

Three Views on the Millennium

Revelation 20:1-10

Sunday, February 5, 2017

Sometime ago, while I was researching on the Second Coming of Christ, I came across an illustration from the NIV Application Commentary. It was a comment on 1Thessalonians 4:13-18, the classic text on the Rapture. And I was amused with what the commentator wrote. He said,

One of my all-time favorite *Peanuts* cartoons involves a conversation between Lucy and Linus. Looking out a window, Lucy wonders: "Boy, look at it rain ... what if it floods the whole world?" "It will never do that," says Linus. "In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow." "You've taken a great load off my mind," replies Lucy, to which Linus responds: "Sound theology has a way of doing that!" The cartoon captures the essence of what Paul was doing in this passage in 1 Thessalonians: Offering "sound theology" as a comfort and encouragement to friends trying to make sense of that universal human experience, death.

I don't know if Charles Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*, is a Christian but the conversation between Linus and Lucy illustrates the truth that one of the most important ways God comforts and encourages His people is through the Bible. Romans 15:4b in the New Living Translation says, *And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled.*

Scriptures offer "sound theology" that removes fear, anxiety and burden from our hearts. This is what Paul did in 1Th 4:13-18 to encourage the believers who were grieving because of the death of their loved ones. This is also what God is doing to us in the Book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation tells us not only how we could overcome evil and helps us to keep on holding on to Christ despite difficulty and trouble, but it also tells us what is going to happen in the future and it prepares us for it.

Stephen William Hawking, the world famous physicist and one of the most intelligent human beings alive today predicts that It is a 'near certainty' that a major technological disaster will threaten humanity in the next 1,000 to 10,000 years. He says in one of his lectures:

I believe that life on Earth is at an ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster, such as a sudden nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus, or other dangers. I think the human race has no future if it doesn't go to space.

To get away from these threats, Hawking believes humankind will have to colonize other planets, which he estimates will take more than a century. The elite institutions of learning are promoting his ideas and people are becoming anxious. What is going to be the future of this world in the next hundreds of years?

In the U.S., Pres. Donald Trump's ban on people from seven Muslim countries are causing confusion and panic not only in the U.S. but even in many parts of the world.

People are wondering what is happening to the world today and many are afraid of what will all of these things such as climate change, nuclear threats, rumors of wars, extrajudicial killings, etc., lead to?

Knowing that Jesus Christ will return and deliver His people and destroy all evil and His enemies gives us great peace and confidence to persevere in a troublesome world. Sound doctrine pertaining to the Second Coming of Christ gives us comfort and encouragement. Yes, things will get bad first, and even more terrible than this world has ever experienced before, but the end is going to be positive.

This brings us to our study today and I want to talk about this most wonderful period of Christ's reign called the millennium or 1000 years that is connected to the second coming of Christ.

The word "millennium" is taken from two Latin words: *mille*, 'thousand,' and *annum*, 'year.' The phrase "thousand years" is mentioned six times in Revelation chapter 20 in verses 2 to 7. This is the only place in the whole Bible where the number of years of Christ's reign in connection with His second coming is specifically mentioned.

In Rev 20:1-10 we will find a description of the millennium but it is not an exhaustive description. We are going to see three essential truths about this period of Christ's earthly reign:

1. The Binding of Satan (vv. 1-3)
2. The Reign of Believers (vv. 4-6)
3. The Final Overthrow of Satan (vv. 7-10)

Today, I will not yet explain our text. I will do something different today. This is going to be more of a bible lecture than a bible sermon. I want to present to you different views Christians hold regarding the millennium. I know that this may not be interesting to some of you, but I believe that it is important that we do this. Read any commentary that deals with the millennium and you will generally find an explanation of these different views that I will present to you.

One's point of view will greatly affect how one interprets verses 1 to 10 of Revelation 20. But understanding the different views and how Christians have come to hold this view will help us to be more humble and charitable towards others whose view is different from ours. I believe that this will also promote more understanding and love towards other believers. We will also be delivered from narrow mindedness

Revelation 20:1-10 is one of the most controversial sections in Revelation. It describes the 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth. From earliest times, orthodox Christian interpreters have been divided over the *nature* and *timing* of the millennium in connection with the second coming of Christ.

Three perspectives regarding the millennium have been held by Christian groups with an equally high regard for Scripture as God's inspired, authoritative word:

1. Premillennialism:

- *Premillennialism* holds that Jesus will return bodily in power and glory before (pre-) the "thousand years" (millennium) to defeat the beast and false prophet and slay His enemies at Armageddon (19:11-21).

- Satan is also bound and imprisoned during this thousand-year period (20:1-3). This is not yet his final destruction; this will only to prevent him from deceiving the nations for a thousand years.
- When Christ comes He will usher in a long period of great peace, justice and physical well-being we call the millennium. Some think of this as a literal thousand years, but others consider the number to mean a very long period of time.
- Christ will reign on earth as a physically present king (20:6).
- During this time Christ's saints, having received their immortal bodies either by resurrection from the dead or by transformation while still alive (1 Thess. 4:13-18), will reign with Christ on the present earth.
- The descendants of those who survive the battle of Armageddon will remain on the earth, multiply and be ruled by resurrected saints. People in the millennium will live long (Isa. 65:20 [NLT], *No longer will babies die when only a few days old. No longer will adults die before they have lived a full life. No longer will people be considered old at one hundred! Only the cursed will die that young!*)
- Although the world will enjoy peace and prosperity, sin, sorrow, and death will not be eliminated until the new heaven and earth replaces the old universe (Rev. 21:1-4; 22:3).
- At the end of 1000 years, Satan will be released and deceive the nations to rebel against Christ and wage war against his people. In this battle, Satan will be defeated and finally thrown to hell and his allies will be consumed with fire from heaven.
- Then all the wicked will be raised bodily to face God's last judgment and eternal wrath in the lake of fire, the "second death" (20:6, 11-14).
- God will replace the old, curse-infected heaven and earth with the new heaven and earth, where there will be no curse, sin, suffering, sorrow, or death—the eternal home of those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (chs. 21-22). (ESVSB)

There two kinds of premillennialists: the classical premillennialists and the pretribulational (aka dispensational) premillennialists.

- **Classical premillennialists** expect that believers will go through a time of "great tribulation" before Christ returns.
- **Pretribulational premillennialists** expect that Christ will first come secretly to take believers from the earth before a tribulation of seven years occurs. After the tribulation, it expects that Christ will come back publicly to reign on the earth, and that he will bring believers back with him at that time.

2. **Postmillennialism:**

- Postmillennialism teaches that Christ will return after (post-) the "thousand years" in which the dragon is bound.
- In this view, during the millennium Christ is in heaven, not on earth; but he exercises his reign through his Spirit and the church's preaching of the gospel. The "first resurrection" is believers' spiritual transition from death to life through union with the risen Christ (Eph. 2:6, *And [God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*).
- Because Satan cannot "deceive the nations any longer" (Rev. 20:3), the church's mission will result in the conversion of all nations and peoples, until

the earth is "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

- The victory of Jesus will be plain for all to see, as political and legal systems are conformed to God's righteousness, cultural pursuits such as labor and the arts are redeemed, and increasing quality and length of life are displayed as God's blessing.
- After this "millennium," however, for a brief interval before Jesus' return, God will allow Satan to be released and the unbelievers of the world will unite to attack God's people. But Jesus will return bodily from heaven in power and glory to defeat and destroy his enemies, to administer the last judgment, and to introduce the new heaven and earth, untainted by sin and curse.

3. Amillennialism:

- Amillennialists are those who hold an "a" [non-literal] millennial view. They think the phrase "thousand years" is the same period as this present church age, and that there will be no future "millennium" before Christ returns for the final judgment.
- *Amillennialism* understands the millennium to be a symbolic time frame between Jesus' ascension and his return when deceased believers reign in heaven with Jesus.
- From heaven's perspective, Christ and his people reign spiritually in the present age (Ps 110:1), even though on earth it is also a period of suffering.
- Amillennialists believe that Satan was bound through Jesus' death and resurrection and is prevented from deceiving the nations and hindering the gospel's spread during the church age (20:2-3; cf. Matt 12:28-29; John 12:31-32; Col 2:15). Therefore the gospel now advances by the Spirit's power through the church's witness, but always amid opposition and suffering. (The millennium is not viewed as a time of relief from persecution, nor a general improvement of living conditions on the sin-infected "first earth," prior to the pristine new heaven and earth. Rather, it promises that the dragon, already a defeated foe, cannot thwart God's plan to gather people from all nations into the Lamb's redeemed army.)
- The "first resurrection" (20:5) is either the life of Christians who have died and are with Christ in heaven, or life in Christ that starts with spiritual new birth (Rom. 6:8-11; Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1-4), which brings them to heavenly thrones from which they now reign with Christ (20:4-5).
- At the end of this age, Satan will be released for a final onslaught against the church (20:7-9). Then Christ will return to judge his enemies, vindicate his people, and usher in the new creation, when sin and curse are utterly banished (2 Pet. 3:13).

Amillennialists believe that the millennium is figurative of the spiritual reign of Christ through the Church leading up to His second coming. Three claims amillennialists use in support of their position are:

- (1) The number 1,000 is used symbolically in the OT to signify completion (1Ch 16:15; Ps 50:10; 84:10).
- (2) The period of 1,000 years is mentioned only here in the entire NT.
- (3) Chapter 20 does not follow 19 sequentially, but is a recapitulation of it.

Amillennialists view Revelation 19:17-21 and 20:9-10 as complementary perspectives on the same last battle at the end of the "thousand years,"

when Christ will come bodily and gloriously to rescue his suffering church and destroy its enemies: the antichrist, the false prophet, Satan and their deceived and defiant followers.

"Each of these views falls within the framework of historic Christian orthodoxy." (ESV Study Bible)

Differences over these perspectives have caused conflict among Christians. Many have forsaken Christian fellowship with those who hold a different opinion. True Christian humility and love (1 Pet 3:8), however, would never let such differences disrupt Christian fellowship. All believers can agree with the overall message of Revelation: Christ will visibly return and rule in an actual new heaven and earth. A real spiritual warfare is taking place. Hell, like heaven, is real, and all people will be judged by God's standards. The prophecies of Revelation offer hope to God's people in the midst of pain, suffering, and confusion in the world. (New Living Translation Study Bible)

A Historical Survey of the different Views of the Millennium.

Ideas taken from the NIV Application Commentary and the section on "Back to Premillennialism" is from Crawford Gribben's book, *Rapture Fiction and The Evangelical Crisis*)

"Reviewing the history of interpretation helps us understand where our views come from so we can take adequate account of them and try to hear Scripture objectively by reducing (insofar as possible) our bias in interpretation."

Revelation 20 has been the subject of considerable debate over the entire span of church history.

Premillennialists

From *NIV Application Commentary*:

The earliest church fathers believed in a literal, future, thousand-year reign of Christ.

- Papias, for example, is said to have reported that the apostle John promised a material, agricultural paradise to come, in a Millennium after the resurrection of the righteous.
- The mid-second-century Christian philosopher Justin Martyr accepted a literal, future, thousand-year reign of Christ in a rebuilt Jerusalem after the resurrection of the righteous, though he admitted that some Christians held other views; he proves his case from Isaiah and Revelation.
- Irenaeus, a late second-century bishop, believed in an earthly millennium during which the saints and martyrs would be rewarded. He interpreted many biblical prophecies literally, including those in Revelation, and warns against allegorizing them.

Shift to Amillennialism

From *New International Commentary of the NT*

- Unfortunately, many chiliasts allowed their imaginations to run riot and read into the thousand-year period all manner of materialistic and sensuous extremes. ... In the third century Origen rebuked those who looked forward to sensual pleasure of gratifying appetite and lust in the millennium. These extremes led later scholars to condemn the materialistic chiliasm that had taken root in the church.
- It was Augustine, however, who about the beginning of the fifth century made the first serious effort to interpret Revelation 20 in a nonmillenarian fashion. He held that the thousand-year period was to be taken as the interval between the first and second comings of Christ. The binding of Satan during this period was accomplished by Christ during his earthly ministry. The first resurrection was the spiritual birth of believers.
- "This view was carried over into the theology of the Reformers. The amillennial viewpoint dominated most of subsequent church history: Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and many prominent church leaders cited by evangelicals on other issues today were amillennial" (*NIV Application Commentary*).
- Today, it has become the dominant view in the Catholic Church. This view is held by famous Bible teachers as Hank Hanegraaff, R.C. Sproul, and James D. Kennedy.

Postmillennialists

NIV Application Commentary

Most nineteenth-century American evangelicals held a view that few people today advocate, and their view actually helped motivate them to evangelize the world. They were **postmillennial**: They believed they would establish the kingdom on earth to prepare the way for Jesus' return. This optimistic approach prevailed especially at the height of the British Empire, when many English-speaking interpreters believed that God was using righteous governments to spread godliness.

This postmillennial view fueled the activist faith of nineteenth-century evangelicals in the United States as they evangelized and worked to abolish slavery. Leading figures of the Great Awakenings like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney were postmillennial. This view provided excellent motivation for mission.

However, the destruction of the First World War shattered the optimistic expectations of the evangelical postmillennialists and a new generation of premillennial thinkers arose.

Back to Premillennialism

(Ideas from Crawford Gribben's *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*)

In the 1830s John Nelson Darby developed dispensational Premillennialism and this system began to take hold among evangelicals. Then in 1917, Cyrus Scofield published the second edition of his *Scofield Study Bible* which sold millions of copies and dominated the apocalyptic thinking of several generations of American evangelicals. The influence of this view became stronger in the 1970s, thanks to Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell who claim to have 100 million supporters every week. By the mid-20th century, dispensational premillennialism had become part of the American cultural mainstream. The widespread appeal of this system has been consolidated by the massive popularity of the *Left Behind* book series written by Tim

LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. (The most successful series of novels in the world today are not the Harry Potter books but the Left Behind series. Someone said, "it is the most astonishing English-language literary phenomenon of the early 21st century."). This is the view of most Pentecostals, Brethren, many Baptists, and most independent Bible churches.

NIV Application Commentary:

This survey of views ... illustrate the point that committed Christians have held many different views about the end-time, yet retained God's blessings. That postmillennialism was the dominant view of nineteenth-century American evangelicals and helped fuel the missions movement should give us pause.

It seems clear [from this survey] that God does not dispense his blessings based on our views about the end time, and that we ought to learn from his example a lesson about charity toward those who hold other views on this matter.

Why the Millennium?

A question normally raised by nonmillenarians is, What is the purpose of the thousand-year reign?

There are at least four answers to this question:

(From *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Abridged Edition*)

- (1) During the Millennium, Christ will openly manifest his kingdom in world history; it will provide an actual demonstration of the truthfulness of the divine witness borne by Christ and his followers during his life on earth. It will be a time of the fulfillment of all God's covenant promises to his people.
- (2) The Millennium will reveal that humanity's rebellion against God lies deep in one's own heart, not in the devil's deception. Even when Satan is bound and righteousness prevails in the world, some people will still rebel against God. The final release of Satan will openly draw out this hidden evil.
- (3) The release of Satan after the Millennium shows the invulnerability of the city of God and the extent of the authority of Christ, since the devil is immediately defeated and cast into the lake of fire forever.
- (4) The Millennium will serve as a long period required to do the "house-cleaning" needed after the preceding ages of sin.

Why I think the millennium is literally 1000 years:

What now may be said as to the length of the kingdom reign? Nowhere in other literature is the kingdom reign of the Messiah specified as a thousand years. Thus parallels to John's use of a thousand years must be sought elsewhere.

1. The phrase "thousand years" is mentioned six times in this chapter after the return of Christ. (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).
 - a. It is the duration of Satan's binding (20:2)

- b. It is the duration of his imprisonment in the abyss (20:3)
 - c. It is the duration of the resurrected saints' reign with Christ (20:4)
 - d. It is the period separating the two resurrections (20:5)
 - e. It is the duration of the resurrected saints' reign with Christ restated (20:6)
 - f. It is the period that will transpire before the releasing of Satan (20:7)
2. The second century church fathers understood the millennium to be a literal 1000 years of Christ's reign on earth.
- a. Papias and Irenaeus who lived closest to the same period in the area where the Apocalypse was composed understood the millennium literally.
 - b. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Nepos, who lived elsewhere in the Mediterranean world during the same period.
 - c. For them the millennium was the climax of all other periods of world history before the new heavens and the new earth.
3. There are numerous passages in the OT that point to a future, literal kingdom on earth (e.g., Ps 2:1-12; 72:8-11; **Is 2:1-4; 9:6-7; 11:1-9; 35:1-10**; Jer 23:5-6; Mic 4:1-8; Zech 14:9-11), so the mention of its specific length only at the end of Revelation demonstrates progressive revelation.