

# My Personal Journey into Amillennialism

I grew up in a small church in Southeastern Oklahoma. That was where I first heard the concept of the last days and our responsibility as Christians to be ready for Jesus's return. It was one of our church's favorite topics when the grownups got together. They'd pass around rapture movies, *Prophecy Today* magazines, and little tracts that attempted to lay out the details of how the end would come.

What I remember the most was that our church always seemed on edge. In 2000, some of the deacons in our church sold survival kits because it would probably get tough before the rapture. 9/11 was another sign that the end was coming, and then the War on Terrorism was another step closer. Out of nowhere, Jesus could return, leading to the disappearance of thousands and the rise of the Antichrist. In 1995, the first *Left Behind* book came out, and it only served to stir up our imaginations of what it would be like to live in a post-rapture world. I was a *Left Behind* junky and read through the series multiple times as a teenager.

As I got older and read my Bible more, I began to have more questions. The more questions I had, the more I wondered how people could be so confident in how things would play out. Don't get me wrong. I had no qualms with people buying into a certain idea of how the end would come, but the belief in a *Left Behind*-style secret rapture was presented as if it were a test of orthodoxy. If you didn't believe in a secret rapture, did you even believe in the Bible?

I mostly kept my questions to myself because I didn't want to be misunderstood. I believed the Bible. I just wasn't certain the end would play out in the way I had been taught. My questions were simple and were coming from an honest reading of Scripture. They weren't meant to condemn; they were just honest questions. I'll give you a few of them.

***Where did we get the idea of a secret rapture?*** The word rapture refers to Christ's return during which He gathers the Elect—His people. As far as the idea of Christ returning and gathering His people, that concept is well-established in the Bible. I had no problem with the idea of a rapture; but I did have growing doubts that it would be secret—which means that *Left Behind's* (and most popular interpretations) idea that thousands of people disappear and no one knows what happened was false. When I read the same passages people cited to defend the secret rapture, I found that there was nothing secret about it.

For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says, “the Lord will come like a thief in the night”—a phrase used in Matthew 24:43 and 2 Peter 3:10 as well. But the surrounding context does not describe a thief *secretly* coming in the back window. It's more like a thief kicking in the front door. 1 Thessalonians 5:3-4 links the idea of a thief in the night with words like “sudden” and “surprise.” Not only that, but when Paul describes the same return in 1 Thessalonians 4, it's sudden but public—so not secret. He

describes the day when “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” (v. 16). It dawned on me that a trumpet—especially, the trumpet of God—could be sudden but it could never be secret.

***Another question I had was: how do people get saved if the entire Church has been taken out of the world?*** In Romans 10, Paul clearly says that evangelism happens through people preaching the gospel. “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? *And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*” (v. 14). In dispensational premillennialism’s version of the end, all believers are taken out of the world leaving only non-believers. All the gospel-proclaimers are taken up, and yet, dispensational premillennialism says there will be people getting saved and who will suffer the Tribulation faithfully. Here’s the question though: where did those believers come from? “How did they hear without someone preaching?” No one could see to answer this question for me. People suggested that people left behind might find books or movies, but still, the Lord doesn’t send books or movies to proclaim the gospel. He sends people. If all the gospel-proclaiming people are gone, how does anyone hear and get saved?

Dispensational premillennialists agree that there will be believers who will suffer persecution during the Tribulation. And I agree. Scripture makes it clear that believers will suffer tribulation and, in the end, face intense persecution—some even being martyred. But because of Romans 10’s statement that proclamation doesn’t happen without God’s people, I couldn’t make the jump that believers would be taken in a secret rapture and new believers would pop up out of nowhere during the tribulation. For me, it meant that dispensational premillennialism had wrongly put a partial return (rapture) before the Tribulation. It made more sense that there would be no return *before* the Tribulation.

***Have we unduly unhitched the rapture from the return of Jesus and the resurrection?*** As a kid growing up in a dispensational premillennial church, the Rapture, Jesus’s return (*parousia*), and the resurrection were three distinct events. When I began pressing on this question, it led to another question. Scripture only talks about two advents. Even my dispensational premillennialist friends agreed there are only “two comings” of Jesus—the first being His incarnation and the second being His actual return. But if the rapture is also the return of Jesus, then doesn’t that add a third advent? Are we saying that there are three advents? No one was able to answer this question clearly. Most of the suggested answers were that the Rapture was not a full return but a partial return. To which I asked, isn’t a partial return still a return? Even if the rapture is a partial return, the secret rapture adds a third advent to the mix when Scripture only identifies the “two comings” of Christ.

This is where things began to take shape for me. If the rapture is a return (an advent), and Scripture only describes two advents, then the rapture must be linked with the return of Jesus. And if the rapture is linked with the second advent, then it is also linked to the resurrection. 1 Thessalonians 4 only

seemed to confirm this idea: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command... 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, and so we will always be with the Lord” (v. 16-17). These two verses merge Jesus’s return (He descends from heaven), the resurrection (He raises up His dead people), and the rapture (He gathers up the living remnant).

***If Christ’s second return is linked with the resurrection, then how can premillennialism argue that people will die during the millennial Kingdom after Christ returns?*** Premillennialism believes that Jesus will return to establish a 1000-year reign on earth. During that time, people will live in a golden age on earth and enjoy exceptionally long lives, but they will still die. Jesus’s return and the resurrection are separated. I couldn’t wrap my head around how people would still die *after* our glorious Savior’s return. Reading 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, I had assumed that Christ’s return and our resurrection were inseparably linked. In fact, 1 Corinthians 15:22-23 deliberately connects Christ’s return with the resurrection—“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then *at his coming those who belong to Christ.*” According to Paul, it is totally appropriate for us to expect death to die when Jesus returns—meaning that premillennialism’s idea that death continues *after* Jesus’s return is off-base.

I understand how premillennialism got the idea that death might continue during the millennial reign. Isaiah 65:20 speaks of a time of restoration when people will live exceptionally long lives. Notably, “the sinner” will live to be a hundred years old. Isaiah 65 seems to foreshadow that when God’s kingdom is finally established, it will be a time of peace, people will build houses, and people will live long lives before finally dying. But Isaiah’s prophecies are complex and much like a mountain range. From a distance, what seems like a single mountain is multiple peaks with some distance between them. Isaiah’s visions of the Kingdom fit our now-and-not-yet paradigms really well, meaning some things happen sooner than later, and others happen only later. So, is Isaiah 65 looking at a single event? Is it looking at the Millennial Kingdom in particular? Or is looking at a series of events spread out over time? In fact, we can’t really say it’s talking about the Millennial Kingdom because Isaiah 65:17 puts it in the context of a new heavens and a new earth. Even premillennialists argue that the Millennial is distinct from and happens *before* the new heavens and earth. So, it’d be false to say that Isaiah 65’s one-hundred-old sinner who dies explicitly refers to Revelation 20’s Millennial Kingdom or that it’s proof of a premillennial reign. If anything, it proves the NT’s now-and-not-yet concept of the Kingdom. In the now-and-not-yet, God’s eschatological blessings break into this current age of sin and death.

The Bible overwhelmingly supports the idea that Jesus’s return leads to our resurrection and the death of death—not a thousand years after His return but at the moment He returns. If people still die during the Millennial, it must be before Christ’s death-ending return. Otherwise, Christ returns, and we

have to wait a thousand years for Him to put death to death—when Scripture clearly connects the moment of His return with the end of death.

With these questions, dispensational premillennialism became more and more unlikely to me. The first domino to fall was the idea of a secret rapture, then the idea that the Church would be raptured *before* the tribulation, then the idea that the rapture, Christ's second return, and the resurrection were separate events. The final domino to fall was premillennialism's idea that death would continue *after* Christ's return. After struggling through these questions with dispensational premillennialism, I briefly looked at postmillennialism. Still, I couldn't bring myself to agree with their idea that as gospel spreads, society gets gradually better until it finally ushers in the golden age we call the Millennial. As I continued my journey, amillennialism made the most sense, so I tentatively accepted amillennialism's understanding of events—giving myself full freedom to say, “I don't know for sure how the end will come, but this makes the most sense to me.”

## What is Amillennialism?

What is Amillennialism? The name is a bit misleading because the prefix “a” makes it seem like amillennialism doesn't believe in a Millennial, which is not true. Amillennialism is built on the core belief that there is a real, literal millennial kingdom based on what we've read in Revelation 20. So, don't let the name fool you. Amillennialism holds to a millennial kingdom.

Given the misconceptions about amillennialism, it's probably best to start with how it's the same with premill and postmill. In addition to believing that there is a millennial reign (just like premill and postmill), amill also believes:

- That there will be a **Man of Lawlessness (an Antichrist)** and a **great apostasy**—in which the world definitively sets itself up against God's reign.
- That before the end, there will be a **great tribulation** in which believers will suffer.
- That Jesus will **suddenly return** (though we disagree with a secret rapture).
- A **future resurrection** is linked with Jesus's return and final defeat of death.

As a brief overview, Amillennialism believes that the Millennial Kingdom started after Jesus's resurrection and exaltation. As I'll show in a moment, Jesus's ascension was the beginning of His reigning session, in which He extends His spiritual kingdom throughout the earth. During this Millennial reign, Satan is bound (but not destroyed), and he is being plundered of his captives. Someday, Satan will be unleashed, and he will deceive the nations into making war on God and His saints. It will be a time of intense persecution and rebellion, led by a figurehead known as the Antichrist. Jesus will return, destroy His enemies, resurrect the dead, judge the wicked, and usher in New Creation.

If you look at this description carefully, you'll find that amillennialism has all of the elements pre- and post-millennialism have, but it puts those elements differently. We're reading the same passages everyone else is, but we've come to different conclusions about their interpretation. So, how have amillennialists come to order things the way we have? I'll give four answers to explain how we've interpreted the end times. These four answers are our hermeneutical keys that shape how we've ordered events.

## **The Millennial Kingdom is a spiritual, real, and symbolic reality in Heaven.**

*First, amillennialists believe that Revelation 20's Millennial kingdom is a spiritual, real, and symbolic kingdom that is currently a reality in heaven.* I use the words spiritual, real, and symbolic together for a reason. Amillennialists generally do not believe that the millennial kingdom is a literal 1000-year period. (We're not the only ones, by the way. Postmillennialists and some premillennialists are also unsure whether the Millennial is a literal 1000 years.) We believe the thousand years is symbolic. However, just because something is symbolic doesn't make it any less real. The millennial may be a "symbolic" thousand years, but it is still a literal, real kingdom.

We believe that when Christ resurrected and ascended, He ascended to take His place on a throne. After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples, **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"** (Matthew 28:18). Revelation 5 describes Jesus's ascension from a heavenly vantage point. In Revelation 5, the heavenly court searches for someone qualified to break the seals and open the scroll—this is the scroll of God's redemptive purposes (maybe even the scroll that was sealed in the Book of Daniel). But no one could be found. That is, until John hears of the Lion of Judah and sees "a [slain] Lamb" approaching the throne. He took the scroll, broke the seven seals, and initiated God's purposes in the world. When the Lamb takes up the scroll, Heaven's crowds cry out, **"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing"** (Revelation 5:12).

As the resurrected and exalted Lord, the Lamb reigns on the throne and sovereignly breaks the seals, bringing God's unfolding plan and purpose to fruition. Amillennialism argues that Jesus is actively reigning and working in His heavenly session. His millennial reign is taking place as He extends His spiritual kingdom on earth from this age until the day of His victorious return.

In objection to the idea that the Millennial kingdom is already happening, some will rightly point out that we are not yet experiencing the blessings of the Kingdom. That's a good point, but one that can be answered by pointing to the fact that we live in a now-and-not-yet reality. Even the disciples struggled with the idea that Jesus had all authority, and yet, not fully restore the kingdom of Israel. They expected

the Messiah's rule to lead to immediate kingdom blessings. Instead, they found the Messiah's reign bringing the kingdom's blessings into the present age of sin and suffering.

In the same way, what if the Millennial reign of Jesus has brought His Kingdom's blessing (which we thought belonged only to the future) into the present age? What if we already experience the kingdom's blessings in this age? Yes, the kingdom's benefits have not been fully realized, but we can already experience those blessings (at least partially) in the present.

This should not be seen as too much of a stretch to those who buy into a premillennialist viewpoint because even in a premill viewpoint, Revelation 20's millennial kingdom is not the fully established kingdom. From a premillennial perspective, the millennial kingdom is a thousand-year kingdom that precedes the final fall of Satan, death, and the New Creation. Similarly, amillennialism believes the millennial kingdom is a spiritual prequel of the final kingdom that is still to come. We just believe that the millennial Kingdom is a current spiritual reality.

This means **the church age is not just a parentheses** in redemptive history. Instead, God is currently extending His Kingdom in the world and submitting all things under the feet of Christ. Jesus reigns over His Kingdom now until the day He returns and brings it fully to earth.

## **Satan is bound and being plundered of his captives.**

This leads to a second point that makes amillennialism distinct: ***Satan is currently bound though not destroyed.*** According to Revelation 20, during the millennial kingdom, Satan will be bound for a thousand years, and after being bound, "he must be loosed for a little while" (20:3). Now let's be clear on terms. "Bound" does not mean destroyed. It also doesn't mean Satan has been rendered harmless. It only means that his power has been diminished to the point that he cannot hold onto his captives.

This interpretation comes from Mark 3:27, in which Jesus explains how He is bringing the kingdom. He says, **"But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house."** In the context of Mark 3, the strong man is clearly Satan. After being accused of casting out demons through the power of Beelzebul, Jesus is clarifying that no kingdom that is divided can stand against itself. Instead, people are witnessing a war between two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. In this war, Jesus has come to bind the strong man (Satan) and plunder him of his captives (believers).

From an amillennialist perspective, it makes sense that Satan is currently bound and is losing captives. Jesus's death and resurrection diminished Satan's chokehold on the world, though it has not completely done away with Satan yet. He can still tempt, steal, kill, and destroy. He's the like chained lions in *Pilgrims Progress*. The fact he has been bound does not make him any less dangerous if you stray from the path and get within reach of his claws. Still, how else do we explain the phenomenon that the greatest revivals in the world are currently happening in places like Iran and China? According to a

*Christianity Today* article in 2020, the number of Christians in Iran is approaching 1 million. And that's just a small snapshot of what God is doing in the world. How do you explain people whose Muslim roots are a part of their national and family identity turning from Allah and to Jesus? In Jesus's words, it seems like Satan is being plundered of his captives, and if he's being plundered, it's because Jesus has bound the strong man. In the future, the strong man will be loosed (unleashed), and he will wreak havoc in the world by deceiving all of humanity to go to war against God himself. From an Amill perspective, Satan being unleashed and the rise of the Man of Lawless go hand-in-hand.

## **Israel's Future is a mass repentance.**

How does an amill perspective interpret Israel? It's more of a covenantal or dispensational question, but explaining how an amillennialist understands Israel is important. First off, the church is *not* a replacement for Israel. Instead, the church is an extension or a continuation of Israel. In Paul's words, God's people belong to the same Olive Tree—with natural branches (Jews) and wild branches (Gentiles) that have been grafted in (Romans 11:17). What's more, throughout the rest of Romans, Paul dismisses the idea that being the children of Abraham (i.e., Israel) is a matter of ethnicity. For him, it's a matter of covenant faith. There are natural branches and unnatural branches, but only one olive tree. For Paul there is a difference between ethnic/national Israel and the remnant—Israel within Israel (see Romans 9:6; 11:1-2). When it comes to Israel, there is an elect people within ethnic Israel. So, the dispensational premillennialism idea that there are two people of God is not true. There's only one people of God.

Many amillennials also believe that all of the Old Covenant promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Christ, who is True Israel. Again, this comes more from a covenant reading of the Bible. As Paul says, all the promises of God find their yes in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20). Think about the Abrahamic covenant. God will give the offspring of Abraham land, seed, and blessing, and the offspring of Abraham will bless the nations. Who is the offspring of Abraham? Paul clarifies that it's not simply ethnic Israel. The Bible makes it clear that, ultimately, it's Christ. Jesus gets the land promise—"all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). He gets the seed promise—whoever believes are *His* people (Isaiah 53:10). He gets the Abrahamic blessing and has Himself become the blessing to all the families of the earth (Galatians 3:16). He is Isaiah 11's banner to the nations, who is *currently* drawing the nations to Himself. Throughout the OT, the King is Israel, and following this logic, Jesus is Israel. God's promises are a "yes and amen" in Jesus. So, the land, seed, and blessing promises have been fulfilled in and for Jesus, who is True Israel.

What does this mean for national Israel's future? It means we are not waiting for national Israel to receive the land promise. It also means that we shouldn't think that God has a separate, disconnected plan for ethnic Jews that is different from His redemptive plan for Gentiles. So what is in Israel's future? Are there any promises left that are waiting to be fulfilled for ethnic Jews? *Yes!*

In Romans 11, Paul explains that in God's sovereign purposes, He has allowed a partial hardening to come upon Israel "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." Paul then says, "And in this way all Israel *will be* saved" (Romans 8:26). The words "will be" implies a future salvation. Israel *will be* saved in the future. That means that we can expect a future repentance from ethnic Jews who once rejected the Messiah. They will believe He is "the Deliverer [who comes] from Zion" and will be saved. Of course, there are sub-categories and other viewpoints that are offered, but many amillennials would not have a problem with the idea that Israel's future is a mass repentance, in which God saves "all Israel"—the elect within ethnic Israel.

## **Christ's Return will mean the end of death, the final judgment of the wicked, and the Kingdom's consummation.**

Probably the most important aspect of amillennialism is the belief that Jesus's return will bring the death of death, judgment of the wicked, and the Kingdom's consummation. Again, in a premillennial paradigm, death is not brought to an end until after Jesus's return and the 1000-year reign. But in an amillennial perspective, death ends when Christ returns. It is the final enemy to fall, and then the New Creation comes. In premillennialism, Jesus returns, people see him, but they do not receive their resurrection bodies until after the 1000 year reign. In Amill, we believe our transformation will happen *at the moment* Jesus returns. This expectation comes from 1 John 3:2: **"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."** According to John, the sight of Jesus brings full and final transformation. He will, in the words of Philippians 3:21, "transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body." 1 Corinthians 15, the same trumpet—probably the same trumpet that announces Jesus's return in 1 Thessalonians 5—announces the resurrection. **"For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed"** (1 Corinthians 15:52).

If we are supposed to be changed (going from mortal to immortal, from perishable to imperishable) when the trumpet sounds and Jesus appears, then it would seem that the premillennial position that believers are still mortal and die is untenable. If you hold to premillennialism, you have to explain how death still exists even after Jesus appears. Amillennialism holds that Jesus's appearance means the disappearance of death and mortality.

## **Our Eschatology Has Consequences**

We'll end with this. I've given you a case for why I think Amillennialism makes the most sense. But there's an even deeper point that needs to be made. Ultimately, you and I don't know how the end will play out. We're arguing about Jesus's second advent like the Jews debated about His first advent—and they were all wrong. When Jesus returns, all of our systems (pre-mill, amill, and post-mill) will fall



short of reality. So, we should hold our specific eschatological systems with open hands and cling to the gospel truth: Jesus is King, and He is coming back.

That said, we should be much more concerned with the consequences our specific systems have in discipleship. All of our systems have strengths and weaknesses, and they all have consequences in the lives of those we disciple. Each of us has to be aware of how our eschatological system could shape the expectations of others around us.

In my experience, premillennialism tends to be strong when it comes to urgently evangelizing others. However, it also tends to under disciple people in a theology of suffering. When I was pastoring a church during COVID-19, I counseled several people who were convinced that Jesus would come back to get them before things got tough. They were confused why they were still here when everything in the world seemed like it was crashing down. When your end-time system believes that the rapture will happen before tribulation, people tend to hope they'll be able to avoid suffering altogether.

Amillennialism has a really robust theology of suffering, but sometimes, amillennialists are not as urgent in evangelism. That's not to say they don't care about evangelism or missions. It's just to say that people tend to become less urgent when you take out something as sudden as a secret rapture.

Postmillennialism rightly encourages Christians to be socially engaged, but it also tends to emphasize political strongmen too much. If the future Millennial kingdom depends on society gradually, progressively adopting the gospel and conforming to biblical law, then it makes sense how the goal could become getting the right people into office and passing the right laws. It's not that these things are altogether bad. But political strongmen should never be the center of our eschatological hopes.

Like I said, all of these perspectives have their strengths and weaknesses, but unless we're honest about the weaknesses, we'll under-disciple those around us. Ultimately, the most important thing is to encourage people to have hope and joy in Jesus's inevitable return. King Jesus is coming back, which is incredibly good news that should motivate us toward a life of faith and love.