

THE MILLENNIAL REIGN

By

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Most Christians are familiar with the expression, “The Thousand Year Reign” based on the references the Apostle John made to it in the Book of Revelation, chapter 20. A simple “Google” search on the internet reveals one fairly common view of this subject:

“The Millennium (also known as the Millennial Kingdom) is the 1,000-year reign of Jesus after the Tribulation and before all the people of the world are sent to heaven or hell. Jesus will reign as King over Israel as well as all the nations of the world. The world will live in peace, Satan will be bound and, at the beginning, everyone will worship God. The purpose of the 1,000-year reign is to fulfill promises God made to the world that cannot be fulfilled while Satan is free and humans have political authority. Some of these promises, called covenants, were given specifically to Israel. Others were given to Jesus, the nations of the world, and creation. All of these will be fulfilled during Jesus’ 1,000-year reign.”
(gotquestions.org/thousand-year-reign-Christ.html)

As stated in this view, many Christians believe “The Millennial Reign” is a future event in which Christ will return to this world and establish a new order of government and/or worship over which He will be King for a thousand years. However, when one considers the circumstances of those to whom the Book of Revelation was written, the context of chapter 20, and the many other New Testament references to the return of Christ; an altogether different, yet reasonable interpretation can be made.

First of all, consider Paul’s treatment of the return of Christ as he addresses it in his epistles. As we will see, he always describes it as the end of time and the consummation of all things, not the beginning of Christ’s reign on the earth. Secondly, consider the plight of the seven churches to which the Book of Revelation was originally written. In his book, “Revelation: Images of Redemptive History”, Elder Joe Holder writes, “... *apocryphal writings in the ancient world were normally written to a suffering, struggling people to remind them of a better way and of hope for the future despite their present hopeless condition.*” Although many may view the “Millennial Reign” as a brighter day, I want to present an interpretation that will give a much brighter hope of the future. Finally, consider the context of chapter 20. Not only is it near the end of Revelation, it is also part of a book that brings to a close the canon of inspired scripture. Does God intend to conclude his written communication to us with thoughts of a new kingdom on the earth or with joyful anticipation of that glorious world to come when we will be eternally delivered from all evil?

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the first century churches about the Lord’s return, he focused their attention on the resurrection and the entrance of God’s children into the glory world. At that time, the entire elect, redeemed family of God will be taken to their eternal home in glory. He makes no mention of an intermediate dispensation of time between the gospel church age and the resurrection. Let’s consider some examples.

"But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets: And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust." - (Acts 24:14-15 KJV)

Paul is here giving a defense of his faith by making reference to the Old Testament writings of the prophets. As he turns his attention to the future, he speaks of his "hope", which they (the prophets) also possessed. Hope implies one's anticipation of something not yet received. Paul's hope for the future was not "The Thousand Year Reign" but the resurrection of the dead. In today's world, there are a number of verses from the Old Testament prophets which are frequently interpreted as prophecies of the "Millennial Kingdom". The second chapter of Isaiah is one example.

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." - (Isaiah 2:2-3 KJV)

It is interesting that in Paul's reference to the writings of the prophets; his hope ("which they themselves also allow") did not embrace a futuristic "Millennial Kingdom", only the resurrection. I believe Paul interpreted passages like Isaiah 2 as prophecies of the New Testament Church, not the "Thousand Year Reign"? Otherwise, why did he bypass this future earthly kingdom when writing to the first century churches? Erroneous interpretations of the passage in Isaiah commonly result from a misapplication of the expression, "last days". The New Testament makes it clear that the "last days" can refer to the first advent of Christ and the gospel church age (See *Hebrews 1:1-2*).

The fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians is the most detailed discussion in the New Testament concerning the resurrection at the end of time. Although Paul referred elsewhere to the resurrection of the wicked (*Acts 24:14-15, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10*), here he is only concerned with the resurrection of the Lord's people (the elect). After reminding the Corinthians of the basic truth of the gospel (v. 1-8), he then addressed the error of "no resurrection of the dead" (v.12) which some of them had embraced. As he addresses this issue, he says "in Adam all die" (v. 22) [i.e., because we were made sinners by Adam's transgression (*Rom. 5:12, 19*), we will die a physical death.], "in Christ shall all be made alive" (v. 22), and "then cometh the end" (v. 24). Notice the order of events: physical death, the resurrection, the end (of time). Then notice verses 25-26, "For **he must reign**, till he hath put all things under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." The context makes it clear that Christ was "reigning" at the time Paul wrote this epistle and would continue to reign until the resurrection. If the use of the expression "a thousand years" (*Rev. 20:2-7*) is not a literal thousand years, which we will try to establish later, then it seems that Paul is teaching that the "thousand year

reign” of Christ began immediately after his resurrection and will continue until the general resurrection of the dead at which time God will be “*all in all*” (v. 28).

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." - (Colossians 3:1-4 KJV)

In this passage, Paul points the Colossian Church to the appearance of Christ. He teaches that at the time he appears, we will “*appear with him in glory.*” If Paul believed in a future, literal 1000-year reign of Christ on the earth, he did not mention it here. To the contrary, he taught that, at the Lord’s coming, we would live with him in glory. If the “Millennial Kingdom” is such an important doctrine, why did Paul ignore it here?

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words." - (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 KJV)

Paul refers here to those who are alive on the earth when the Lord comes. He then describes the resurrection of the dead. Immediately after the resurrection, those who are alive at his coming will be “*caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*” Paul makes no reference to a new kingdom on the earth when the Lord returns.

"I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;" - (2 Timothy 4:1 KJV)

Here Paul makes reference both to the Lord’s coming as well as his kingdom. What kind of kingdom is under consideration here? Is it the “Millennial Kingdom”? Notice what happens when he appears. He will “*judge the quick and the dead*”. He will judge those that are alive at his coming as well as those that are dead. This describes the events of the resurrection, not the “Thousand Year Reign”.

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?"

Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." - (2 Peter 3:10-13 KJV)

Peter, like Paul, makes no mention of a "Millennial Kingdom" when the Lord comes. With regard to this present world in which we live, he says, "*the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up...*" Therefore, the "*new heavens and a new earth*", is not referring to a new form of government in this present world. It speaks of a deliverance from this world (*Gal. 1:4*).

Now let's turn our attention to Revelation, chapter 20. My interpretation is based on two underlying assumptions. First of all, when studying the imagery of Revelation, I use a method of interpretation suggested by Elder Joe Holder:

"Allegorical interpretation misses the point of apocryphal genre because it insists that every part of every vision must hold meaning. Don't try to make every horn and every claw of a visual image in Revelation mean something, thus hopelessly miring the mind in confusion. Look at the "big picture". Think of the whole vision as the image of an idea. If you have a pest problem in your home, you will likely go to the pesticide section of the local home improvement store and look for products that control the pest. Most pesticides are poisonous chemicals. Each label will display the manufacturer's identity, directions for the safe use of the material, precautions in its use, and the chemical contents of the container. Every label will also display a visual image, skull and crossbones. This image tells nothing about the chemical contents of the package. It says nothing about the physical appearance of the contents. It is the image of an idea that must be kept in mind when using this material. The contents of this package are poisonous! This illustrates what I believe is a central point in the study of Revelation, the image of an idea. As you read John's visions, look for a unifying, over-arching idea that flows from this vision and the images John describes." (Revelation: Images Of Redemptive History, from the Preface, page x).

Secondly, I do not interpret the expression "*a thousand years*" as a literal one thousand years. Generally speaking, I believe we should try to interpret scripture literally. In the words of Elder Sonny Pyles, "If the literal makes sense, choose no other sense." However, the obvious context of much of the book of Revelation is symbolic, not literal. Furthermore, the expression "*a thousand*" is sometimes used in the Bible to indicate a large number, but not a specific quantity. This is true even in some passages where the surrounding context is literal (*Deut. 1:11, 7:9, 32:30; Jos. 23:10; 1 Chr. 16:15; Job 9:3, 33:23; Psa. 50:10, 84:10, 90:4, 91:7, 105:8; Isa. 60:22; 2 Pet. 3:8*).

*"And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him **a thousand years**, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till **the thousand years** should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. (*Revelation 20:1-3 KJV*).*

The first three verses of Revelation 20 depict Satan being apprehended and imprisoned by an angel from heaven. In keeping with Elder Holder's recommended method of interpretation, I suggest that John's idea behind this imagery is the victory of Jesus over Satan. This victory was accomplished as a result of Jesus bearing the sins of His people on the cross. However, Satan has not yet experienced his final perdition. Although he was defeated at the cross, his banishment to eternal doom will not take place until our Lord's return (*Mat. 25:41, Rev. 20:7-10*). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul clearly distinguishes between the defeat and the final ruin of our adversary. He says "*he (God) hath put all things under his (Christ's) feet*" (*1 Cor. 15:27a*). This is referring to what resulted from the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Thousands of years before Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians, God said to Satan that Christ would bruise his head and that he would bruise Christ's heel (*Gen. 3:15*). Satan's head was bruised when Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead. Satan has been "*put under his feet*". However, Paul also refers to a future time, after the resurrection, when "*all things shall be subdued unto him (Christ)*" (*1 Cor. 15:28*).

As a result of the victory we have in the cross of Christ, Satan is now limited or "*bound*" (*Rev. 20:2*) in his ability to do harm to God's people. Think of a serial killer on death row. It is such a relief to the victims' families when the killer is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. However, he may remain on death row for 20 to 30 years. The murderer's ability to kill people has come to an end. However, he may still have some level of emotional influence on the victims' families. There are also questions in the back of their minds. What if he escapes from prison? What if his conviction is overturned during the appeals process? Perhaps they go to bed at night with these thoughts on their minds. However, some day he will be executed. Then his influence will be completely terminated. He will be forever removed from society and will never trouble anyone again. Satan has much more influence than a prisoner on death row. However, he can not separate us from God (*Rom. 8:38-39*). One day his "death sentence" will be carried out (*Mat. 25:41, Rev. 20:10*). God's children will then be eternally delivered from his ability to contact them or have influence in their life.

I believe the thousand years under consideration is representative of the time between this defeat of Satan at the cross and his final abode, the lake of fire; the time between the first and second advent of Christ; or the church age. Jesus described it as "*the tribulation*" (*Mat. 24:29*). I believe this New Testament church age is the last dispensation before the return of Christ when the dead shall be raised. The elect, redeemed family of God will then be transported to the glory world and the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. - (Revelation 20:4 KJV)

In order to encourage His children who are suffering at the hands of their persecutors during this present tribulation, God gives John a glimpse of the activity of heaven. He

saw "...the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God...and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years." (Rev. 20:4) What incredible encouragement this must have been to the seven churches to which the revelation was first given. No doubt, they personally knew people who had been put to death for their faithfulness to Christ. Now they are blessed to see that heaven is a real place where the souls (not the bodies) of the departed saints are reigning with their Savior. Interestingly, God's children in the church are also described as reigning with Christ (1 Cor. 4:8). Until the end of the "thousand years" (church age), God's people can be comforted by the thought contained in this verse. What the Lord's people enjoy in part in the church, the departed saints enjoy more fully in heaven. On the resurrection day, all the elect in heaven and earth, in their glorified bodies, will then realize the fullness of their reign with Christ (Eph. 2:7, 1 Cor. 15:22-28, 1 Thes. 5:23).

"But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years." - (Revelation 20:5-6 KJV)

What Paul referred to as being "absent from the body and present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8), John refers to here as "the first resurrection". He is not implying that there are two different bodily resurrections. The "first resurrection" is when the soul of God's children departs this world to be with the Lord. The "second resurrection" refers to the bodily resurrection at the end of time. In like manner, he implies that there are two deaths by referring to "the second death". John is not teaching that the existence of the wicked ends at the time of their natural death. The first death is the abode of the wicked immediately following their natural/physical death (Jude 6). Although Jude only refers to "the angels which kept not their first estate", notice that they are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." These angels are bound but have not yet faced their final judgment. Such is the lot of the souls of the wicked who have already departed from their mortal life in this present world. The second death is the eternal lake of fire, the place where their bodies will be cast immediately following the resurrection at the end of time (Rev. 20:14). One of the meanings of "death" is separation. Natural death is the separation of life from the body. Here John has in mind the ultimate separation, i.e. eternal separation from God.

"And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever." - (Revelation 20:7-10 KJV)

At the end of this "thousand years", "...Satan shall be loosed out of his prison," (v. 7). The question is frequently asked in twenty first century America, "Are we presently

living in that “*little season*” (v. 3)? To answer that question, consider Elder Holder’s observation:

“As soon as the forces of evil are set against ‘...the camp of the saints...,’ God sends fire and destroys them! There is never a battle! It ends before it starts!If Jesus actually fought with Satan at Calvary and won, we understand why no battle occurs in this last episode.... He (Satan) faces the King Himself. Almost as soon as Satan positions his forces against the saints, Jesus appears and destroys them.” (Revelation: Images of Redemptive History, pages 396-398)

Perhaps we have been preoccupied with this “*little season*” because we have misunderstood it. It is not a period of time in which Satan will rule the world. It is a time when he will make one final effort to destroy the kingdom of God. However, he will be destroyed before he gets started. In chapter 17, John simply says the beast will, “*ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition*” (v. 8). Paul made a similar statement when writing to the church at Thessalonica, “*And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:*” (2 Thes. 2:8). Remember, the battle was fought and won at Calvary. In this “*little season*”, Jesus releases Satan from prison in order to reveal His own glory as he pours out His eternal wrath upon him. Continuing with the previous analogy, the death row inmate is released from the confines of his cell, only to be securely escorted to the execution chamber. In the brief period of time between his release and his execution, he presents a greater threat as the prison guards must make physical contact in order to shackle him. However, any attempt to escape his doom is in vain. Such is the fate of our adversary:

"And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." - (Revelation 20:11-15 KJV)

The last five verses of the chapter refer to the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. This event coincides with or immediately follows the outpouring of God’s wrath on Satan (v. 9-10). John presents the great white throne as a holy place by saying, “*the earth and the heaven fled away*” (v. 11). It is before this throne that “*the dead*” are gathered. All of the dead are being judged “*according to their works*”; therefore, they are not children of God (v. 12). Their names are not written in the book of life. They come from “*the sea*”, “*death*”, and “*hell*” (v. 13). Since John is addressing the resurrection of the wicked, he emphasizes the locations of their bodies. Some are under the waters (*sea*), some are in the grave (*hell*), and some are alive, though dead in trespasses and sins (*death*). This embraces the wicked who have experienced physical death as well as the ones who are still alive when the Lord returns. John’s description of the resurrection

harmonizes with the doctrine of a general resurrection. However, in keeping with the overall context of Revelation, he emphasizes the Lord's judgment on His enemies by focusing on those whose names are not "*written in the book of life*". He then identifies their final abode, "*the lake of fire*" and refers to it as "*the second death*" (v. 14). Obviously, John is not using the word "*death*" to describe the end of their existence. To the contrary, he is referring to a state where there is an awareness of great suffering. This place is the final destiny of all of those who were not chosen in Christ, not redeemed by His blood, and not justified by His righteousness. The Lord never knew them (*Mat. 7:23*) because their names were not written "*in the book of life from the foundation of the world*" (*Rev. 17:8*). When Jesus addresses them, he will say, "*Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:*" (*Mat. 25:41*).

The bright hope of every heaven born soul is to hear Jesus say, "*Come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:*" (*Mat. 25:34*). If they are to be judged "*according to their works*" (*Rev. 20:12-13*), they have no hope. However, because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, they will one day join the chorus of heaven and sing, "*Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;*" (*Rev. 5:9*). A correct understanding of Revelation will not leave us with fear or uncertainty with regard to our Lord's return. We will be left joyfully anticipating his coming. In the words of the one to whom the Revelation was given, we will be found saying, "*Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*" (*Rev. 22:20*).

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