

I. Introduction

- A. Any puzzle builders here? There is something fun, and relaxing, and even social about putting together a complex puzzle.
- B. If you do this, you know the secret. When you have all the pieces of a big puzzle spread out over a table, what part of the puzzle do you start with?
- C. You start with the outside edge. With the frame. You look for pieces with one straight edge, and start placing them by color.
- D. Welcome to part two in our series on the end times. The series is called Endgame. To use the theological name, the topic is called Eschatology.
 - 1. Eschatology is how we organize everything the Bible says about the second coming of Jesus.
- E. His first coming was in humility, born of the virgin Mary, in the incarnation.
- F. He second coming will be in glory, coming in the clouds.
- G. So, we are looking at Bible prophecy of the end times. And as we are doing this, we have two ground rules:
 - 1. Be charitable.
 - 2. Be normal.
- H. So, last time I introduced the big idea. Jesus is coming again. The Bible says a whole lot about this topic. When Jesus comes again and how Jesus comes again will be huge. It will be a big upheaval. It will be a cataclysmic set of events.
- I. And like a puzzle, there are a whole bunch of pieces that need to be put together.
- J. And since it's a puzzle, we're going to start with the frame. The outside edge, or the structure, that helps us put everything else together.
- K. In the Bible, the name of that frame and that structure is Covenants.
- L. As I go through this stuff, you're going to be thinking... how is this about Bible prophecy and the Second Coming? Where's the Tribulation? Where's the R-Word (Rapture)? Where's the Antichrist and the ten toes and the Mark of the Beast? Please, for the love of all that's holy, throw in a blood moon! Give me something!
- M. So, like I said, we're going to be normal, and we're going to be methodical, and non-sensational. No apologies.
- N. Okay, so what is a covenant and why does it matter. First the short answers, then we'll dig in.

II. *The Frame: The Covenants of God*

- A. *What is a covenant?*
 - 1. In the Bible days, a covenant was an agreement between two parties. It was kind of like a contract. There were covenants between nations, between people, and between God and humans. They were a pretty common part of the ancient world.
 - 2. The Bible records a number of covenants between God and his people, and between God and the world.
 - 3. In a minute, we'll look at three of the covenants in the Bible. First...
- B. *Why does it matter?*
 - 1. So answer this. Simple yes or no. If God makes a covenant, is he going to keep it?
 - 2. Yes. He cannot lie. His word is true.
 - 3. So if God makes a covenant, and in that covenant, he promises to do something in the future, we can count on it. It's going to happen.
 - a) *With God, every promise is a prophecy.*
 - 4. It's a guarantee about the future. Can you see where we're going with this?
 - 5. The covenants are collections of promises from God. And with God, every promise is a prophecy.
 - a) Bible prophecy is not a bunch of prophets looking into a crystal ball and saying, here's what I see coming. No. It is God declaring the end from the beginning. It is God saying here's what I will bring to pass in accordance with my promises.
 - 6. So, we can look into the covenants God made, and see the promises that he's going to keep in the future.
 - 7. That's prophecy.
 - 8. Get it? Get the frame?
 - 9. Okay. So let's look at three covenants God made and see how they set the frame around Bible prophecy... and our whole lives.

III. Three Covenants

A. *The Covenant with Abraham*

- 1. So, this part of the story starts with Abraham. He was named Abram, which was changed to Abraham, so we'll stick with that.
- 2. Abraham was the Father of the Jews. God made a covenant with him. God promised to do certain things for Abraham. This Abrahamic covenant is stated and restated several times in the Bible. It's in Genesis chapter 12, Genesis chapter 15, and Genesis chapter 17. The New Testament refers to it as well in many places.
 - a) God covenants to make Abraham a great nation.
 - b) God covenants to give Abraham a great land, the promised land.
 - c) God covenants to give Abraham a vast kingdom with too many people to count.
 - d) God covenants to bless the whole world through Abraham.
 - (1) And all of this covenanting was made around 2,000 BC, so a very long time ago.
- 3. I want us to look at what kind of covenant this is, because it's really important. Let's look at Genesis 15.

B. Genesis 15

- 1. *After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." But Abram said, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" (Genesis 15:1-3)*
 - a) This is my favorite part of the covenant. Do you want to know why? Because with all these promises that Abraham was receiving, we have the biggest one of all right here: God says I am your exceedingly great reward.
 - b) Yes, you get many nations. Yes, you get treasures. Yes, you get wealth. Yes you get a whole boatload of blessings stipulated in this covenant I am making with you.

- c) But you know the biggest thing of all? You get me. Me. God. I am your reward. I am your exceedingly great reward, and if you have me, you have everything you need and then some. Right?
- d) But poor Abraham is still confused. God promised him a mighty nation from his loins, but he is childless. He has actually appointed some random dude his heir.
- e) So, despite this startling promise: Hey Abraham, you get me... all Abraham can say is... That's nice God, but everything is in question because I don't have an heir.
2. *And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. (Genesis 15:4-6).*
- a) What is the first book in the Bible? Genesis. That's where we are. This is the dawn of history, the dawn of civilization, and the dawn of theology.
- b) God says to a very old man, Abraham, you shall have an heir, from your own DNA.
- c) How did he respond?
- (1) *Abraham believed in the Lord* — that's faith. Abraham put his trust in God and in the promise of God.
- (2) *And the Lord accounted it to him for righteousness* — that's salvation.
- d) Do you see the word "accounted" there? God is an accountant.
- e) Did Abraham do good works here?
- f) No. All he did was believe in God.
- g) And what did God do in return?
- h) God opened the heavenly books, and made an accounting entry. In that accounting entry, he put all the goodness, all the righteousness, all the qualifications that Abraham would ever need. And God looked down at a flawed, imperfect person, and said: on the basis of my righteousness credited to you as a free gift, I hereby declare you good enough for me.
- (1) This is justification by faith which runs from the first book to the last book of the whole Bible.
- i) I do not believe this is the day Abraham was saved. But this was his refresher course.
- (1) He was justified long before this. But you may be here today called by grace to salvation, and you believed, and were pardoned from your sin, and you were justified.
- (2) But you have not grown enough. And because you have not grown enough, you are not confident of the sweet meaning of all these words and phrases God says about you: "Accepted in the Beloved." Perfect in Christ Jesus. Complete in him.
- (3) You are indeed justified, though you don't know what it means. You are accepted, but you do not realize the depths of your acceptance. And you are complete in Jesus Christ, though your sense of your personal incompleteness still outweighs your sense of completeness in Him.
- (4) So it was for Abraham. He was saved, but he kept forgetting his riches.
- j) Abraham had this silly habit of trying to actually help God. He tried to help God make his promises come true. And do you know what that created?
- (1) A whole lot of drama.
- (a) Grace means God needs no help... which bring us back to covenants and all that. Because this salvation by grace through faith is about to get a boost.
3. *Then He said to him, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it." And he said, "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" So He said to him, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (Genesis 15:7-11)*
- a) So this is the freaky part of the story here. Five animals get sacrificed. And then each animal is cut in half, except for the birds, down the middle. And then each half is placed in a line, like a little walkway down the middle. It's kind of gruesome, but the vultures like it.
- b) To us, this is freaky.
- c) To Abraham, he would have instantly understood what was going on. Why? Because he lived in an age when everybody knew about covenants.
- d) You slaughtered a bunch of animals, in effect saying, that if we don't both keep our ends of the deal, may we be slaughtered too.
- e) Then you laid out the halves of the animals to make a little path between them. Because you are saying, these are the parameters. These are the agreements. Stay between the lines. The lines are our friends.
- f) So far so good?
- g) Then, the last thing you did to ratify a major covenant was that BOTH PARTIES would walk together through the slaughtered animal pathway.
- h) Both parties. God is one party. Abraham is the other party.
- i) So anybody who knows anything about ancient covenants, including Abraham, expects God and Abraham to walk through the butchered animals. Because that would mean God would do his part, and Abraham would do his part, and both parties would obligate themselves to fulfill the conditions of the covenant.
- j) So, now it's time for Abraham to take a stroll with God. What happens?
4. *Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. (Genesis 15:12)*
- a) At the very time when Abraham is supposed to walk with God through the pieces, a deep sleep falls upon him. The whole scene is spooky and eerie.

- b) While he is asleep, God prophesies that the Jews will exit the promised land and be stuck in Egypt 400 years, and after that they will return. That's in verse 12-16. All that comes to Abraham while he is in this deep sleep.
 - c) But we still have these animal pieces out there. And Abraham is supposed to walk through them with God, so Abraham can do his part, and God can do his part.
5. *And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram... (Genesis 15:17-18a)*
- a) What??
 - b) Here's what. God walked through the pieces alone. Abraham slept. God walked through the pieces alone. He is seen as a bright light shrouded in dark smoke, a great picture of God.
 - c) God ratifies the covenant all by himself.
 - (1) Who is taking all the responsibility to fulfill the covenant? God is.
 - (2) Who is taking zero responsibility to fulfill the covenant? Abraham is.
 - (a) He is sleeping and gaining all the benefits from the effort and work of God. Don't we have a name for this?
 - d) Grace.
 - e) Or, there is another term in theology for this kind of covenant. God's covenant with Abraham is called an unconditional covenant.
 - (1) *Unconditional Covenant: God vows to keep his word and fulfill his obligations no matter what the other party does or how the other party acts.*
 - (a) There are no strings attached.
 - (b) No conditions to fulfill.
 - (c) No fine print.
 - (d) No conceivable situation under which the covenant can be broken because it all rests on the shoulders of God.
6. And you are sitting here thinking so what, who cares, where's my Bible prophecy?
7. Let's upshift here and move into overdrive.
8. I said there was a frame around Bible prophecy. I said the frame consisted of three covenants. And the first one is the Abraham covenant.
9. Here come the next three really fast. Each one is a sub-covenant of the Abraham Covenant.
- C. The Sub-Covenants
1. *The Palestinian Covenant: God covenanted with Abraham to give him a specific land area for his kingdom. (Gen. 12:1; 13:14-17; 15:7; 17:7,8; Num. 34; Deut. 30)*
- a) In this covenant, God basically says, here are the borders of your kingdom, your promised Land, Abraham.
 - b) It is an unconditional covenant, meaning it will happen no matter what.
 - c) And, this is the important part — this covenant has never been fully fulfilled. It's another IOU. In plain language, God said He would give Israel a clearly designated land in spite of their sins. The united testimony of the prophets of old is that Israel will be regathered from the nations of the world and reassembled in their ancient land.
 - d) Israel has a future and that future is in the full borders of the land promised to Abraham — borders which have not ever been achieved in history.
2. *The Davidic Covenant — God covenanted with David to give him an eternal throne over an eternal kingdom (2 Samuel 7:13,16; Ps 89:3,4; 35-37)*
- a) *Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever, And his throne as the sun before Me; It shall be established forever like the moon, Even like the faithful witness in the sky." Selah (Psalms 89:35-37, NKJV).*
 - b) Surprise, David is dead. But if God promised him an eternal throne, that must mean a son of David will take that throne, or else God can't be trusted.
 - c) Fast forward a thousand years. Go forward to when Jesus was born. When Jesus was born, an angel delivered a message. The angel was named Gabriel, and the message was to Mary. Here it is.
 - (1) *"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32, 33, NKJV).*
 - d) Jesus inherits the throne of David. And he is in the house of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the Son of Abraham. And his throne is forever, and his kingdom has no end.
 - e) Here's what this means. Gabriel quoted the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant, the Palestinian Covenant, and the Davidic Covenant to Mary when he told her Jesus would be born.
3. What is the point?
4. The point is these covenants were still in effect. The point is these covenants were going to be fulfilled in Jesus.
5. Have they been fulfilled yet? No.
6. Will they be fulfilled? Yes, if God is to be trusted, and he is.
7. When will they be fulfilled? In the future.
8. What does that make them? Prophecies.
9. All of which is to say that all of Bible prophecy fits inside a frame of God's promise to build his kingdom in this world. It is a literal kingdom. It is an earthly kingdom. It is a kingdom centered on Israel with global dominion. And the one who sits on the throne is Jesus.
10. This is the course of world history. This is the heart of Bible prophecy.
11. Jesus Christ will come to establish his kingdom. How does that happen?
12. In two words? The Millennium.
- D. The Millennium
1. The Millennium is the name for the kingdom of God. This kingdom will be established by Jesus when he returns.

2. It has an earthly part and a heavenly part.
 - a) The earthly part lasts for a thousand years, hence the name millennium.
 - b) The heavenly part lasts forever.
3. The Bible talks about this 1,000 year reign in Revelation 20. It mentions a thousand years six times:
 - a) Rev 20:2 Satan is bound for a thousand years.
 - b) Rev 20:3 Satan cannot deceive the nations for a thousand years.
 - c) Rev 20:4 Those who did not take the mark of the beast reign with Christ for a thousand years.
 - d) Rev 20:5 The final resurrection waits for a thousand years.
 - e) Rev 20:6 God's people reign with him a thousand years.
 - f) Rev 20:7 After the thousand year reign, Satan is released from his prison.
4. The book of Revelation talks about the thousand year duration. But the other books of the Bible talk about the awesomeness of the millennium.
 - a) There will be peace on earth. Jesus will rule from Jerusalem. He will exercise global dominion. All nations and kingdoms will bow to him. He will literally dwell in our midst:
 - (1) *"Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst," says the LORD. "Many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and they shall become My people. And I will dwell in your midst. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent Me to you. "And the LORD will take possession of Judah as His inheritance in the Holy Land, and will again choose Jerusalem. "Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for He is aroused from His holy habitation!" (Zechariah 2:10-13, NKJV)*
 - b) Believers in Jesus will rule with him — we will each have our own sphere of dominion. During this time there will be no wars, no famines. Wild animals will be tame, and the lion will lie with the lamb.
5. The Millennium is God paying his IOU to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. It is the Abrahamic covenant, the Palestinian Covenant, and the Davidic Covenant all being fulfilled.
6. This is the Kingdom of God.
7. There are events that must take place before the millennium, and we will talk about that. We will go deeper into the millennium next time.
8. But let me wrap this up with a few really important things to remember.

IV. The Kingdom of God

A. *Until Jesus comes, the kingdom of God on earth is impossible.*

1. This whole world is DUI... it is driving under the influence of the devil. All the efforts to create a good world are doomed to failure. It just can't happen.
 - a) Human power cannot create the kingdom.
 - b) Evolution cannot create the kingdom.
 - c) Social justice cannot create the kingdom.
 - d) Not even the church can create the kingdom.
 - e) We can't usher in the kingdom.
 - f) We can't call down the kingdom.
 - g) We can't live the kingdom... except in a figurative sense.
 - h) Kingdom living, kingdom praying, kingdom this, kingdom that — there's a bit of truth in this language, but there's so much error mixed in these days, I don't like the phraseology at all.
2. Now, don't get me wrong: there are qualities of God's righteous rule that can be displayed on earth. But the kingdom? That is a future tense thing, and its fullest expression waits for the Lord's return.

B. *Any so-called Kingdom without Jesus at the helm is part of the Devil's deception.*

1. You can trace it to the garden of Eden. You can trace it through the flood of Noah and the Tower of Babel. And into the social gospel movement, and the political movements of today.
2. When the world unites under anybody but Jesus, the "Anybody" is a mask for Satan.
 - a) And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. (2 Corinthians 11:14)
3. The devil has always wanted to be king of earth. But he's not smart enough. He's not strong enough. He's not good enough.
4. But he will try, and he is trying today.
5. Should we help people and work to make society better? Yes. For sure. The best way is through getting people saved.
6. But can we fix the ills of earth? No. Only Christ can build his kingdom, and we have no hope till he returns. So...

C. *Jesus comes back before the millennium can start.*

1. He's the one who ushers it in, so the return of Jesus must be premillennial.
2. There are other views, called post-millennial (Jesus comes back after the millennium) and a-millennial (there is no millennium)... but I don't see those as biblical.
3. We'll dig deeper next time. This is the frame.
4. But here is the bottom line for today: the immense drama of human history, with this unceasing war between good and evil, will not go on forever. Christ will return and win the battle. Decisively. Literally. Personally. Forever. He will once for all fulfill the covenants, and pay the promised IOU.
5. The truth of Christ's second coming is a glorious and comforting revelation. It is an encouragement to grow in grace. It is a shot in the arm to evangelism. For those who reject Christ, it is a solemn warning.
6. But to the child of God who trusts completely in His Son and His atoning death, it is our great and blessed hope.
7. The any time return of Jesus makes our heart skip a beat. And in the words of the Book of Revelation, we pray, *"Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (22:20).*