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**Postmillennialism: Wishful Thinking or Certain Hope?**

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## Introduction

I have been invited here to speak on the topic of whether the postmillennial hope is 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 contemporary 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 that will be out in three weeks, 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, 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 affirm 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 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 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. Let us turn now to our third foundation stone for the postmillennial hope:

### **Prophecy**

God’s prophetic word is power. It is not raw power, however. Neither is it brute force. Rather it is structured, sovereign might. It is guided by divinely ordained creational principle and covenantal promise. It will secure the end toward which it moves: “So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). Our’s is a certain hope, not a mere wishful thought, for God says: “My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isa. 46:10b).

There is an abundance of prophecy that we could delve into at this juncture. We could look at the glorious prophecy of Psalm 2, where the Messiah is promised that He will be given all the nations on the basis of His historical resurrection. On this sure promise the psalmist calls upon all contemporary nations to do homage to the Son.

We could turn to Psalm 22, where we learn that “all the ends of the earth will turn and remember” and “all nations will worship” the Lord. This is as a direct result of the efficacy of His historical suffering, dealt with in the first portion of the Psalm. We could delve into Psalm 72, where we read that He will “rule from the river to the ends of the earth.” This will be in contemporary history before the new heavens and new earth, for it is “as long as the sun and moon endures.”

We could open up Psalm 110, which speaks of His entry into heaven and being seated at God’s right hand “until His enemies become a footstool for His feet.” There we learn that His enemies will be vanquished before He leaves heaven to return to the earth at the Second Advent.

And there are many, many more passages that reflect the glorious victory motif and provide for us a sure grounding in prophecy for our certain hope. But though the Church has ample time available to it to expand the victory of Christ, I do not have such time to expound the victory of Christ. So let me just turn to consider Isaiah 2:2-4, a classic postmillennial reference. (By the way, this passage is found almost verbatim in Micah 4:1-3.)

First, we should note the time-frame for this prophecy we are considering. This is fundamentally important for demonstrating the strength of the postmillennial interpretation, as contrasted to the weakness of the amillennial, premillennial, and dispensational interpretations.

The time-frame we are dealing with is stated in Isaiah 2:2: “Now it shall come to pass in the last days....” The “last days” is eschatological terminology that is important to the structuring of redemptive history. As argued by Oscar Cullmann, history is properly divided in two: B.C. and A.D. Christ is the center point of universal history. According to the infallible interpretation of the New Testament writers the “last days” began with Christ. This view is opposed by ancient rabbinism and modern Judaism, which do not hold Jesus Christ to be the Messiah. It is also contrary to the Zionism inherent in dispensationalism, which conceives of these days beginning at a time far removed from the first century, and relative to the state of Israel rather than the Person of Christ.

Let us simply note a few verses in support of our contention that the “last days” began in the ministry of Christ:

Acts 2:16-17a: “But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh.’”

1 Corinthians 10:11: “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come.”

Hebrews 1:1-2: “God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.”

Hebrews 9:26: “He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

Clearly “the last days” is an eschatological time-frame which began in the days of Christ. Just as clearly it is during the course of these last days that the events prophesied will occur. Isaiah employs the definite article “the” to speak of the “last days” as a unit, a totality, a whole. That era was to be the last era of the very days the Jews then lived in. That is, this is speaking of temporal history, before eternity begins: it is the last era of the days of history. By definition, then, no temporal era is to follow.

Furthermore, the prophecy to follow is to occur during the last days. In Hebrew the letter (beth) is present, indicating it is actually in or during the last days that these things occur. The same phrase “in the last days” occurs in Genesis 49:1, where we read: “And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days.’” He is not informing his sons of what will happen after their last days, but during them! Isaiah is not prophesying what will happen after the last days, as per premillennialism and dispensationalism.

Now what is to occur during these last days? This is where postmillennialism parts company with amillennialism. And this is where we have our certain hope underscored.

Isaiah mentions first that “the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains” (Isa. 2:2). The Hebrew reads literally: “In the last days, established shall be the mountain of the Lord’s house.” The emphasis is on firm establishing, so “established” it is put first in the statement. The Hebrew word (kun) speaks of permanent duration—and this is intensified by the verb “shall be.”

The writer of Hebrews, who emphasizes the “last days” to the Hebrews of the first century (Heb. 1:2; 9:26), speaks of the beginning of this fulfillment in his day. He tells those Jews who were living in the era of the “last days” and who had professed faith in Christ that: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). Consequently, he adds in Hebrews 12:28-29:

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.” Christ’s kingdom is established in the last days by Christ Himself, while on earth almost 2000 years ago. It is a permanent and sure establishment, not to be overthrown.

Secondly, Christ’s kingdom is spoken of as an exalted mountain, towering over the landscape of the earth: “the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills” (Isa. 2:2b). The Lord’s house in the Old Testament was the temple, which contained the Shekinah glory presence of God. In the New Testament the Lord’s house/temple is the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is a spiritual temple containing the presence of the Spirit of God: “having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:20-21). As Christ said, His kingdom-Church was to be “a city set on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). Isaiah promises that hill will be an exalted mountain.

Third, during the last days the mountain of the Lord's house will be exalted for a glorious reason: "all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3). Here we see the victory of the Gospel: All nations will flood into the house of God as an ever-deepening stream. These will evangelize others, encouraging them to turn to God and to seek to worship Him and live by His Law. This is why we have a Great Commission from the Lord that promises: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20.)

Fourth, because of this the cultural implications eventually become enormous: "Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isa. 2:3-4).

Due to the exalted dominance of the Lord's House in the final era of redemptive history. . . . And due to the tremendous influence of Christianity's God-blessed missionary outreach, sinners will be powerfully transformed by a saving knowledge of the Lord and will. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit they will seek to implement His righteous Law. As a consequence of this, their warring tendencies will be overcome by the grace of God, so that universal righteousness, peace, and prosperity will flow into all the earth.

Postmillennialism teaches that social progress is inevitable. But it is not inevitable on evolutionary assumptions, by naturalistic means, and driven by the inherent goodness of man. Rather social progress toward universal peace and prosperity is certain on the basis of creational, covenantal, and prophetic forces operating in symphony under the providence of God. That is, social progress is assured by means of God-blessed evangelism and discipleship, according to the history-determining prophetic word of God.

I now turn now to my last foundation stone:

## **Kingdom**

By creation God establishes the world in which righteousness is to dwell. By covenant He structures the legal framework of universal righteousness. By prophecy He engages the power of His all-controlling word to direct the spread of His righteousness in history. And by the establishment of the kingdom, He begins the actual progress to universal righteousness.

According to the clear testimony of the New Testament, Christ established His kingdom during His earthly ministry over 1900 years ago. As He began His ministry He preached: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Later He preached: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28).

Peter points to His Resurrection as the point at which Christ assumed Messianic rule: “Therefore, [David] being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ” (Acts 2:30-31a). He then makes reference to Psalm 110:1 to show the expectation of Christ’s rule:

Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:33-36)

But let us turn to Paul’s exposition of the postmillennial kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:20-27. This glorious passage resounds with victory as the throbbing essence of the postmillennial hope. Let me give a brief, running exposition of Paul’s thought here.

As we all well-know, Paul is dealing with the idea of the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15. He points out that it is in Christ that we shall be made eternally alive by the resurrection: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). But there is an order in the eschatological resurrection: Christ becomes the firstfruits of the resurrection. “But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Cor. 15:23). Just as surely as Christ, the firstfruits, was resurrected in eschatological glory long ago, so shall we, who are found in Him, be resurrected in eschatological glory at some future date.

Contrary to the premillennial expectation, the resurrection is the grand finale of the “last days.” The resurrection punctuates “the end” of history: “But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then comes the end” (1 Cor. 15:23-24). No new era begins: these are the last days that we now live in. No millennial period will follow the resurrection in history because “then comes the end.”

But what may we expect to precede the conclusion of history? Here is where we part company with our amillennial brethren. Verse 24 says, “the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father.” The end of earth history is brought about “whenever” (literally) Christ “delivers up” the kingdom to the Father.

In the construction before us the “delivering up” of the kingdom must occur in conjunction with “the end.” The Greek for “delivers up” here is (*paradidomi*), which is a verb in the present tense and subjunctive mode. When the word translated “when” or “whenever” (*hotan*) is followed by the present subjunctive (as here), it indicates a present contingency that occurs in conjunction

with the main clause, which is “then comes the end.” Here the contingent factor is in regard to the date of the “end”: “whenever” it may be that He delivers up the kingdom, then the end will come.

Associated with the predestined end here is the prophecy that the kingdom of Christ will be delivered up to the Father. But this occurs only “when he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” In the Greek text the *hotan* (“when”) is here followed by the aorist subjunctive, *katargese*. This construction indicates that the action of this subordinate clause precedes the action of the main clause. The phrase here should be translated: “after he had destroyed all dominion, authority and power.”

Gathering this exegetical data together, we see that the end is contingent: it will come whenever it is that he delivers up the kingdom to the Father. But this will not occur until “after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” Consequently, “the end” will not occur, Christ will not turn the kingdom over to the Father, until after He has abolished His opposition. Here is the certain hope of postmillennialism!

And notice further that verse 25 demands that “He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.” Here the present infinitive translated “reign” indicates the continuance of a reign then in progress. References elsewhere to the Psalm 110 passage specifically mention His sitting at God’s right hand. Sitting at the right hand entails active ruling and reigning, not passive resignation. He is now actively “the ruler over the kings of the earth” who “has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev. 1:5).

Here in 1 Corinthians 15:25 we learn that he must continue to reign, He must continue to put His enemies under His feet—but until when? The answer is identical to that which has already been concluded: it is expected before the end of history. Earlier it was awaiting the abolishing of all rule, authority and power; here it delayed until “He has put all His enemies under His feet.” The repetition of the expectation of His sure conquest before the end is significant. Furthermore, the last enemy that will be subdued is death, which is subdued in conjunction with the Resurrection that occurs at His coming. But the subduing of His other enemies occurs before this, before the Resurrection.

In verse 27 it is clear that He has the title to rule, for the Father “has put everything under His feet.” This is the Pauline expression (borrowed from Psa. 8:6) that is equivalent to Christ’s declaration that “all authority has been given Me.” Christ has the promise of victory and He has the right to victory. Psalm 110, especially as expounded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, shows He will have the historical, pre-consummation victory as His own before His coming.

This is why He confidently commands us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). This is why postmillennialism is a “certain hope.” Our hope is built on the foundational principles of creation, covenant, prophecy, and kingdom.