, O God, ‘and shall glorify they name.’ The modern notion has greatly dampened the zeal of the church for missions, and the sooner it is shown to be unscriptural the better for the cause of God. It neither consorts with prophecy, honours God, nor inspires the church with ardour. Far hence be it driven.” [Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, on Ps. 86:9 in Murray, xiv]

But that was Spurgeon, a premillennialist writing about the new dispensational premillennialism. Or this:

“So, likewise, whatever resistance we see today offered by almost all the world to the progress of the truth, we must not doubt that our Lord will come at last to break through all the undertakings of men and make a passage for his word. Let us hope boldly, then, more than we can understand; he will still surpass our opinion and our hope.” [Calvin, in D’Aubigne, cited in Murray, xii]

But that is the amillennialist, John Calvin. In other words, don’t believe everything you hear about the views of others. Great and wise men, mission-minded men and hopeful men, have held and taught each of the views and they had their reasons. I am going to say that I think the Bible, taken together, supports the idea of the salvation of the nations and the golden age as occurring *within* history, that is as the pre- and post-mils hold. We’ll make that point another time. However, I am a very long way from thinking or saying that anyone can prove that beyond reasonable doubt.

Still, we have this glorious prospect of the all the nations of the earth rejoicing with us in the salvation of Jesus Christ. At a time when the hatred of Christianity is on the rise in the Muslim world, at a time when our faith is despised and pitied by the cultural elite of our own Western civilization, it is important to remember that our day will come and the gospel will have its vindication. How long we must wait for that is not the important thing. That it is definitely coming is enough to know! Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. As emphatically and constantly as the Bible teaches us that, clearly the Lord intends that we should live our lives in the active expectation of that day. What a day *that* will be!