



Eschatology – A Study of the End Times

Lesson 7: The Time Before the Tribulation

Introduction

As we consider the end times, it is important to have an understanding of where we are now so that we can understand where we are headed. God has been working all throughout history, and we know that God will also work in the future. The encouraging reality is that He is working even now. In the present age, God's purposes relate to both the nation of Israel and the church. Furthermore, God also provides insights regarding the characteristics of the present age. In this lesson, we will consider God's purpose for Israel, God's purpose for the church, and God's plans in the present age.

God's Purpose for _____¹

In Scripture, it is clearly observed that Israel played a crucial role in God's plan throughout history. As we continue in our study of the end times, we will also observe that Israel will play a crucial role as a nation in the future. But what about now in this church age? Where has Israel been? Are they playing any role today? In order to understand this, it would be informative to consider what happened at the first coming of Christ.

When Jesus came to earth the first time in the flesh, He did not fit the first century Jewish preconceived notion of the Messiah. They had in mind a Messiah, who would be a political and a military leader, one who would deliver them from the bondage that they were in under the Romans. They had an idea the messiah would be another King David, but greater. This was their only perspective on what the Messiah would look like and be like. Frankly, they did not have a theology of a suffering Messiah (Isa. 53). Since Jesus did not fit their version of the Messiah, the Jews ended up rejecting Him as the promised Messiah, who was prophesied about in the Old Testament (Gen. 3:15; 49; 2 Sam. 7:8–16). We also observe that the works that He performed, they asserted Jesus performed them under the power of Satan (Matt. 12:14, 24). Therefore, though the kingdom work that Jesus was doing proved He was the Messiah, they dismissed Him. This constituted a clear dismissal and turning away from the Messiah, which culminated with the nation of Israel crucifying the Messiah through the Romans (Acts 2:23). Because of their rejection of the Messiah, God judged the nation. God inflicted upon them what Paul identifies as a partial hardening (Rom. 11:25). In the present age, the nation of Israel has been grafted out,

¹ The following is adapted from *The End Times in Chronological Order* by Ron Rhodes.

and it will last until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled (Luke 21:24; Rom. 11:25). But this does not mean that God is done with the nation of Israel. They have not been replaced by the Church. Paul states in Romans 11:1–3 that God has not rejected His people. In fact, there is a partial hardening now until the fullness of the Gentiles has come. So, God has not rejected His people, and this frankly comes down to the faithfulness of God. He is faithful to His people. God is a promise-keeper who will fulfill *all* His promises to Israel from Old Testament times, including His promise to give Israel a permanent land in a future kingdom—the millennial kingdom (Gen. 15:18-21; 26:3-4; 28:13-14; Ps. 105:8-11).

God’s Purpose for the _____

The word “church” is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning those who have been called out from among the world. The church represents those whom God has called out from among the world, which consists of both Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, the universal church consists of born-again believers who comprise the body of Christ and over whom Christ reigns as Lord (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18). Although there is diversity in the body such as age, gender, race, wealth, social status, and ability, they are all joined together as the people of God (Gal. 3:28). Those who are members of this universal body/kingdom have become one because they have put their faith in Christ alone as Lord and Savior over their lives (John 3:5; Acts 16:31).

The church was a mystery prior to the New Testament. But after the rejection of the Messiah, the church was born. Acts 2 onwards records the birth of the church, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, and then the rest of Acts shows the growth of the church as the Gospel spreads, beginning in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

There are five points that confirm the fact that the church has not always existed:

1. The _____ does not contain a single reference to “the church.”
2. Jesus said: “I _____ build my church” (Matt. 16:18).
3. The apostle Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians, wrote about the church and Israel as _____ from each other (1 Cor. 10:32).
4. Every believer in the church age is _____ into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), which first happened on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2; 11:15-16).
5. The church is called a “_____” that was not revealed to past generations but was revealed for the first time in the New Testament era (Eph. 3:3-6, 9; Col. 1:26-27).

Therefore, the church has not always existed. Rather, it was a mystery that has been revealed in the New Testament. The purpose of the church will be to exalt God (Eph. 3:20–21), equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–17), and to evangelize the lost (Matt. 28:18–20).

God’s _____ in the Present Age

Scripture does reveal what the course of this present age is going to be like. Since the Jews rejected the Messiah and the kingdom offer at Christ’s first coming, God’s kingdom program was thereby delayed and not established on earth (Acts 1:6–7). In fact, it will be delayed until the second coming of Christ when Christ will establish His one-thousand-year millennial kingdom

The way God has worked since the Day of Pentecost is through the church. In fact, the church is God's primary way in which He is advancing His agenda in the present age. The parables in Matthew 13 give us some insight of the present age between the two comings of Christ. After the Jews rejected their King, Jesus revealed more about the kingdom through parables, which pertain to the period between His two comings.

In Matthew 13, Jesus revealed what the course of the present age will be like until His return.

- Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1–23; 18–23) - The parable of the Sower teaches that this age will be characterized by the sowing of the gospel seed into different soils. As the gospel is sowed, there will be different responses to the gospel. The parable shows that there will be those that will fail to receive the message, which is illustrated by the first three soils. Some have no desire to believe while others have superficial desires. This parable illustrates that many will not receive the message of the gospel. The parable also shows that some will receive it, and they will bear lasting fruit in varying degrees. These are those who hear, understand, and cherish the truth.
- Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 34–40) - This parable teaches that there will be both sons of the kingdom as well as unbelievers, that is the sons of the devil, who will co-exist until Christ returns. But when Christ returns, He will separate those who are His from those who are not His (Matt 25:31–46).
- Parable of the Mustard Seed and Leaven (Matt. 13:31–33) - These two parables speak of the growth of the kingdom in the present age. It starts off small, and then grows into something that is great. Michale J. Vlach points out that “This growth of the kingdom could be linked with two developments. (1) The message of the kingdom is spreading in this age. (2) the number of those who believe in the kingdom message is growing. Thus, while the kingdom itself awaits establishment at the second coming, the kingdom grows as the message of the kingdom and the sons of the kingdom increases.”²

From these parables we learn that in the present age, there will be varied responses to the message of the gospel, there will be those who are citizens of the kingdom, and those who are not, and that kingdom citizens will be added, which will grow the kingdom of God.

As we have seen, God is working in this age. History is headed in a particular direction. God's current plan for Israel is their partial hardening, where a remnant is being saved. But in the future God will save the nation. God is also presently working through His church to preach the gospel and to grow the kingdom. Many will reject the message, but there will also be those who hear the truth, understand it, and cherish it.

² Vlach “He will reign forever,” 331.