

THE MILLENNIAL QUESTION

Does the Bible teach that there will be a future 1000 year millennial kingdom on earth? Instead of beginning with Revelation 20, I'd like to go back and see what Jesus and the apostles taught concerning the Kingdom.

JESUS AND THE KINGDOM

Jesus warned those who were looking for a future kingdom on earth that *“the kingdom of God is NOT coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God IS IN YOUR MIDST”* (Luke 17:20-21). This is not to say that there can be no future kingdom manifestation, but it does say that the Kingdom has a present reality.

When Jesus describes the end of the age, He tells of the Son of man sending forth His angels and gathering all of the unrighteous out and judging them in *“the furnace of fire”* (Matthew 13:42). He goes on to say that *“the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father”* (Matthew 13:43). There is no mention of a future 1000 year kingdom.

In John 6, Jesus says that ALL believers will be raised up at the same time — the last day.

“And this is the Father's will which has sent me, that of ALL which he has given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again AT THE LAST DAY. 40 And this is the will of him that sent me, that EVERY ONE which sees the Son, and believes on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up AT THE LAST DAY.” (John 6:39-40).

“No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him: and I will raise him up AT THE LAST DAY” (John 6:44).

“WHOEVER eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up AT THE LAST DAY” (John 6:54).

If ALL believers are to be raised up on the last day, and Jesus says this is the case, then it stands to reason that there will not be several different resurrections of believers separated by a thousand years. Indeed, if the last day is really the last day, then we cannot postulate a few more days to follow, let alone a thousand years.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

The Apostle Paul does not teach of a future millennium in which people in their natural bodies enter into an earthly kingdom. To the contrary, he says that “*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*” (1 Corinthians 15:50). This statement would seem to preclude any possibility of an earthly flesh and blood millennium which is inherited by people of flesh and blood.

Premillennialism	Pauline Theology
Some people will enter into the kingdom in their natural flesh and blood bodies to inherit the kingdom	<i>Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God</i>

Paul presents this present age as culminating when “*death is swallowed up in victory*” (1 Corinthians 15:54). This takes place when Christ returns “*at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed*” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

If Paul is saying that death will be defeated at Christ’s return, then we can understand that Christ is reigning now and will continue to reign until death has been defeated.

For He must reign until he has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

If death is defeated at the rapture/second coming and if this is the last enemy to be defeated, then Paul’s theology does not allow room for a further enemy to arise a thousand years later.

Further evidence of Paul’s view of eschatology is seen in his second epistle to the Thessalonians:

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰ when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed-- for our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Notice the “YOU” on the first line. Paul is speaking to the 1st Century Thessalonian church. They are the church as it was in that day. It is evident from this that he is not speaking to some future group of “great tribulation” saints, after the church had been taken away and neither is he speaking of a relief that shall be given after a thousand years of such relief. This is speaking of Christ’s Second Coming.

This passage promises that the present difficulties of Christians shall be relieved when the Lord is revealed from heaven with His angels, to take vengeance on the ungodly with everlasting destruction, and be glorified in the saints.

Premillennialism teaches that everlasting judgment takes place only at the end of an earthly millennium and judgment leading to the wicked being punished with everlasting destruction. But the above verse states something totally different. Paul says that it is when Christ returns that the wicked are judged with an eternal judgment.

Premillennialism	Pauline Theology
Unbelievers only given a temporary judgment at the Second Coming; the final and eternal judgment of unbelievers takes place after the millennium.	Unbelievers <i>will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day.</i>

THE APOSTLE PETER

Peter is warning of a coming judgment which is going to come “as a thief.” The Premillennialist would have us believe that this judgment takes place at the END of a 1000 year kingdom.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (2 Peter 3:10).

Does Peter speak of these events in such a way as to indicate that they will come at least a thousand years in the future? Not at all! Rather, he goes on to say that we are to be looking for two things:

- We are to be “*looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat*” (2 Peter 3:12).

- We are to be “*looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells*” (2 Peter 3:13).

The Premillennialist does not look with immediate expectancy for either of these events for he believes that they must be preceded by Christ’s return and then a 1000 year period and only then can he look for these events to take place.

In contrast, Peter describes the return of Christ as ushering the judgment of God and the resulting new heavens and new earth. We must therefore conclude that there is not a future 1000 year period in Peter’s theology.

THE APOSTLE JOHN

Does John give new revelation of a future 1000 year millennium? Remember that it is only in Revelation 20 that this mention of 1000 years is laid out. Our question is twofold:

- a. Is John teaching something new that has not been previously revealed?
- b. Are John’s vision (“I saw”) in Revelation 20:1 and the verses that follow to be interpreted with a rigid literalism?

I want to suggest that the first question will be answered by the second. Revelation is filled with a number of the visions which John had. Let me say that I believe that he really did see these things and is describing exactly what he saw.

For example, in chapter 1 John sees a vision of One who had feet like bronze, eyes of fire, a voice like running water, a sword coming from his mouth, and stars in his hand. But I further believe that these things which John saw were all SYMBOLIC of Jesus.

Let me use a further example. In chapter 5, John sees a lamb standing before the throne of God. This lamb has seven horns and seven eyes and has the appearance of having been slain. John really saw this lamb, but it is ONLY SYMBOLIC of Jesus - the REAL LAMB of God.

A third illustration is found in Revelation 12 where a woman who is clothed with the sun and wears a crown of 12 stars gives birth to a child and then, after he has been caught up to heaven, flees to the wilderness. What shall we make of this vision? To take it with rigid literalism would be to say that the Virgin Mary had an incredible wardrobe and that she spent her later career in the desert running from dragons and avoiding floods. Preposterous? Yes, I think that it is. But that is what happens when you try to interpret prophetic symbols with rigid literalism.

It must be emphasized at this point that the ONLY way to make the Bible teach a literal millennium is to interpret Revelation 20 with this same sort of rigid literalism. If we instead approach it in the same manner that we approach the rest of the book, we will understand something other than a literal fleshly millennium.

The Premillennial scheme (and for the purpose of this article I am only dealing with Historic Premillennialism rather than the Dispensational brand) has the following events at the Second Coming of Christ:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Resurrection. (2) Judgment of wicked. (3) Judgment of Satan. (4) Entrance into 1000 year Kingdom. |
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As the chart below will demonstrate, the Premillennial scheme has these events taking place BOTH at the beginning and at the end of their Millennium.

Premillennial Scheme	
At the Second Coming of Christ	At the End of the Millennium
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Resurrection. (2) Judgment of wicked. (3) Judgment of Satan. (4) Entrance into 1000 year Kingdom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Resurrection. (2) Judgment of wicked. (3) Judgment of Satan. (4) Entrance into the eternal kingdom.

I want to suggest from this that the Premillennial is suffering from “double vision” in that he sees the events of the future happening TWICE. I don’t claim to have the last word on prophecy. Perhaps it all WILL happen twice. But I am not certain that the Bible either teaches it or requires that we understand it that way.

CLEAR VERSUS THE UNCLEAR IN INTERPRETATION

There is a general rule of Biblical interpretation that we are always to interpret the unclear passages by looking to see what the Bible clearly and plainly teaches. It is because of this principle that we should take great care before allowing an interpretation of the symbolism of Revelation to dictate a view that is contradictory of the plain teachings of the rest of the Bible.

- The judgment takes place at the end of this age in which the wicked are burned up and

the righteous shine forth: *Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age.* ⁴¹ *The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness,* ⁴² *and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* ⁴³ *Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Matthew 13:40-43).*

- The resurrection of all believers is on the last day: *EVERY ONE which sees the Son, and believes on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up AT THE LAST DAY (John 6:40).*
- The return of Christ and the resurrection of believers shall take place on the Day of the Lord: *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.* ¹⁷ *Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.* ¹⁸ *Therefore comfort one another with these words.* ¹ *Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.* ² *For you yourselves know full well that the **day of the Lord** will come just **like a thief** in the night. (1 Thessalonians 4:16 - 5:2).*
- The world ends with the Day of the Lord: *But the **day of the Lord** will come **like a thief**, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up (2 Peter 3:10).*

Therefore, the resurrection and the second coming and the end of the world all occur at the end of this age, which is the day of the Lord, which is His return, which is the last trumpet. Instead of presenting a confusing hodgepodge of differing events and timetables, the Scriptures clearly and consistently present all of these as one and the same event.

AN AMILLENNIAL LOOK AT REVELATION 20

The term Amillennium specifically means “no millennium.” However that is not entirely accurate as a designation. Those who hold to this position do not deny the words of Revelation 20 - they merely see John’s vision as a symbol for the present reality of this age. This is understood when we examine the particulars of the Millennium.

1. The Binding of Satan.

Jesus spoke of the concept of the binding of Satan in Matthew 12. It was in the context of His having cast out a demon. There were those present who suggested that He was able to do this because He was secretly in league with Satan. But He pointed out that Satan does not work at cross purposes with himself and the fact that he was being bound by Jesus made it evident that they were no allies.

“And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Consequently they shall be your judges. 28 But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house.” (Matthew 12:27-29).

The characters of whom Jesus speaks are obvious. When he speaks of binding “the strong man,” it is evident that He is speaking of the manner in which He has bound Satan by the casting out of demons. The very fact that Satan was being cast out and the strong man was being bound was in itself evidence that the kingdom of God had come.

Notice the specific manner in which Satan is said to be bound in the Millennium. It is with regard to his ability to deceive the nations.

And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, SO THAT HE SHOULD NOT DECEIVE THE NATIONS ANY LONGER, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. (Revelation 20:2-3).

Prior to the first advent of Christ, the nations were completely deceived by Satan to the point that very few outside of the confines of the tiny nation of Israel ever heard the truth of the gospel. But with the coming of Christ and the advent of the church, the gospel exploded throughout the world. The very fact that the gospel has gone to the nations and that gospel has been received by people in those nations is a sign of Satan’s having been bound.

OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD	CHURCH PERIOD	END TIME PERIOD
SATAN LOOSE	SATAN BOUND	SATAN LOOSE
Nations deceived by satanic rulers	Nations no longer deceived by a satanic ruler	Nations again deceived by Satan and Antichrist

People of God oppressed	Nations of world reached by Gospel	Saints attacked
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The Bible says that during the kingdom, “*the earth will be flooded with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*” (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14). At the same time, Revelation 20 makes it clear that evil is also present in the Millennium as it ends in revolt against the reign of Christ.

This brings up a legitimate objection. The objection comes from 2 Corinthians 4:3-4.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Paul says that people and nations have been blinded to the gospel. Does Paul mean that no one believes or that only a very few will necessarily believe because everyone else has been blinded? It would seem to me that this IS the case and would continue to be the case were it not for the binding of the god of this world as per Revelation 20. If Satan had not been bound, then we would not see the growth of the gospel in the world today. At the same time, Paul indicates that there is still a blinding. In other words, BOTH of these phenomenon are taking place today. There has been a blinding that has taken place since the beginning. Yet despite this ongoing blindness, Satan IS being bound with respect to his blinding abilities and therefore the gospel has and continues to be preached in and believed by many of those who are in the nations.

2. The Thousand Years.

...they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4b).

The Amillennial view is that this reference to a thousand years is symbolic of a long, undesignated period of time. This should not surprise us. When the Psalmist tells us that the Lord owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10), we do not thereby conclude that the Lord does not own the cattle on hill number 1001. Likewise, when we read that a thousand years with the Lord are as a single day (Psalm 90:4), we do not press this in an overly literal manner.

The number 10 is presented in the Bible as a complete number. There were ten commandments and we read of a beast with ten horns. The kingdom is said to be of a duration of ten cubed: 10x10x10=1000. It is a number of fulness.

3. A Reigning Priesthood with Christ.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them... and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4).

...they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years (Revelation 20:6).

The New Testament makes it clear that we in today's church is a kingdom of priests. *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).*

John has already set forth this principle in the opening verses of the book of Revelation: *He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever (Revelation 1:6).* Notice the tense of the verb. John does not say that God will in the future make us to be such a kingdom. The aorist tense gives no hint that we are to wait for the future for such an action. It is a present reality.

4. The First Resurrection.

And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand, and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.

Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4-6).

There are several references here to a "first resurrection." What is the nature of this first resurrection? Remember that the author of this book is the Apostle John. He has already set forth the mention of a first resurrection in his Gospel Account.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming AND NOW IS, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live." (John 5:25).

Jesus was not denying the reality of a future physical resurrection - He would mention that in verse 29. But before that resurrection comes, there is a first resurrection - one that is spiritual and that NOW IS.

In the same way, Paul speaks of how there was a time when we were dead in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1), but God made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with Him (Ephesians 2:5-6).

Notice the blessing that John bestows upon those who take part in the first resurrection: *Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power.* Only those who have a part in the first resurrection are exempt from the second death. This is what Jesus told Nicodemus when He said, *“Unless a man is born again, he shall not see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3).

	First	Second
Resurrection	Resurrection of the Soul to Spiritual Life	Resurrection of the Body at Christ’s Second Coming
Death	Spiritual Death	Eternal Death

Here is the promise of Revelation. If you have the first resurrection, you don’t have the second death. But if you have the first death, then you don’t have the second resurrection.

AMILLENNIALISM AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Even a cursory look at the book of Revelation reveals that it is a book with a stylized structure. Everywhere you turn within this book there are groupings of sevens.

- Seven churches
- Seven lamps and seven spirits of God before the throne
- Seven Seals
- Seven peals of thunder
- Seven Trumpets
- Seven Vials
- A seven headed dragon with seven crowns

Too often people have taken the book as though it were a chronological planner for a futuristic prophetic timetable when, instead, it clearly offers a series of pictures that reveal Christ in His workings in heaven and on earth (that is why its official title is “the Revelation of Jesus Christ”).

What we have in Revelation are a series of parallel visions, each of which presents a portrait of Christ at work in the world. Sometimes, as is the case of Revelation 12, we are taken all the way back to the birth of Christ. No matter what the beginning, the end is always the same. It is that Christ returns in victory to judge the world and redeem His people. This can be illustrated by comparing the sixth and seventh of the series of seals, trumpets and bowl judgments:

6th & 7th Seal	6th & 7th Trumpet	Seventh Bowl
1. Great earthquake.	1. Great earthquake.	1. Great earthquake.
2. Voices, thunderings, lightnings and an earthquake.	2. Lightnings, voices, thunderings and an earthquake.	2. Voices, thunders, lightnings and a great earthquake.
3. Angel cried with a loud voice	3. Great voices in heaven	3. Great voice from heaven
4. Every mountain and island taken out of their way	----	4. Every island fled away and the mountains were not found
----	5. Great hail	5. Great hail
----	6. Temple opened; voices heard	6. Great voice out of the temple
7. Day of his wrath is come.	7. Thy wrath is come.	7. Fierceness of his wrath.

How does this relate to Revelation 20 and the Millennial Question? Very simply. In Revelation 19 we are treated to a vision of the return of Christ in judgment. Accordingly, the very next section takes us back to still another recapitulation of the workings of Christ in this age. It is thus seen that the context of Revelation 20 suggests the Amillennial view of eschatology.

AMILLENNIALISM AND CHURCH HISTORY

One of the arguments commonly made against Amillennialism is that it was a theology

manufactured by Augustine in the 5th Century of the church. But is it? While he held to a premillennial scheme, Justin Martyr testified that “there are true Christians who think otherwise” (Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, 150 A.D., Chapter 70). This means that there were already in the second century several different millennial views. From where did they come?

Eusebius speaks of the origins of Premillennialism: *“Papias... presents other accounts as if they had come to him from unwritten tradition, and some strange parables and teachings of the Savior, and some other more mythical accounts. Among them, indeed, he says that there will be a period of about a thousand years after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. I suppose that such ideas came to him through a perverse reading of the apostolic accounts, he not realizing that they had spoken mystically and in figures. For he appears to be a man of very little intelligence, if one may so speak on the evidence of his words. But he is responsible for the fact that so many ecclesiastical writers after him, relying on the antiquity of the man, held the same opinion; for instance, Irenaeus, and whoever else may have held the same views.”* (Eusebius Pamphilus, 325 A.D.).

While church history in and of itself is not a sufficient reason to affirm or deny an interpretation of the Scriptures, in this case, the history of the church does give an added testimony to the Amillennial interpretation.

CLOSING COMMENTS

I do not believe that these millennial issues ought to serve as an issue over which we divide the church. It is unfortunate that so many Christians have used disagreements in this area to try to bring division to the body of Christ.