

# POSTMILLENNIALISM

## Wishful thinking Or Certain Hope?

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In this article we shall endeavor to answer the following question, Is the postmillennial hope wishful thinking or certain hope? My initial response to this either/or dilemma is to affirm that postmillennialism is both wishful thinking and a certain hope. Let me explain what I mean by this unusual assertion.

By every godly measure postmillennialism should be wishful thinking for the believer. That is, it should be the Christian's wish that the Gospel of Jesus Christ make overwhelming and victorious progress in the earth. It should be our wish that the world be overflowed with the righteousness of God through our diligent, God-blessed labor. It should be our wish that peace arise as a result of the gracious transformation of human nature under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Why would a Christian wish for anything less?

Unfortunately, the prevailing evangelical mind-set today is dispensationally afflicted. Consequently, it is fundamentally pessimistic regarding the progress of contem-

porary history. Around the turn of the century, the influential dispensationalist R. A. Torrey summarized the wish of developing dispensationalism. He declared: "The darker the night gets, the lighter my heart gets."

Torrey stated this on the basis of his eschatology of despair. His dispensationalism saw the future in the hands of an approaching personal Antichrist, who would arise in the looming Great Tribulation. His hope, his delight, his wish was for the "imminent" Return of Christ. He felt these horrible events would set the stage for and thereby hasten the Lord's Return. In his view, the worse things became, the sooner Jesus would come. Millions of Christians hold his view today. Because of this, this century, which has witnessed the triumph of dispensationalism among evangelicals, has also witnessed the triumph of humanism in culture at large. There is a measure of cause-and-effect here. As Christians retreat from culture in anticipation of society's collapse, humanism has been sucked into the void left by Christianity's leadership absence.

But I hasten to declare: Postmillennialism is not mere wishful thinking. It is, as a matter of revelational fact, a certain hope. It is as sure as God's Word. In the final analysis, all of Scripture is eschatological in orientation, for all of Scripture deals with the progress of redemption. This progress has a goal to which it relentlessly presses. Consequently, the subject of eschatology, of postmillennialism, is of tremendous expanse and great depth. Thus, it is mere wishful thinking if we intend anything more than scratching the surface of this glorious topic. I have a book recently published, entitled *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*. It is over 550 pages long, and I still had to cut out whole chapters and slim down over-large chapters. The topic before us is massive.

Due to the enormity of the challenge and the scarcity of time (this was originally given as a speech --ed.), I have determined it best to reduce the proof of the certainty of postmillennialism to four foundational truths. Those foundation stones, which I will but summarily survey, are: Creation, Covenant, Prophecy, and Kingdom.

### Creation

When considering the eschatological outcome of history, we should look back to the foundational inception of history. Why did God create the world? What was His holy design for His creature man? When answered from Scripture, these and related questions clearly point to the postmillennial hope.

Let us notice first that it is inarguably the case that God created the universe for His glory and delight. As it originally came from His hands it was all "very good" (Gen. 1:31). In Romans 11:36 Paul exults: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." Thus, the angelic host of heaven af-

firm in Revelation 4:11: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." Indeed, due to His creative right, the Scripture affirms dozens of times what the psalmist declared in Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

Why is it so difficult to think that God's creative intent will not be experienced in the course of history which He created? Perhaps "the best laid plans of men often go astray," but surely this is not the case with God!

Why would God give up on history, which He began as "very good"? Does not God "make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come." Does He not declare: "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Isa. 46:10)? If God created the universe for His own glory, He will get the glory!

Second, God created man in His image. Genesis 1:26 reads: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'"

Here we are not left to guess what is meant by "the image of God." In the very revelational setting wherein we learn of the divine determination to create man "in His image," we also learn that man is given "rule over all the earth." A fundamental aspect of man's reflective image of God is this: He is to exercise righteous rulership, holy dominion in the earth. It was God's design for man to subdue the earth. And surely the presumption here in the "very good" creation is that man is to

rule as the very image of God, and thus in holiness and righteousness. God intended His creation to be in subjection to righteous man, who is in turn subject to the Lord God.

The God-ordained impulse in man is to create culture; to develop every area of life to the glory of God. We see the dominion impulse operative even in the post-fall world, when Cain builds a city, when Jabal becomes a cattle-farmer. When Jubal creates the harp and flute and develops music. When

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Tubal-Cain develops metallurgy (Gen. 4:20-22). And the creation of culture is exactly what postmillennialism anticipates -- in the very temporal sphere in which man was placed and given the dominion mandate! Postmillennialism expects God's created order to bring glory to Him through the righteous development of culture.

Third, in fact, immediately after the Fall of Adam (which I am convinced took place within days of the end of the creation week), the Lord God revealed His plan for redemption. This redemptive plan works hand-in-glove with His creational purpose regarding God's image, man. Where redemption flows, it restores man to a rightful approach to life,

which is to bring glory to God in all things.

The protoevangelium found in Genesis 3:15 reads: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Here we have the promise that despite struggle in history between Christ and Satan, Christ will win the victory -- not Satan.

Surely the victory will be won in history, where the struggle takes place!

We see the fulfillment of this in legal principle in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ: "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). In point of fact, Paul draws upon the language of the protoevangelium when he speaks of the beginnings of that victory in history. The victory won through Christ, will be experienced through Christ's body, the Church. Romans 16:20 reads: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

The language of Genesis 3:15 is of the total subjugation of Satan. It is in keeping with the original good intent of God in creation. God created the world to bring glory to Himself. He created man to reflect His sovereign dominion. And He redeems man to restore him to righteous dominion over the world and Satan.

#### Covenant

A second foundation stone for postmillennialism is the idea of "covenant." Paul subsumes all the Old Testament covenants under one principle: gracious promise. When he writes to the Gentile Christians, he urges them to "remember that at that time you were foreigners to the covenants

of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Although there were "covenants" plural, they all developed "the promise" singular.

A key manifestation of the Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament, a fundamentally significant covenant "of promise," is found in the Abrahamic Covenant. First recorded in Genesis 12, the Abrahamic Covenant continues the creational principle of universal glory to God and the redemptive power of God in history: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3). This important covenant is alluded to a great number of times in the New Testament.

It is crucial to recognize the universal scope of blessing established in this covenant: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Because of this glorious promise, Paul writes in Romans 4:13: "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith." Through the establishment of His covenant by the glorious labor of His Son, Who is the ultimate Abrahamic Seed, God intends to spread redemption throughout the "world" and upon "all peoples on earth."

The covenantal promise of God's blessings overwhelming "all peoples on earth" is founded on the very being of God. His covenant power is exemplified in His covenant name: Jehovah. That name, according to Exodus 3:14 means: "I Am that I Am." This self-designation is particularly important to our understanding of God and of His covenant. This statement is found in the imperfect tense in Hebrew, thereby distinguishing a constantly manifested quality.

From this name we may discern certain of God's intrinsic qualities: (1) His aseity. God exists of Himself. He is wholly uncreated and self-existent. There is no principle or fact back of God accounting for His existence. (2) His eternity. He is of unlimited, eternal duration. The combination of the verb tense (imperfect) and its repetition ("I am" / "I am") emphasize His uninterrupted, continuous existence. (3) His sovereignty. He is absolutely self-determinative. He determines from within His own being. As the Absolute One, He operates with unfettered liberty. He is not conditioned by outward

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circumstance. He is what He is because He is what He is. He is completely self-definitional and has no need of anything outside of Himself. This is the God Who makes covenant. This is the covenant God Who establishes certain hope in the place of wishful thinking.

This covenantal victory was confirmed in Old Testament prophecy, where we read of the Abrahamic Covenant: "Your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies" (Gen. 22:17b). The gate of an ancient city was the place where special defenses were placed (Deut. 3:5; 28:52) and where justice was administered (Deut. 16:18; 17:5ff). The Abrahamic Covenant promises the conquest of all opposition.

This promise comes over into the New Testament in Jesus' statement to Peter: "On this rock I will build my church,

and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). The defense and injustice of Satan's walled city, his kingdom, will succumb to the onslaught of Christ's Church. This is covenantal promise. It is the clear testimony of the covenantal Scripture that Christ came for the express purpose of defeating Satan and supplanting his nefarious kingdom: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8b). He appeared in history to destroy Satan in history. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy

him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). He came in historical form so that He might win historical victory.

The New Covenant development of the Abrahamic Covenant promises an unshakable kingdom: The writer of Hebrews writes to first century Christians: You have come "to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the

blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Heb. 12:24-29).

The covenantal promise of God involves the blessing of all the peoples of the earth, the overcoming of historical opposition to the people of God, and the establishment of the unshakable purpose of God. To be concluded next month.Ω