

DISPENSATIONALISM & AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

Week Three
Eschatology

The Rapture, the Millennium, and the End of All Things

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Session Overview

This is the week where the rubber meets the road for many people. The rapture, the tribulation, the Antichrist, Armageddon, the millennium—these are the ideas that have captured the American Christian imagination through books like *Left Behind*, prophecy conferences, and countless sermons. For many Christians, dispensational eschatology is eschatology. They have never heard an alternative. Today we lay out the dispensational scheme in full, show where it comes from, and then present the confessional Lutheran alternative—which is, in fact, the historic Christian consensus.

Session Goals

- 1: Understand the full dispensational eschatological timeline: rapture, tribulation, millennium, and restored temple
- 2: Identify the key Scripture passages dispensationalists cite and see how their hermeneutic drives their reading
- 3: Understand the Lutheran confessional position on the Last Things: one return of Christ, one resurrection, one judgment
- 4: See how dispensational eschatology shifts the Christian's focus away from the means of grace and toward prophetic speculation

I. Why Eschatology Matters (and Why It's Not About Charts)

Before we examine any eschatological system, we need to understand what eschatology is *for*. The word comes from the Greek *eschatos* (“last”) and *logos* (“word” or “study”): the doctrine of the last things. In the Lutheran tradition, eschatology answers the question: *What is the Christian's hope?*

The answer is not a timeline. It is a person. Christian hope is the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. The Creeds confess this. The Catechism teaches it. The hymnal sings it. Eschatology, rightly understood, is not about decoding when the end will come or which nations play which roles in a prophetic drama. It is about the certainty that Christ, who has come and who comes to us now in Word and Sacrament, will come again in glory.

Dispensationalism transforms eschatology from a confession of hope into a system of prophetic intelligence. It shifts the focus from *who* is coming to *when* and *how*, and it fills the answers with extraordinary specificity—a seven-year tribulation, a literal thousand-year kingdom, a rebuilt temple, renewed animal sacrifices, a distinction between the rapture and the second coming. The system is elaborate, internally consistent (if you grant its

hermeneutic), and enormously compelling to people who want certainty about the future. But it is not what the Church has confessed.

II. The Dispensational Eschatological Timeline

The dispensational system arranges the end times into a specific sequence of events. Not every dispensationalist agrees on every detail, but the broad outline—especially as popularized by Scofield, Ryrie, and the *Left Behind* series—runs as follows:

Stage 1: The Rapture

At any moment—without warning and without preceding signs—Christ will return invisibly to snatch away (“rapture”) all true believers from the earth. The dead in Christ will be raised, and living believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. They will be taken to heaven. Everyone else will be left behind. This is the event dramatized in the opening pages of the *Left Behind* novels: planes crash as pilots vanish, cars careen off highways, children disappear from cribs.

The key text cited is 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. Dispensationalists read this as a secret, pre-tribulational event distinct from the visible second coming. The rapture removes the Church from the earth so that God can resume His program with Israel during the tribulation.

Stage 2: The Seven-Year Tribulation

After the rapture, a seven-year period of unprecedented suffering descends on the earth. This tribulation is derived primarily from Daniel 9:27 (the “seventieth week” of Daniel’s prophecy) and from the judgments described in Revelation 6–19. During the tribulation, a world leader known as the Antichrist will rise to power, establish a one-world government, desecrate a rebuilt Jewish temple (the “abomination of desolation”), and persecute those who refuse to take his mark.

In the dispensational scheme, the tribulation serves a dual purpose: it is God’s judgment on a world that rejected the Gospel, and it is the period during which God resumes His covenant program with national Israel. Many Jews will come to faith during the tribulation (the “144,000” of Revelation 7), and Israel will be at the center of the final conflict.

Stage 3: The Second Coming and Armageddon

At the end of the tribulation, Christ returns *visibly* with His saints (those who were raptured earlier) to defeat the armies gathered at Armageddon, destroy the Antichrist, and establish His kingdom on earth. Note the critical distinction: in the dispensational sys-

tem, the rapture and the second coming are two separate events, separated by seven years. This two-stage return is unique to dispensationalism.

Stage 4: The Millennial Kingdom

Christ then establishes a literal, physical, thousand-year kingdom on earth, centered in Jerusalem. Israel is restored to its full territorial inheritance. The temple is rebuilt, and animal sacrifices are reinstituted—not as atoning sacrifices (Christ’s atonement is acknowledged) but as “memorial” offerings. Saints who were raptured and resurrected rule with Christ over the nations. This millennium is understood as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel that, in the dispensational reading, cannot be fulfilled by the Church.

Stage 5: The Final Rebellion and Eternal State

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a brief rebellion (Revelation 20:7–10), which is crushed. The unsaved dead are then raised for the Great White Throne judgment (Revelation 20:11–15), and the eternal state—the new heavens and new earth—begins.

III. The Key Texts and How the Hermeneutic Drives the Reading

Dispensational eschatology draws on a relatively small number of biblical texts, read through the hermeneutical lens we examined last week. Understanding how these texts are used—and how they can be read differently—is essential.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 — The “Rapture” Passage

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

— 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

Dispensational reading: This describes the rapture—a secret, pretribulational event in which believers are removed from the earth before the tribulation begins. The “caught up” language indicates a physical removal to heaven.

Lutheran reading: Paul is describing the *one* return of Christ at the end of the age. There is nothing secret about it—there is a cry of command, an archangel’s voice, and a trumpet blast. The language of being “caught up to meet the Lord in the air” uses the Greek word *apantēsis* (“meeting”), a term used in the ancient world for a delegation going out to meet an arriving dignitary and then *escorting him back* to the city. Believers go out to meet

Christ as He descends—and then accompany Him as He comes to earth in glory. This is not an evacuation. It is a royal welcome.

Daniel 9:24–27 — The Seventy Weeks

Dispensational reading: The “seventy weeks” (literally “seventy sevens”) are 490 prophetic years. The first sixty-nine weeks run from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to the coming of the Messiah. After the sixty-ninth week, there is a *gap*—the Church age, which Daniel did not foresee—and the seventieth week is the future seven-year tribulation. The “parenthesis” between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks is now almost 2,000 years long.

Lutheran reading: The seventy weeks are fulfilled in Christ’s first advent, atoning death, and the establishment of the new covenant. The “one who makes desolate” (9:27) refers to the Roman destruction of the temple in AD 70. There is no exegetical basis in the text for inserting a multi-thousand-year gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks. The gap is required by the dispensational system; it is not required by the text.

Revelation 20:1–6 — The Millennium

Dispensational reading: A literal future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, following His visible return. This is the most natural “plain reading” of the passage.

Lutheran reading: Revelation is the most intensely symbolic book in the New Testament. It communicates through visions, numbers, and images drawn from the entire Old Testament. The “thousand years” is a symbolic number (10^3 , the number of completeness cubed) representing the present reign of Christ through His Church between His ascension and His return. This Augustinian reading was the consensus of the Western church for over a millennium, was affirmed by the Reformers, and is explicitly confessed in the Augsburg Confession, Article XVII.

Matthew 24 — The Olivet Discourse

Dispensational reading: Jesus is describing the tribulation and His second coming in a passage addressed primarily to Israel, not to the Church. The “abomination of desolation” (v. 15) refers to the Antichrist’s desecration of the rebuilt tribulation temple. The “one taken and one left” passages (vv. 40–41) describe the rapture.

Lutheran reading: Jesus is answering His disciples’ question about the destruction of the temple. The primary referent of the “abomination of desolation” is the Roman destruction of the temple in AD 70, which Jesus explicitly says will happen within “this generation” (v. 34). The discourse also looks forward to Christ’s final return, because the destruction of Jerusalem is itself a type of the final judgment. The “one taken and one left” language de-

scribes judgment, not rapture—being “taken” is not rescue but removal in judgment, as in the days of Noah (v. 39).

IV. The Lutheran Confessional Position: What We Actually Believe

The Lutheran eschatological confession is remarkably clear and remarkably restrained. It confesses what Scripture teaches without building the elaborate speculative structures that dispensationalism requires.

Augsburg Confession, Article XVII: Of Christ’s Return to Judgment

“Our churches teach that at the consummation of the world Christ will appear for judgment and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end. They condemn the Anabaptists, who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. They condemn also others who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.”

— Augsburg Confession, Article XVII

Notice what Article XVII confesses and what it rejects:

It confesses: Christ will appear. There will be a judgment. All the dead will be raised. The godly receive eternal life; the ungodly receive eternal condemnation.

It rejects: The idea that “before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world.” This is a direct rejection of premillennialism—the belief in an earthly kingdom before the final resurrection. The Confessors called this a “Jewish opinion,” using the same language that the early Church Fathers used to describe chiliasm (millennialism).

The Confession is deliberately spare. It does not construct a timeline. It does not speculate about the sequence of end-times events. It confesses the return of Christ, the resurrection, and the judgment—and it leaves the rest in God’s hands.

The Shape of Lutheran Eschatology

One return of Christ. There is no two-stage return. No secret rapture followed by a visible coming. Christ will return once, visibly, in glory, to judge the living and the dead. Every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7).

One resurrection. All the dead will be raised—not in stages separated by a thousand years, but at the Last Day. Jesus Himself says He will raise believers “at the last day” (John 6:40)—not at a rapture followed by a later resurrection.

One judgment. The sheep and the goats will be separated (Matthew 25:31–46). There is no separate judgment for Israel, no separate judgment for tribulation saints, and no separate judgment after the millennium. There is one judgment before the throne of Christ.

The “already and not yet.” Christ’s kingdom is not entirely future. He reigns now, at the right hand of the Father, through His Word and Sacraments. The kingdom is present wherever the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered. But it is not yet consummated—we still live in a fallen world, we still suffer, we still die. The full manifestation of the kingdom awaits Christ’s return. This “already/not yet” framework is the authentic New Testament eschatology, and it is far richer than either the dispensationalist “not yet” (the kingdom is entirely future) or a triumphalist “already” (the kingdom is fully realized now).

Christ comes to us now in the means of grace. This is the distinctive Lutheran emphasis that dispensationalism cannot accommodate. Eschatology is not only about the future. Every time the Word is preached, every time Baptism is administered, every time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, Christ is coming to His people. The “closeness” of the end is not measured by geopolitical events matching a prophetic chart. It is experienced every Sunday at the altar rail. The Lord who will come is the Lord who comes now.

V. A Side-by-Side Summary

Dispensational Eschatology	Lutheran Eschatology
Two-stage return: secret rapture, then visible second coming seven years later	One return of Christ, visible, in glory, to judge the living and the dead
The Church is raptured before the tribulation; God resumes His program with Israel	The Church endures tribulation in this age and is sustained by the means of grace until Christ returns
A literal seven-year tribulation derived from Daniel’s seventieth week, still future	Daniel’s seventieth week is fulfilled in Christ’s first advent and the events surrounding it
A literal 1,000-year earthly kingdom after the second coming	The “thousand years” of Revelation 20 is the present age of the Church; Christ reigns now
A rebuilt temple with renewed animal sacrifices as “memorials” during the millennium	Christ is the true temple (John 2:19–21); His sacrifice is once for all (Heb. 10:10); animal sacrifices are obsolete
	One general resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day (John 6:40; John 5:28–29)

Multiple resurrections: Church at rapture, OT saints and tribulation saints later, unsaved after millennium

Multiple judgments for different groups at different times

One judgment before the throne of Christ (Matt. 25:31–46; 2 Cor. 5:10)

Eschatology focuses on decoding future events from prophetic texts

Eschatology focuses on the hope of Christ's return and His present gifts in Word and Sacrament

VI. How Dispensational Eschatology Diminishes the Means of Grace

This is not an abstract concern. Dispensational eschatology has concrete pastoral consequences that affect how Christians live, worship, and understand their faith.

It replaces assurance with anxiety. The rapture doctrine creates a perpetual undercurrent of fear. Will I be taken or left behind? What about my children? What about my spouse who doesn't seem to take faith seriously? This anxiety is the opposite of the confidence that flows from Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In Lutheran theology, assurance is grounded in God's objective promises delivered through tangible means. In dispensational theology, assurance is constantly threatened by the question of whether you have truly "accepted Christ"—a subjective criterion that offers no solid ground to stand on.

It shifts the center of gravity from Christ's gifts to a future calendar. When eschatology becomes primarily about when and how the end will come, the Sunday morning service loses its eschatological weight. But in Lutheran theology, the Divine Service *is* eschatological. Every celebration of the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the feast to come. Every proclamation of the Gospel is Christ coming to His people in the present. Every Baptism is an incorporation into Christ's death and resurrection. The future does not diminish the present; the present participates in the future.

It makes the Church expendable. If the Church is a parenthesis—a temporary arrangement destined to be raptured out so God can get back to His real program with Israel—then the Church is not the body of Christ in any ultimate sense. It is a holding pattern. This undermines the Church's self-understanding, weakens commitment to the local congregation, and encourages the consumerist, church-shopping mentality that pervades American Christianity.

It baptizes current events with prophetic significance they do not carry. Every Middle Eastern war, every earthquake, every political crisis becomes a potential sign of the rapture. As we discussed in last week's supplement on the Iran conflict, this has real-world consequences: it shapes how Christians evaluate foreign policy, how they vote, and

whether they can maintain compassion for all who suffer in a conflict that they have been taught to view as a divinely ordained act in the end-times drama.

VII. Discussion Questions

1. Before this study, what was your understanding of the rapture? Had you been taught it as a settled biblical doctrine? How does learning about its 19th-century origin affect how you evaluate it?
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 carefully. Does the text describe a secret event? How does the Greek word *apantêsis* (“meeting”) change how you understand the passage?
3. The Augsburg Confession rejects the idea that “before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world.” Why do you think the Confessors considered this important enough to condemn? How does this rejection apply to dispensational premillennialism?
4. How does the “already/not yet” framework change the way you think about your own life as a Christian? What does it mean that Christ is reigning now through Word and Sacrament, even as we await His return?
5. Have you or someone you know experienced anxiety about the rapture or about being “left behind”? How would you pastor someone struggling with that fear? Where would you point them for assurance?

Looking Ahead to Week 4

Next week we turn from eschatology to soteriology—the doctrine of salvation. We examine decision theology and the altar call: the revivalist tradition that runs from Charles Finney through Billy Graham to the modern “accept Jesus into your heart” framework. We’ll show how this tradition confuses Law and Gospel, denies baptismal regeneration, and turns conversion into a work of the human will rather than a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Recommended Resources

For the Instructor:

Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse in Matthew’s Gospel* (Concordia Publishing House, 2000). A thorough, confessional Lutheran exegesis of Matthew 24–25 that directly engages dispensational readings.

Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Baker, 2003). Written from a Reformed perspective but largely compatible with Lutheran amillennialism. Accessible and well-argued.

G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Eerdmans, 1999), chapters on Revelation 20. The most thorough academic defense of the amillennial reading of the millennium.

For the Class:

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 as a continuous passage (not just the “rapture verses” in isolation). What is Paul’s actual pastoral purpose? What comfort is he offering?

Read Augsburg Confession, Article XVII. It is only a few sentences long. What does it confess? What does it reject? How does its brevity compare with the elaborate dispensational timelines?