

THE END IS HERE...AGAIN

PART 1



INTERVIEW WITH GREG ALBRECHT AND STEVEN SIZER

Part 1—an edited summary of a three-hour audio discussion with Greg Albrecht and Stephen Sizer.

Greg Albrecht: Before we begin, allow me to share with you a little background about Stephen Sizer. Before I had the pleasure of meeting Stephen personally, I came to know him through his writings—it's been my pleasure to make his acquaintance as a fellow Christ follower. Stephen is an evangelical Anglican parish pastor. I have had the honor of visiting him at his church in Virginia Water, Surrey, England. He is a popular teacher in churches and seminaries throughout Europe, the Middle East and the United States, and the author of several books. An acknowledged expert on Palestinian Christians and Christian Zionism, a much sought-after conference speaker, he has agreed to visit with us here at our offices at Plain Truth Ministries. Stephen, perhaps you could give a brief background to the two books you have written most relevant to our discussion today.

Stephen Sizer: Thank you, Greg. The first of the two books I think

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that you're interested in relation to our topic today is called *Christian Zionism, Roadmap to Armageddon*? It's a historical examination of the Middle East conflict and how Christians have been part of the problem as much as the solution. It looks at the theology of what's known as "Christian Zionism" with the idea that God is bringing the Jewish people back to the land to fulfill biblical prophecy, and then the book also looks at the political consequences of things like Christians buying into the settlement program, justifying the separation barrier and encouraging the Jews to come back to the land. So that book deals with history, theology and politics.

The other book, which is the most recent book I've written, is really a much simpler and lighter, shorter read—it's called *Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church*. It's published by IVP as well, and it's simply looking at what the Bible says about Israel and the Church. How does the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together? Is there a contradiction? Is there continuity?

John Stott very kindly allowed me to include a sermon he preached on the place of Israel which has never been published in the Appendix of this book. So it's worth buying it just for Stott's unpublished sermon on Israel.

GA: These books will be the topic of our conversation about the fixation so many within Christendom have about what is pop-



ularly called “end times” teaching. Among other things, we’re going to see how important distinctions between the new covenant and the old covenant are blurred by many, merging the two together and in the process confusing biblical teaching that is otherwise clear. So we’ll ask and answer questions like: Just what is “end times” teaching? How did some Christians first become fixated on “end times” teaching? Was the early church concerned with this issue? And we’ll be talking about Christian Zionism.

East to Muslims because these are opportunities to help explain what Christianity is all about. They see our Western intervention in the Middle East as a continuity with the Crusades a thousand years ago. They see our presence in the Middle East as colonizers.

Most of them equate American foreign policy with the Bible. And so we take these opportunities to define what we mean by the word “Christian” and what did Jesus teach his followers to do—to be peacemakers, a ministry of reconciliation. The other motiva-

that journey right now. So finally, before we begin, let me remind our listeners and readers that Stephen holds a master of theology degree from Oxford and a Ph.D From Middlesex University. So the Rev. Dr. Stephen Sizer, who is happy to be called Stephen.

SS: That’s all I want to be known as—Stephen.

GA: Stephen, it’s such an honor for us to have you join us as we talk about “end times” teaching. Can you first of all explain this whole idea of



Palestinian Christians are suffering by association with us... Now they are the glue, they are the peacemakers in the Middle East, so we need to support the local Christians.



PHOTO BY STEPHEN SIZER ©

But to continue introducing Stephen—Stephen Sizer is a trustee of the International Bible Society, Send A Light Ministries Trust, which sponsors and publishes *The New International Version*. Stephen is active with the International Bible Society, and he is a recognized authority worldwide on the history, theology and impact of Christian Zionism on the world affairs today.

Stephen, you’ve been asked to teach and speak at conferences and seminars all over the world, even somewhat dangerous locales, at least from a North American perspective. You are, in my mind, a peacemaker as God’s grace lives in you and the light of Jesus shines through you.

In the religious world, some people try to describe the distinctions between Christianity and Islam as a culture war, or a holy war. And you find yourself being asked by both groups to explain to others that not all Christians and Muslims are rebel-rousing, flag-waving, saber-rattling folks.

SS: I always try to say “yes” when I’m invited to speak in the Middle

East. Most of them equate American foreign policy with the Bible. And so we take these opportunities to define what we mean by the word “Christian” and what did Jesus teach his followers to do—to be peacemakers, a ministry of reconciliation. The other motivation I have is a burden for the Christians in the Middle East. In Israel, Palestine, and also the wider Middle East. Palestinian Christians are suffering by association with us. The Islamic communities who are in the majority sometimes persecute or make life difficult for the Christians in the Middle East because of their association with us. Now they are the glue, they are the peacemakers in the Middle East, so we need to support the local Christians.

GA: You and I, in our younger days, had a similar view of biblical prophecy. Of course we came at the subject from vastly differing beliefs—you would no doubt want to make sure of that distinction—but we still arrived at similar conclusions regarding the “end times.” Many of our listeners and readers have experienced a similar transformation and many are on

end times preaching and teaching?

SS: Well, it’s a subject that’s very controversial because the Scriptures give us clues about the future.

And there’s a sense of curiosity that Christians have had from the very beginning. There’s this fascination with the unknown, with the future, and it’s been there from the very beginning of the early church. You know, Peter talks about “these last days.” So the last days began 2,000 years ago. And rightly we see the death and resurrection of Jesus as the most important event in human history. The salvation of the world was achieved through his death and resurrection.

The flip-side of “end times” teaching is that it has bred an unhealthy fascination in those issues and areas where the Scriptures have not been explicit or clear. And so instead of seeing the Scriptures as a puzzle where we have all the pieces on the table and all we’ve got to do is fit them together, it’s been turned into a game or a puzzle with either pieces missing and we’ve got to find them, or it turns the Bible into a code book, and so the latest book will tell us how to interpret the Bible. “End times” speculation has been around for a long time.

GA: If you’ll allow me a shameless self-promotion, I mention an interpretative methodology in my book on Revelation, *Revelation Revolution, The Overlooked Message of the Apoca-*

lypse. It seems to me that some have built, or have “bought into” a system constructed by others, something like a metaphorical, archaeological sifter. I’m talking about the kind of filter the gold miners used in the old days, a device that allowed them to put sediment and mud in it, and then they would shake the contents. This device looked something like a couple of 2x4s with a window screen on the bottom—it was designed to retain kernels of gold and to let unwanted dirt and debris escape out the bottom. When it comes to biblical prophecy, that’s exactly how many people approach the Bible.

In my case I bought into a method where, while I was studying the entire Bible, I was just reading a well-worn path through the Bible that I’d been directed to read. The method combined one passage, or part of a passage, with other passages that seemed to say something similar. The method combined a little bit of Daniel, a little bit of Revelation, a little bit of Matthew 24, and, *voila*, we’ve got end times teaching! I was completely oblivious that there were other ways of looking at those same passages until about 20 years ago. So the interpretive method one uses in approaching and reading the Bible is such an important topic by itself.

SS: For me the key is—is Jesus central to our theology—is he central to our view of the now and the not yet—the future? For example, when we read the Bible as Christians we go back to the Old Testament and read it through the eyes of Jesus, not taking passages out of the Old Testament and applying them to today without passing through Jesus.

The key question I’d want our listeners and readers to have in their minds as they engage with us in this conversation is this—was the coming of Jesus the fulfillment of the promises God made in the Old Testament, or the postponement of his promises? The answer to that question tends to distinguish Christians between those who are preoccupied with “end times” thinking and are therefore looking today in our newspapers for the fulfillment. Or did Jesus fulfill them? That’s the key question. Is the coming of Jesus the fulfillment or postponement of those promises?

GA: So as you say, we need to ask if

we are more preoccupied with “end times” teaching than we are on Jesus. If you’re really focused on Jesus, I don’t think you’re going to be preoccupied with “end times” teaching.

SS: No. You’re going to be evaluating your priorities today in the light that Jesus might come back tomorrow, and that’s healthy, but you won’t be preoccupied with what’s going to happen next. I want to be on the welcoming committee for the coming of Christ, not the organizing committee.

The danger of preoccupation with “end times” speculation is that you start manipulating events to fulfill your fear of the future. And I want to avoid that. So a healthy view of the future is that Jesus can come back anytime he likes. He’s sovereign. He’s going to come back. We’ve got to be ready, but we’re not here to be plotting what’s going to happen next.

GA: Stephen, you have talked about five common mistakes people make as they try to understand what the Bible might seem to be saying about the future. Can you share them with us briefly?

SS: The first is called *transient literalism*. It’s the idea that the Bible is predicting specific events. I’ll give you just an example. Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* talks about the Russian force being the world’s greatest superpower. But then, ten years later, in his book *Planet Earth 2000*, he says Russia’s no longer the world power, just as the Bible predicted. So on one occasion he says the Bible predicts Russia’s the world power, and then ten years later he says the Bible predicts Russia’s not a world power.

GA: So transient literalism means that someone is continually changing the goalposts—moving the finish line as it were.

SS: Exactly. Exactly. Charles Dyer has written several books. *The Rise of Babylon* is one. If you look at the front cover from the first edition, you will see a picture of Sadaam Hussein on the front. And you will also see a picture of Nebuchadnezzar in the corner from a gold coin, and on the back it says Nebuchadnezzar and Hussein even look the same. But in the second edition of this book, the cover featur-

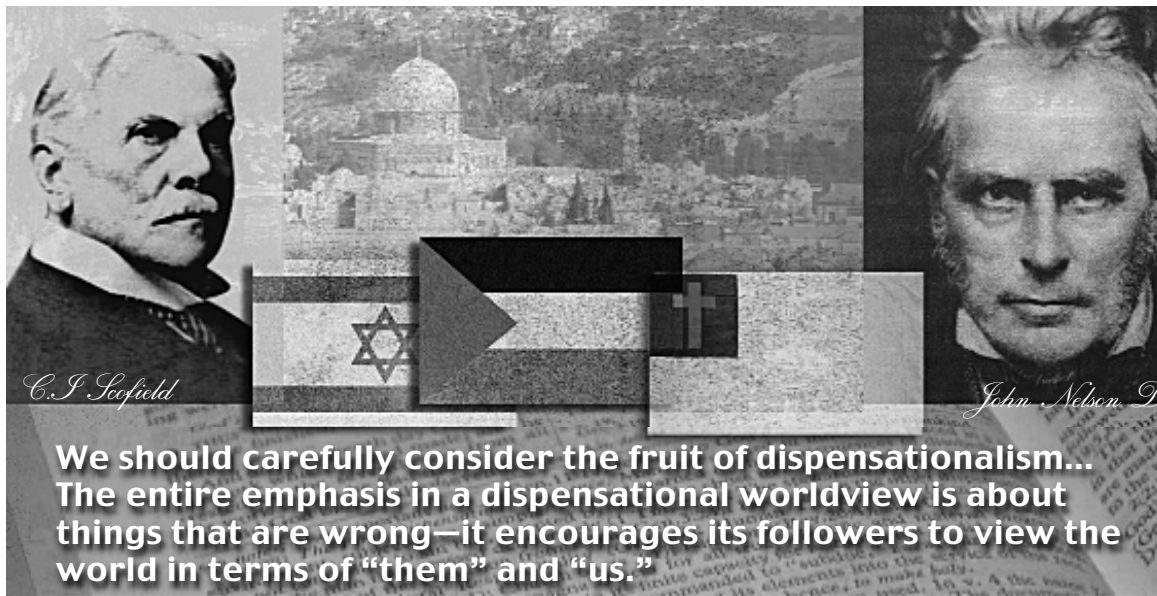
ing Sadaam Hussein is gone. Why is he gone? Because he’s dead. Who is the new figure? It’s Osama bin Laden. You simply change the goalposts. You know, I can remember when Gorbachev was considered the “mark of the beast” because he had a mark on his forehead. These claims of transient literalism conveniently sell books. We need a healthy skepticism when someone turns up and says, “here’s the antichrist.”

GA: In my book about Revelation I mentioned that I fell prey to a similar outlook in my earlier years. I not only believed and preached that very thing—as many of the identities of world leaders would change, because individuals left positions of power or they died. After I was rescued from all of that thinking, by God’s grace, I thought I would spoof this whole approach by printing a calendar for each of the past years featuring “beasts of the month.” It would be a fascinating exercise.

SS: Thank you. That’s true. The transient literalism used to sell books forgets the antichrists identified by name five or ten years ago. Babylon is a classic example. How have Christians understood Babylon in the Book of Revelation? In the time of the Reformation it was the Roman Catholic Church. When we were both into this “end times” theology it was going to be the European community.

The second common mistake is *speculative literalism*—the Bible code theory. According to *speculative literalism*, we should read the Book of Revelation as if John is describing 20th century military technology in first century terms. So the locusts become helicopters or horses prepared for battle become heavily armed attack helicopters. Crowns of gold become helmets, and so on. Again, the problem with this is that it is appealing but it is short-lived.

The third common mistake is *contradictory literalism* where you’ve got the same event interpreted quite differently. A famous radio evangelist in the 1940s went to Revelation 9 and said the army of 200 million horsemen must be demonic beings who plague the unrepentant sinners. Hal Lindsey says the 200 million are Chinese Red Army troops coming in from the East. Well, the problem with that



times” teaching is that we can get complacent about suffering, as you have just said. We downplay suffering in other parts of the world because it doesn’t fit our theology. “End times” teaching can become an addiction. It is, as you’ve said, a very strong temptation to claim that God has given me special knowledge. You know, God has told me something about what’s going to happen next, so you need to trust me. It’s going to come true. We’re all vulnerable to the temptation to want to

have that knowledge, rather than acknowledging that we are servants of the Lord, that he has revealed his will fully and finally in Scripture, and that our role as pastors and teachers is to explain the text and allow the Holy Spirit to apply it in people’s lives and not manipulate people with what we claim is our inside knowledge.

Of course, the idea of Christians suffering is not a popular sell. The idea of a rapture—that we can escape and watch this war of Armageddon from heaven is a popular theology because it’s an escapist idea. And we can look back in history and see other times when Christians wrongly thought that God would deliver them from suffering. There were many Christians who lost their lives in the Holocaust, as well as Jews. Suffering is part of the Christian walk.

GA: You know Stephen, I think we need to further discuss and define the rapture and talk about two men named Darby and Scofield. Let’s start by discussing the idea of a rapture.

SS: The idea of the rapture is a very modern piece of speculation. It really only goes back to the early 1800s, maybe a little bit before then, but it was popularized by Edward Irving in the 1820s. John Nelson Darby picked it up, along with the Early Brethren, in the early 1830s and 1840s, who later split into three groups called the Closed, Open and Plymouth Brethren. The idea of the rapture, or the secret rapture, does not exist in Christian theology for nearly 2,000 years, which itself should put up warning signs.

is which is right? Are we dealing with demonic forces or Chinese soldiers? Or perhaps it’s 200 million demon-possessed Chinese soldiers on horseback?

A fourth mistake is what I call *enhanced literalism* where it is presumed that we, modern readers, need to give the Scriptures a little help. The pastor or teacher will read from the Bible and then insert definitions of terms and words—adding to the text. A man named C.I. Scofield, whom we’ll come back to, was instrumental in this approach, among others.

The fifth common mistake is *arbitrary literalism*, and Mike Evans is quite skilled at this. His most recent book, *The American Prophecies*, suggests that America is predicted in Scripture.

He explains that you have this reference in Revelation 12 to the woman who was given two wings of a great eagle that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, and this is seen as a massive airlift transporting escaping Jewish people from the Holocaust. The eagle, according to this common mistake, is the national symbol of the U.S. and it’s possible the airlift is being made by U.S. forces bringing the Jewish people back to the land.

The problem is, the eagle is also the symbol of Germany, the Czech Republic and Syria. So why choose America over some of the other countries in the world? But Mike Evans in *The American Prophecies* says, after thousands of hours of research, “I’m convinced that America is found in prophecy, and I believe you will be too, after reading my book.” A fasci-

nating thing is, if you go to Amazon, and read the review of *American Prophecies*, Amazon’s editor says “the actual quotes from Scripture are rather sparse.”

GA: You know, Stephen, it’s been said many times in many different ways, but essentially when it comes to interpreting the Bible there are two ways. There is the right way and the wrong way, of course. The Christ-centered perspective—the Bible and the Gospel are all about Him. And then there’s the other way. It’s all about *me*. The whole idea behind “end times” teaching and its latest popular incarnation, the *Left Behind* publishing juggernaut, is that the Bible really is all about *us*.

We’re supposed to believe that this viewpoint really didn’t make much sense back in the 1700s or the 1500s or the 1300s, but today it makes sense. I’ve noticed that when I’ve read, studied and even known prominent evangelists, teachers, Christian leaders who have predicted the Second Coming, their predictions about “the end” are almost always within their lifetime or toward the end of their lifetime. The date they set for the end is seldom, if ever, 100 years beyond that.

In the *Left Behind* books, the whole scenario is that the tribulation comes to North America. Such narrow-minded thinking ignores what happened in the Holocaust. What happened in Cambodia, in Bosnia or Rwanda—no, that wasn’t tribulation. According to “end times” teaching, it seems it’s not the tribulation until it happens to *us*.

SS: One of the dangers of “end

The idea of the rapture actually has 1) no basis in Scripture, and 2) no basis in church history. The rapture is based on an assumption that the New Testament teaches there are two parts to the return of Christ—a secret return, and a visible return.

The Bible actually says Jesus will return, but he will return visibly and physically, and everyone will see him. So the idea of a secret rapture is not based in Scripture. So how should we be prepared? Well, we should be prepared for persecution, we should be prepared for a falling away of some Christians, we should be prepared for the return of Christ. And that means that we should be ready, we should be faithful, watchful and serving, and not worry about the timing. What matters is that we are found faithful, not speculative.

The rapture, as it is commonly taught, takes our eyes off Jesus and his priorities for us. It places our emphasis on speculation and it creates a kind of an addiction. Those who are continually looking for the rapture are constantly seeking the next truth, the next hidden code or the next revelation.

GA: So when will “end times” speculation end? What is the cure for prediction addiction and speculation syndrome? Many live in this hyped up world of prediction addiction, going from one addictive “high” to another—it seems like that’s the only way they can live. The predictions have to increase in intensity and outlandishness, it seems, to satisfy the craving of its addicts.

SS: What does the Bible say about how we should live our lives until the return of Christ? What does the Bible tell us about the future? Well, you know, if I’m toying with whether I should read a book or not, I look at the last chapter of the book and I’ll skim read it, and if I like the ending then I’ll decide whether to read it or not, because I hate books with a sad ending, you know, where the heroine gets killed.

If we look at the book of Revelation, how does the story end? Revela-

tion 21:1-4. We see a new heaven and a new earth, God is going to wipe away every tear from their eyes, no more death, mourning, crying, or pain. The old order of things is passed away. And then we dip into Chapter 22:1-2. What do we read? The angel showed John a river of the water of life as clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree offer the healing of the nation.

Now we’re back in the Garden of Eden—Paradise redeemed and restored—but what is the image we’re given of the world? The nations exist, and however we understand it, that living water is for the healing of the nations. Now Jesus has called us to be peacemakers. Paul instructs us to have a ministry of reconciliation. We no longer regard people from a worldly point of view. Among other things, a worldly point of view divides the world between the good guys and the bad guys.

We are ambassadors of God in the world today. Why? Because God is, in Christ, going to bring people of every nation, tribe and language to himself and bring healing and reconciliation. Now if that’s our vision of the future, if that’s where we believe the Lord is taking the world, yes there’s going to be suffering, yes there will be judgment to come—but that view of the future causes us to be hopeful, not fearful and pessimistic about the future.

Before the fascination with “end times” teaching, the church was filled with optimism about the future. But that was replaced with a pessimistic view of the future which we would call *pre-millennialism*, particularly dispensational pre-millennialism, where people give up on the potential for the present.

Dispensational pre-millennialism leads Christians to believe they are wasting their time in any positive efforts today because it’s all going to burn, and Jesus is coming back tomorrow. Therefore, given this belief, we don’t have to worry about

the national debt, climate change or military escalation because it’s all going to burn. The pessimistic view of dispensational pre-millennialism takes the incentive and motivation out of Christian ministry—founding hospitals and building schools. Yes, we live as if Jesus is coming back tomorrow, but we should plan for a thousand years.

GA: We should carefully consider the fruit of dispensationalism. What does this negativism and paranoia about the future produce? Many non-Christians begin to see Christianity at large as being extremely negative, and even hateful and bigoted, because the message continues to be about us, and not Jesus. The entire emphasis in a dispensational worldview is about things that are wrong—it encourages its followers to view the world in terms of “them” and “us.”

SS: Right. This dispensational perspective divides the world into very stark alternatives. It’s black and white. And you’re either one of us or one of them. You’re either on our side or the other side. So we can put whole countries into the camp of the antichrist.

GA: Stephen, let’s expand our discussion now—perhaps a good place to start is with Matthew 24. Some believe that Matthew 24 is a literal map of “end time” events, while others believe that most of the events predicted by Jesus in this chapter were primarily fulfilled in A.D. 70 of the Christian era. What do you think of Matthew 24? Do you think it was entirely fulfilled or do you think it’s predicting a coming tribulation?

And while we discuss Matthew 24, we might be able to talk a little about dispensationalism and terms like



What happened in Cambodia, in Bosnia or Rwanda—no, that wasn’t tribulation. According to “end times” teaching, it seems it’s not the tribulation until it happens to us...One of the dangers of “end times” teaching is that we can get complacent about suffering.

The idea of the rapture actually has 1) no basis in Scripture, and 2) no basis in church history. Secondly, it's based on an assumption that the New Testament teaches there are two parts to the return of Christ—a secret return, and a visible return.



a-millennialism, post-millennialism, and pre-millennialism and pre-tribulation.

SS: Matthew 24 is a sober chapter of Scripture. Jesus has clear ideas in mind. He's trying to prepare his disciples for what will happen next. He wants them to be ready and prepared for the conflict they were going to experience when the Jewish authorities recognized that early Christians were no longer endorsing the law of Moses and when the Roman authorities would recognize that these Christians worshipped a higher authority than the emperor. The gospel was going to bring followers of Christ into conflict with anyone and any system that required a higher loyalty than they were going to give to Jesus. He was their Lord and Savior. And that would bring them into conflict.

When we interpret Scripture, it's important to remember the Bible wasn't written *to us*, the Bible was written *for us*. And we read it over the shoulder of, first of all of those to whom it was first written, and secondly over the shoulder of Christian generations since the year 33 A.D. So it was written *for us*, but not *to us*.

With such a perspective, we look at Matthew 24 and ask what are some of the general principles that might apply to our generation, rather than looking at it as a passage that's been locked up 2,000 years and now it applies to our generation. That's what I call *chronological snobbery*. It's *chronological snobbery* to believe we are the only generation that matters, and the last 2,000 years of Christian history has been a waste of time—by comparison. I think we should look at Matthew 24 and understand the signs Jesus gives us, not as predicting the time, but as warning signs about being ready.

This passage is a warning sign to be ready and prepared, not about how many years remain before the Second Coming. Matthew 24 was for his generation, first and foremost. The apostle Peter stood up at Pentecost and said that unless they listened to the one God has sent (he's quoting Moses), you will be completely cut off from God's people. And within a generation, God destroyed the temple—he destroyed the only known

means of access to Almighty God and the divine presence in a locality on earth. That must have been a cataclysmic event.

GA: One of the key verses in this chapter is when Jesus says the generation to whom he was talking (verse 34) would not pass away "until" all these things have happened. He and his disciples were standing there on the temple mount and Jesus was saying not one stone will be left on top of another, such will be the destruction. Of course, he wasn't simply talking about a building, he was talking about a symbol—a religious icon if you like—that stood in the way of the new covenant, as the author of Hebrews makes so clear. The book of Hebrews goes through the entire old covenant piece by piece, topic by topic, and says, "look, Jesus is greater. Jesus is superior to all the old. Bring in the new, the new has come." The temple had to go so the new would be clearly the covenant that God's people, Christians, knew that they were living by, not by some kind of mixture of the old and new.

There are people who say about this verse, "Well, Jesus said, I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all of these things have happened. He wasn't talking about those people. He was talking about the generation since the time that the Jews went back to the promised land in 1947-48. Or he was talking about the time when we had the ability via the atomic bomb, to blow up the entire human race." It's another chronological kind of manipulation to which people subject this passage, and in the process they forget that we must read the Bible over the shoulder of its original recipients,

knowing that it was written *for us* but not directly *to us*.

SS: Christians have understood this chapter in four specific ways, and those are the four common views of the future. And these are the long words we define now: *a-millennialism, pre-millennialism, post-millennialism and preterism*.

The early church held a *pre-millennial* view that there would be some kind of cataclysm and then Jesus would return. And they understood it as their generation. So the early church was *pre-millennial*. They took Jesus literally and that first generation did see the temple destroyed, the scattering, but they lived in the belief that Jesus was returning very soon.

That gave way, as a view of the future, as Jesus didn't return, to the view that Jesus would return but that the gospel itself would transform the world as the church grew. So *post-millennialism*, the idea that the church had superseded Israel became popular within the Roman Catholic Church as well as among the reformers and particularly in the 18th century. So the idea was that the thousand years, the millennium (of Revelation 20) was a symbol for church history, before Christ returns.

The *a-millennial* view which was also popular in the time of the Reformation was simply the idea that Jesus will come back, and that's it. The *a-millennial* perspective sees the millennium as a heavenly term, describing a heavenly reality and that Jesus will return and that will be it. No 1,000-year reign on earth in Jerusalem.

Finally *preterism* believes that the promises Jesus gave about his return were fulfilled in A.D. 70. The problem I have with being a full preterist is what do you do about Jesus saying the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky (Matthew 24:30)? I'll leave it to our preterist friends to interpret that. But I would call myself a partial preterist in the sense that I believe much of what Jesus predicted was fulfilled in A.D. 70, but we still await his final appearing.

GA: We're going to take a break and then return for Part 2 of *The End is Here...Again*—with Stephen Sizer. When we return we'll pick up with our conversation about the concept of the millennium. □