



# THE LAST DAYS

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RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

## THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT: postponed or FULFILLED?

BY GARY DEMAR



"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56).

"And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to us their children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is written in the second Psalm, 'Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.' And as for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David'" (Acts 13:32-34).

**J**. Dwight Pentecost writes that the Abrahamic covenants, "according to the Scriptures, are eternal."<sup>1</sup> The Bible describes them as "everlasting." If "everlasting" means "lasting or enduring through all time," then dispensationalists do not believe that the Abrahamic covenants are "everlasting" since they have been postponed for nearly 2000 years! Given that dispensationalists claim that only they follow a consistently literal method

"If the Abrahamic covenant was *unconditional*, if obedience was not required until the words, 'if ye will obey my voice,' were uttered at Sinai, why is *Esau* excluded from the blessings of this covenant?"

Oswald T. Allis, author of *Prophecy and the Church*

of interpretation, it's surprising that they equivocate on the meaning of "everlasting." Consider Charles Ryrie's standard definition of "literal interpretation" and apply its principles to how dispensationalists propose a postponement theory to explain how the Abrahamic covenant was not realized during Jesus' ministry:

Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation that gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Another often quoted definition is David Cooper's Golden Rule of Interpretation which states, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages, and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise." The problem is, dispensationalists do not always follow these guidelines. This is especially true in the way they interpret "everlasting."<sup>3</sup> By applying the Ryrie/Cooper literal litmus test, "everlasting" should have "the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking." To go further and to be more accurate, "everlasting" should have the same meaning it has elsewhere in the Bible unless there is a specific indication that the meaning is different in degree.

All the dispensational writers I consulted, who have the irritating habit of quoting one another to support their claims, agree that the "Abrahamic covenant is called eternal in the Word of God" (Gen. 17:7, 13b, 19; 1 Chron. 16:16–17; Psalm 105:9–10).<sup>4</sup> Paul Benware, former professor of Bible and theology at Moody Bible Institute, writes that "Those blessings included the guarantee of national existence as well as the greatness of the nation, the land area of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant as an everlasting covenant."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time the Abrahamic covenant is said to be "everlasting," dispensationalists insist that it has been postponed. Mal Couch, an advocate of dispensational theology, writes:

Most dispensationalists hold to a kingdom postponement theory . . . Dispensationalists believe that the kingdom was set

aside, the Jews suffered the final dispersement, and the church, which was not mentioned in the Old Testament, was given to reach the Gentile nations.<sup>6</sup>

Does "everlasting" include the idea of postponement in its dictionary definition or its biblical usage so that it passes as the "primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning" of the word? Is there anything in "the immediate context" of Genesis 17 or when "studied in the light of related passages, and axiomatic and fundamental truths" that would "indicate clearly" that a definition of "everlasting" can include the idea of postponement? Absolutely not. Everlasting and postponement are contradictory ideas.

## *The First Everlasting Covenant*

Prior to the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant, God instituted the Noahic covenant. Even though "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth," God says that He "will never again destroy every living thing" (Gen 8:21). The everlasting nature of this covenantal promise is so secure that the earth itself would have to pass away in order for it to be postponed, put off, or revoked (8:22). Couch insists that the Noahic covenant will remain in effect "As long as earth history remains in its present physical state."<sup>7</sup> He can affirm this because, as the Bible states, it's an "everlasting covenant":

And I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth (Gen. 9:15–16).

Following dispensational postponement theology, God could send another worldwide flood and claim that He was not abrogating the everlasting nature of the Noahic covenant. God could claim, following Ryrie and other dispensational advocates, that He was only interjecting a parenthesis, an indeterminate period of time in which the keeping of the promise is delayed (stopping the prophetic clock, so to speak). Would anyone accept such an argument, dispensational or not, as being legitimate? And yet this is exactly what dispensationalists do with the Abrahamic covenant.

Dispensationalists see no problem in manufacturing gaps, delays, postponements, and parentheses<sup>8</sup> while still claiming that the Abrahamic covenant is eternal. But they would be hard pressed to apply and defend a similar methodology when it came to God's everlasting character (Gen. 21:33; Ps. 93:2; Isa. 40:28; 1 Chron. 16:34, 41; 2 Chron. 5:13; Ps. 136; Ps. 119:142; 135:13; 145:13; Is. 45:17; Jer. 31:3; Hab. 3:6) or the everlasting nature of the Noahic covenant.

## *Israel's Disobedience*

The Noahic covenant remains in force, according to the dispensationally oriented Nelson Study Bible, "no matter how evil Noah's descendants got. Indeed, He promised that until the end of the earth, there would be seasons of planting and harvest and day and night. God unilaterally promised to uphold the rhythms of the earth in order to sustain human life—even though humans had rebelled against Him, their Creator."<sup>9</sup> But to a dispensationalist, this same promise does not apply to the Abrahamic covenant which is also said to be everlasting.

Pentecost writes that when the nation of Israel refused to embrace Jesus as the promised Messiah, the kingdom offer "was withdrawn and its establishment postponed until some future time when the nation would repent and place faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>10</sup> There is no such condition attached to the Abrahamic covenant as dispensationalists continually insist. The maintenance of the covenant is not dependent on the response of those with whom it was made since God deals with a remnant of Israel (Rom. 11:1–5; cf. Matt. 21:43–44; 1 Peter 2:9–10).

## *Adding to the Word of God*

Of the Abrahamic covenant, Ryrie writes, "The Scriptures clearly teach that this is an eternal covenant based on the gracious promises of God. There may be delays, postponements, and chastisements, but an eternal covenant cannot, if God cannot deny Himself, be abrogated."<sup>11</sup> As we've seen, the Abrahamic covenant is identical in wording to the Noahic covenant in that both are said to be everlasting. Let's apply Ryrie's qualifier to the Noahic covenant that he applies to the Abrahamic covenant and see if it makes sense: "The Scriptures clearly teach that the Noahic covenant is an eternal

covenant based on the gracious promises of God. There may be delays and postponements, but an eternal covenant cannot, if God cannot deny Himself, be abrogated." An eternal covenant cannot be abrogated or delayed or postponed and still be described as "eternal."

A fundamental question remains: Does the everlasting Abrahamic covenant mention anything about the possibility of postponements or delays? Dispensationalists are quick to point out that there are no conditions to the Abrahamic covenant,<sup>12</sup> but they seem to ignore the fact that there is no mention of postponements or delays which would presuppose conditions. Where do we find a verse that reads something like this?: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you although there may be delays or postponements"? If conditions cannot be added *ex post facto*, then neither can new definitions of everlasting be created.

### *The Elasticity of "Everlasting" in Dispensationalism*

Not only can everlasting mean postponed, but we find that dispensationalists teach that everlasting does not mean forever. How does this nuanced definition, which may be correct, fit with their unbending rule of literalism? It seems that dispensational literalism dies the death of a thousand qualifications. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum states that the English words "everlasting" and "perpetual" "do tend to carry concepts of eternity," but "that is not the meaning of the Hebrew words themselves." He continues:

The Classical Hebrew term "forever" (*olam*) as BDB states, means "long duration," "antiquity," or "futuraity." The Hebrew forms mean nothing more than, "until the end of a period of time." What the period of time is must be determined by the context or determined by related passages. In classical Hebrew, these words never meant or carried the concept of eternity, but had a time limitation. The period of time may have been to the end of a man's life, or an age, or dispensation, but not for ever in the sense of eternity.<sup>13</sup>

Fruchtenbaum is not alone in defining *olam* this way. In the Theological

Wordbook of the Old Testament, published by Moody Press, Allan MacRae writes "that neither the Hebrew [*olam*] nor the Greek word [*aion*] in itself contains the idea of endlessness. . . . Both words came to be used to refer to a long age or period . . ."<sup>14</sup> Let's apply the two definitions of "everlasting" ("forever" and "long duration") to the land promise. Ryrie states that Israel is to have "permanent possession of the promised land."<sup>15</sup> John Walvoord concurs: "A literal interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant involves the permanent existence of Israel as a nation and the fulfillment of the promise that the land should be their everlasting possession."<sup>16</sup> Permanent means "continuing or enduring without fundamental or marked change." If something is permanent, there can't be a postponement, especially one that's been in effect for nearly two millennia. **As we stand right now, the Abrahamic covenant has been in its postponement phase longer than its fulfillment phase. This hardly passes for permanent or everlasting.**

Then there's Fruchtenbaum's definition of "everlasting" (*olam*). He claims that it means "nothing more than 'until the end of a period of time.'" Who makes the determination of what that period of time is? The dispensationalist will have one opinion and the non-dispensationalist will have another opinion. Since the Bible tells us that Israel did possess the land, contrary to so many dispensational claims to the contrary,<sup>17</sup> then one could make the case that the specified period of time has passed. But contrary to what the Bible actually states, dispensationalists argue that Israel never had full possession of the land, so the "everlasting" nature of the promise (no matter which definition is used) is not effective until the Jews are reestablished as a nation and living in the full borders of their land. But Israel did enter and possess the land thousands of years ago:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass (Joshua 21:43-45).

All the elements necessary for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant as related to the land are present in these

verses: God gave the Israelites the land He had promised to give; they possessed and lived in the land; they had rest; their enemies did not stand before them; not one of the promises God made to the house of Israel failed. If these verses do not teach what they seem to teach, then how else could God have put it, said it, or written it if He had wanted to inform the Israelites that they had in fact possessed the land as promised? Even after being confronted with these crystal clear words from Joshua, futurists continue to insist that they do not teach what they seem to teach. Consider the commentary of Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.:

Oftentimes students of the Bible point to three passages that appear to suggest that the promise of land to Israel has indeed been fulfilled: Joshua 21:43-45; 23:14-15; Nehemiah 9:8. These texts assert that "not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (Josh. 21:45; cf. 23:14).

However, the boundaries mentioned in Numbers 34:2-12 are not the ones reached in the accounts of Joshua and Judges. For example, Joshua 13:1-7 and Judges 3:1-4 agree in maintaining that there was much land that remained to be taken.<sup>19</sup>

So much for a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy. Since Numbers 34:2-12 and Joshua 13:1-7 precede Joshua 21:43-45, it seems obvious that by the time we get to the end of the book of Joshua the land was in Israel's possession even though there were nations dwelling in Israel's midst (Josh. 23:4-7). Just because other nations resided in the land does not mean that Israel did not have full possession of the land. The nations are said to be "an inheritance for your tribes" (23:4). Notice the conditions of remaining in the land: "Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left" (Josh. 23:6). Failure to follow this specific condition will mean that these nations "shall be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you" (23:13).

What about Judges 3:1-4? While the land was possessed and was in the hands of the Israelites before Joshua died, some nations were left "to test Israel . . . to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD" (Judges 3:1, 4). It was Israel's disobedience that put the

land back into the hands of her enemies. God delivers Israel through Othniel, and then we read, "Then the land had rest forty years" (3:11): Not part of the land, but the land—the land occupied by Israel—had rest.

The New Testament says nothing about there being a need to fulfill the land promises. There is no discussion about a future return to the land. The physical land of Israel has no role to play in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant since the coming of Christ. It's not surprising therefore that the Jewish Christians saw nothing covenantally wrong with selling their land:

For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need (Acts 4:34–35).

Notice that the Bible does not say that they sold their possessions or "their goods," as The Bible Knowledge Commentary has it. They sold their land and houses. Jesus had told them earlier that the temple would be destroyed and Jerusalem judged within a generation (Matt. 24:1–34).

Jesus is the focal point of history, not dirt (land) or stone (temple) (John 2:19; 3:20–24; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:4–8). Nothing in the New Testament is said about a return to the land or a rebuilding of the temple. The New Testament

only describes the destruction of the temple (Matt. 23:38; 24:2) and indifference to the land (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 8:1).

## Conclusion

If the Abrahamic covenant is said to be everlasting and permanent, and Israel has not been in possession of the land since the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then the Bible is mistaken. Of course, this is impossible. Like so much of the Bible, dispensationalists misunderstand the theological significance of the Abrahamic covenant as it is developed and finds fulfillment under the New Covenant.

### Notes

1. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, [1958] 1964), 69.
2. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, rev. ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 80.
3. Eugene H. Merrill writes that the "everlasting covenant of salt" is "probably . . . a metaphor to speak of its durability [Num. 18:19]." (Eugene H. Merrill, "Numbers," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 236). See the later discussion of how "everlasting" is defined.
4. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), 49.
5. Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 33.
6. Mal Couch, "The Postponement Theory," *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000), 221. The book is misnamed. **Dispensational hermeneutics cannot be described as "classical."**
7. Couch, "Hermeneutics and the Covenants of Scripture," 140.
8. "An intercalary period of history, after Christ's death and resurrection and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, has intervened. This is the present age, the Church age. . . . During this time God has not been dealing with Israel nationally, for they have been blinded concerning God's mercy in Christ. . . . However, God will again deal with Israel as a nation. This will be in Daniel's seventieth week, a seven-year period yet to come." (E. Schuyler English, *A Companion to the New Scofield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1972], 135). Emphasis added. John F. Walvoord writes: "As H. A. Ironside had made clear in his thorough study of this problem, there are more than a dozen instances of parenthetical periods in the divine program."

(John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979], 26). Philip Mauro is correct when he writes, "Never has a specified number of time-units making up a described stretch of time, been taken to mean anything but continuous or consecutive time-units." (Philip Mauro, *The Seventy Weeks and the Great Tribulation*, rev. ed. [Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, n.d.], 93). Emphasis in original. **Dispensationalists like Walvoord see gaps because their system requires gaps in order to make it work.**

9. Earl D. Radmacher, "The Noahic Covenant," *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 20.
10. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 293.
11. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, 53.
12. Ryrie writes: "The original promises given to Abraham were given without any conditions whatsoever" (Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, 54).
13. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 655–56.
14. Allan MacRae, "Olam," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, 2 vols. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 2:673.
15. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, 48. Emphasis added.
16. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Dunham Publishing Co., 1959), 139–140. Emphasis added.
17. One of the most ingenious efforts to make a text say something it does not comes from Elliott E. Johnson. Quoting Joshua 21:43–45, he claims that "Joshua introduces the inaugural or partial fulfillment of the covenant as given to Abraham." The text says no such thing. Johnson continues by claiming that "it is inaugural or partial because of the limited scope. That limitation is indicated in a second summary statement (Josh. 13:1–7)." (Elliott, "Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism," *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 137). In Joshua 13 the Israelites had not possessed the land, but by the time we get to Joshua 21, we're told that "they possessed it and lived in it" (21:43). This makes perfect chronological sense. In order to make his view work, Johnson must place the events of Joshua 13 after Joshua 21.
18. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), 111. Benware references Joshua 23:4–7 to support his contention that "The statement in Joshua reflects an Old Testament concept of fulfillment wherein the promise of God was being fulfilled and that generation was getting their share. But it was not the final or ultimate fulfillment of the promise" (*Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 55). What is "the final or ultimate fulfillment of the promise"? Is it in the physical land of Israel, or does the NT direct us to consider a more permanent possession of which the physical land of Israel was a mere type and shadow similar to the tabernacle, temple, circumcision, priesthood, and animal blood sacrifices? (John 4:21; Rom. 4:13; Gal. 4:25–26; Heb. 11:15–16; 12:22–23). "After depicting the role of the servant in this restoration (52:13–53:12), Isaiah pictured the great expansion Zion will experience (54:1–3). This expansion is expressed in territorial terminology. It says, 'Your descendants [seed] will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities' (54:3). This is reminiscent of the territorial connotations noted earlier in Genesis 22:17, where it says Abraham's offspring will possess the gates of their enemies" (Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985], 54). Paul makes use of Isaiah 54 by showing how the fulfillment is not in the "children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman" (Gal. 4:31). And who are the children of the free woman? Those who reside in "the Jerusalem above" which "is free" (4:26).

*"Because thou hast obeyed my voice"* Genesis 22:18

That those who insist that the Abrahamic covenant was wholly unconditional, do not really so regard it is shown also by the great importance which Dispensationalists attach to Israel's being "in the land" as the pre-condition of blessing under this covenant. Scofield tells us: "The descendants of Abraham had but to abide in their own land to inherit every blessing."

It is indicated also by the fact that we never hear them speak of the restoration of Esau to the land of Canaan and to full blessing under the Abrahamic covenant. This is due of course to the fact that Israel is the constant theme of Old Testament prophecy, while the burden of prophecy regarding Edom is almost wholly denunciatory. It is the New Testament which fills Amos's prediction of the subjugation of Edom with the glory of that gospel invitation, which is made to "the residue of men . . . and all the Gentiles" (Acts xv. 17). But if the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional, if obedience was not required until the words, "if ye will obey my voice," were uttered at Sinai, why is Esau excluded from the blessings of this covenant? He was a son of Isaac as much as Jacob was. How could his disobedience deprive his descendants of the blessings of the covenant, if the covenant did not require obedience?

It is important to distinguish between the certainty of the ultimate fulfilment of the promise to the seed of Abraham and the blessedness and security of the nation or of the individual at any given time under that covenant. It is claimed by the Dispensationalists that it is because the covenant was entirely unconditional, that it is certain of fulfilment; that if obedience were a condition, sinful Israel could not confidently expect its fulfilment. This overlooks the fact that the certainty of the fulfilment is not due to the fact that it is unconditional, nor is its fulfilment dependent upon the imperfect obedience of sinful men. The certainty of the fulfilment of the covenant and the security of the believer under it, ultimately depend wholly on the obedience of Christ. As Paul declares, Christ is in a unique sense the Seed in whom the nations are to be blessed; and it is because of His perfect obedience to the will of God that the covenanted blessings are secure to all His people (Gal. iii. 16). Obedient faith in a Saviour to come was the righteousness of Abraham quite as much as it was the righteousness of Moses, of David, of all the prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament dispensation; and the same obedient faith in a Saviour who has come is the righteousness of every saint of the present gospel age.

— OSWALD T. ALLIS