

“THE MEANING OF THE MILLENNIUM.”

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 20:1-6

Introduction.

Chapter 20 of Revelation is one of the most controversial in all of Scripture, no doubt right up there with Genesis 1. This chapter has been a virtual paradise for fanatics, false prophets and false teachers. It has been a playground for literalists, a court room for judgmentalists and a throne room for much hubris (excessive pride or self-confidence).

In just seven verses the term thousand years is used six times. But these six uses of a thousand years have created many thousands of debates over a couple of thousand years. What do these thousand years refer to? Are they literal or symbolic? When are these thousand years? Are we in them now, or are they yet to come? How can anyone know?

This evening we enter where angels fear to tread and take up the great millennium debate.

Over the last few chapters of Revelation we have watched the enemies of Christ be defeated. The harlot (Rev. 17:1 – 19:10), those who bear the mark of the beast, the beast himself, the false prophet (19:11-21). One by one they have gone down to complete destruction. One enemy remains, the greatest enemy of all, the dragon who is called the serpent or the devil or Satan himself. This chapter brings us to consider the final destiny of Satan.

The new heavens and the new earth when they come will be completely free from all sin, evil, suffering, temptation, disobedience and rebellion (21:1-8).

Satan is Bound, vss. 1-3.

Once again as with many of John’s visions he sees an angel, a messenger of God, come down from heaven to earth.

Let me remind us again what a huge difference there is between a Christian worldview or perspective as opposed to a secular worldview or perspective. For the secular modern man there is nothing out there, there is no heaven or hell, no angels to come and visit us, no God and certainly no Savior. Remember the words of the Beatles singer John Lennon:

“Imagine there's no heaven, It's easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky.”

The angel coming down from heaven to earth has in his hands the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. Where did the angel get the key? Who gave it to him? Remember John's vision in:

Revelation 1:17-18 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and *I have the keys of Death and Hades*."

We are told the purpose of the key and the chain is to bind the dragon so he will deceive the nations no more until the thousand years are over.

The dragon is that ancient serpent, the devil or Satan. That one who from the time of Adam and Eve, so many millennia ago has been wreaking havoc on earth, stirring up wars, division and strife, breaking hearts and homes, tempting us to lust and greed and pride and selfishness, leading people into deception, lies, false worship, idolatry. He has fueled every kind of evil and wicked and vile passion, he is behind all anger and hate and man's inhumanity to man.

After thousands of years of rampaging through humanity for all of human history he is seized by an angel from whom he is powerless to escape. Notice the matter of fact ease with which he is bound and thrown down and shut in and sealed up.

The Thousand Year Reign, vss. 4-6.

Then John tells more of his vision, a vision of thrones and the souls of those who had been martyred for Christ, beheaded for the word of God, and also those saints who had not worshiped the beast and had not received the mark of the beast. All these souls are living and reigning with Christ awaiting the final resurrection without fear of the second death, meaning spiritual death.

For the sake of simplicity and brevity, allow me to say the millennium debate hinges on three main points in this text.

First, the chronology of events and relationship between chapter 19 and 20.

Second, the meaning of the binding of Satan, how complete or literal is it?

Third, the meaning of the first resurrection, is it physical/bodily or is it spiritual?

What we know is that in 19 there is a description of a coming of Christ on a great white horse followed by a great battle in which all the powers and forces of evil and all the kings and nations are defeated. In Revelation 21 there is a description of the new heaven and the new earth in which no evil exists.

So what happens between and when does it take place?

Premillennialism.

Let's begin with the premillennialists. This is probably the most popular view today.

They believe Revelation 20 describes an intermediate age, a literal one thousand years, beginning with the Second Coming of Christ in 19. They get this by taking the events of 19 and 20 in chronological order. The pre means that Christ will come before the millennium begins.

Christ will physically reign on earth during this time and Christians will have *resurrection* bodies and will rule and reign with Christ on earth. They believe that this will be a period of great peace and prosperity because Satan is completely bound. At the end of that one thousand years, Satan will be released for a brief time and then the final end, and the final judgment will come.

They believe there will be a bodily resurrection of believers before the millennium and another bodily resurrection of unbelievers at the end of the millennium.

We have to be careful not to paint all premils the same. There are two major camps. The most well-known view, called dispensational premillennialism is the most recent on the theological scene and the most popular. This view is behind the Left Behind series and most TV and radio preachers and prophecy types (Hal Lindsey, Jerry Jenkins, Tim Lahaye).

They believe there will be a secret rapture of the church out of the world before the tribulation. Then after the tribulation they believe Christ will come back to earth and set up a thousand year kingdom based in Jerusalem in which the temple will be rebuilt and the sacrificial system reinstated.

This view was started in England and gained wide acceptance through the Scofield Reference Bible published in 1909 and taught at Dallas Theological Seminary.

There are other premils called historic premillennialism who don't believe in a pretribulation rapture.

Amillennialism.

Many but not all Reformed teachers and preachers hold to a less well known view called *amillennialism*.

The amillennialists doesn't take all the images literally, but sees them symbolically. John literally saw what he saw, but what he saw were visions and symbols. And that applies to the thousand years. It is a perfectly round number and very large. It can mean just a long period of time.

Seven means a fullness in quality. Ten means a fullness in quantity.

Thousand multiplies or intensifies ten, ten times ten times ten. This is absolute completeness.

When Scripture says God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10), it doesn't mean that the cows on hill number 1001 are not His.

The "a" means there is no literal one thousand year millennium. But they do believe in a real millennium. Amillennialists view the events in Revelation as repetitive cycles and 20 is a flashback to events mentioned in 16-19.

John records his visions as he received them but we have already seen that there are cycles so they don't follow a chronological order. Events in later chapters happen before events in earlier chapters.

This is called recapitulation, a restating or a repetition, starting over.

One example of this is that the battle of Armageddon is mentioned in 16:16 and 19:17-21 and 20:7-10. There are not two battles, one before the millennium and another one at the very end of the millennium.

Everything in 20 are all descriptions of things as they currently are in our lifetime. This present life is a real reign with Christ as head of His church.

This is the simplest position, from the Ascension to the Second coming is all one age, one season. We are in the end times. At the end there will be one Second Coming and the one resurrection. After the Second Coming there will be a judgment and then a new heaven and a new earth.

What about Satan being bound?

Premillennialists don't see how it is possible for us to be in the millennium time now because of all the evil around us. Satan seems to be very much alive and well on planet earth. And we have only to look back two days to Paris to see that. What we see on TV certainly doesn't seem like a bound and chained Satan.

The question is what is meant by being bound and chained. What is Satan prevented from doing? We are told that he might not deceive the nations until the millennium is over.

John doesn't say Satan is bound so he can no longer persecute or trouble Christians. He still prowls like a roaring lion, he still throws his flaming darts.

Scripture speaks to the question of the kind of binding done here.

Matthew 12:29 Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

John 12:31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

Colossians 2:15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

I John 3:8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

Jesus' own description is clear. There is a strong man and then there is a stronger man who comes to plunder the goods of the strong man. The newcomer assaults and over comes him and binds him.

This newcomer came at the incarnation and to prove His power began casting out demons and evil spirits. For all his strength, Satan was no match. He still causes lots of trouble, but he is also bound in some way.

But what about the deceiving of nations part, isn't Satan still doing that. Yes, but Satan can't stop the spread of the Gospel to all nations as it is. He cannot prematurely incite the nations to war against Christ until Christ says he can. His spiritual blindness and darkness is held back. Yes, there are still dark places, but the gospel is advancing even under the cover of darkness and tyranny.

Christ's victory on cross freed nations from Satan's deceit.

Matthew 28:18-20 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Since Pentecost Satan has not been able to hold back the tide as the Gospel spreads to the nations. Christ is stealing what was his. Every new convert is proof.

I was at a meeting of CRC pastors this past week and Dr. Joel Nederhood was there. How many of you heard him speak of Back to God Hour broadcasts? He is 89 and still very active in ministry. He has recently been in the Ukraine and told us of the conversion of a thousand Jews including some rabbis.

These Scriptures teach that Satan is bound now even though there is still sin and death and evil in our world. He is restricted, he is not able to stop Christ or His church, the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church. He can't stop the spread of the gospel.

It is more consistent with the whole counsel of Scripture to view the thousand years as the present Gospel age, the end times from the resurrection until the return of Christ.

Is the first resurrection bodily or spiritual?

Revelation 20:4-6 seems to speak of this thousand years as part of a *first resurrection* and before a second resurrection. Are there two bodily resurrections? Is the first for Christians and the second for non-Christians?

We understand Scripture to speak of an intermediate state when the souls of Christians go to heaven to be with Christ until the final resurrection. We see a picture of this in

Revelation 6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

This is almost word for word the same as 20:4. The dead in Christ, reign with Christ. Thrones in Revelation are always in heaven, never on earth.

We know the first death is a preliminary bodily death and the second death is final spiritual death. So the first resurrection is a preliminary resurrection until the final bodily resurrection and permanent dwelling in the new heaven and earth.

Those who had been beheaded on account of Christ, those who worshiped the one true God and didn't bow to the beast, these are present with Christ living in triumph because of the blood of Jesus. They await the second coming with Christ seated on thrones with His authority to judge.

Amillennialists believe we are in the thousand years, so far it is two thousand years and counting. It could go on for another thousand years or more, only God knows.

Amillennialists believe the souls of deceased believers reign with Christ in heaven. Christ is victorious and rules His people. The kingdom of God exists alongside the kingdom of Satan, like in the parable of the wheat and the tares/weeds until Christ comes again. Just before He comes again there will be an intensification of evil, and a great gathering in of Jews.

Postmillennialism.

There is a third position called *postmillennialism*. It is similar to amillennialism but they believe the thousand years will be marked by a spread of the gospel and an increasing expansion of the kingdom. It envisions a growth of earthly triumph for the church.

Postmil likes the simplicity of amil, especially the single second coming and they like what they consider a more effective or complete binding of Satan and a more victorious and peaceful and prosperous reigning of Christ during the millennium.

They take Satan being chained more literally, though not necessarily the thousand years.

There will be a great era of improvement either spiritually or socially or both, and then one single climax to history. This view is also held by many Reformers.

Implications and Applications.

John never imagined the debate this chapter would cause in the church and he certainly never intended it. He would be very unhappy with this unintended outcome, all the end time fantasies and prophecies, all the wild predictions and claims to secret knowledge, all the sensationalist preying on weak and gullible minds pretending to warn us of events just around the corner that never happen.

All of this is a distraction to John's message to a suffering and persecuted church. All of this draws our attention away from his central message of faithful obedience, sacrificial love, patient perseverance and alert watchfulness for an enemy who prowls like a lion.

Evil is real and ought to be taken seriously. But our salvation is secure and seated on His throne in heaven from which He rules and reigns with all the saints. And this ought to be taken joyfully.

When the thousand years is, is not the most important issue in the Bible. It's mentioned only in seven verses in one chapter at end of Bible. There are many far more major issues that are taught in many places in Bible.

Whenever and wherever Christians are a persecuted and oppressed minority or even in danger of being wiped out, when all seems hopelessly lost, Revelation 20 reminds us of the true nature of reality. The reality is God is in control, Christ reigns, and Satan is a defeated foe. What happens on earth is not the end of the story. God will have the last word.

It will turn out that Christians and the church cannot and will not be defeated or destroyed. In fact the more the powers of Satan ravage the church on earth, the more Christians are established in positions of real power and permanent authority in heaven. Isis is only strengthening the Church triumphant in heaven.

Martyrdom leads to a victorious resurrection. For the Christian physical defeat and death is spiritual victory.

In a real sense whatever view of the end a Christian holds, he is an optimist. He knows God is completely in control, he knows that Christ's victory on the cross is real and that Satan's power and days are limited.

Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.