

Revelation 20:1-15
The Millennium
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Last Sunday evening, I said that I was going to preach a few sermons on prophecy and end time events. My sermon last week was on the rapture. After the service, one lady told me that she agreed with everything I said but had some questions about the millennium. So that is what I am preaching on tonight. The millennium refers to the 1000 year reign of Christ which is mentioned in Revelation chapter 20, which was our Scripture reading for tonight.

Let me begin with a word of caution. I enjoy studying prophecy in Scripture, but I also acknowledge the need to be careful. This is an area where, if one is not careful, one's Bible study becomes merely an intellectual exercise with little relevance to the gospel and the Christian life. The study of prophecy can become almost a hobby or an intellectual game. I am reminded of a quotation by C.H. Spurgeon, the famous 19th century English preacher. Before I read this quotation, let me define one of his words for you. In this quotation, Spurgeon speaks of a "water butt." That word refers to a large barrel which the English leave outdoors to collect rain water, what we would call a rain barrel. With that definition, here is the quotation from Mr. Spurgeon:

I know a minister whose shoe-latchet I am unworthy to unloose, whose preaching is often little better than sacred

miniature painting -- I might almost say holy trifling. He is great upon the ten toes of the beast, the four faces of the cherubim, the mystical meaning of badgers' skins, and the typical bearings of the staves of the ark, and the windows of Solomon's temple: but the sins of business men, the temptations of the times, and the needs of the age, he scarcely ever touches upon. Such preaching reminds me of a lion engaged in mouse-hunting, or a man-of-war cruising after a lost water-butt.

I fully agree with Mr. Spurgeon here. We must not get so engrossed in the minute details of typology and prophecy that we neglect the gospel, the central message of the Bible, or that we forget that the message of the Bible has a practical relevance to our day to day living.

With that caution in mind, let us now consider the prophetic subject known as the millennium. You might remember that last week, I quoted several passages which appeared to be teaching a very simple prophetic future. One day in the future, Jesus will return to earth. There will at that time be a general resurrection of all the dead of all ages, both the good and the wicked, the just and the unjust. Immediately following that, there will be a general judgment of all humanity. And immediately after that, eternity will begin with the saints on the new earth and the wicked in the lake of fire.

The passages I mentioned last week which give support to this simple view are Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29, Matthew 13:30-43, Matthew 25:31-41, Acts 24:15, Romans 2:5-16 and 2

Thessalonians 1:6-10. In review, let's again examine one of them, John 5:28-29:

- 28 “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice
29 “and come forth -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

That passage is very simple and easy to understand. It is straightforward teaching. The passage in Revelation is more difficult to understand and is in a book filled with symbols and metaphors. I believe we should interpret the difficult passage in the light of the easy to understand passage, the obscure passage in the light of the clear passage.

Can we do that? Is that possible? Well, yes, I think it is. According to the clearer passages, the return of Christ, the general resurrection and the general judgment will all occur at the end of this age. Revelation 20 talks about the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the great white throne judgment as all occurring after the millennium. That means that the millennium must be the church age. That is the only way to interpret the difficult in light of the clear.

But some disagree with this conclusion because, they say, the early church overwhelmingly believed that the millennium would occur after the end of the church age, or, to put it differently, that Christ would return before the millennium. That position is called premillennialism - Christ will come before

(pre) the millennium. Centuries later, they say, St. Augustine of Hippo identified the millennium with the church age, and only then did that idea become popular. Dr. Charles Ryrie in one of his books said, “Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church.” Shouldn’t we believe what the early church believed and not contrary doctrines which developed centuries later?

Well, there is a problem with that line of argument. I attended Dallas Theological Seminary back in the ‘70s. One of the students at that time was Alan Boyd. One day my Hebrew professor stopped in the middle of class to tell us that he had never had a student so gifted in the original languages as was Alan Boyd. That was most unusual. Seminary professors don’t normally praise students in the middle of a class in that way, especially when that student is not even in that particular class. Alan was a very gifted student of the languages. For his thesis, Alan read all the early church writings up to the death of Justin Martyr in the original Greek for the purpose of evaluating Dr. Ryrie’s statement, “Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church.” Alan’s purpose was to prove this statement, but his study of the evidence did not allow him to do this. His conclusion was that Dr. Ryrie’s statement was invalid. He concluded that there were very few premillennialists among the early church fathers, that many of the early church fathers who are often claimed as premillennialists were not premillennialists. He also concluded that the premillennialism which was held by a few early church fathers was very different from the dispensational premillennialism which is popular today.

So we don't have to be premillennialists because that is what the early church believed. And what is important anyway is what the Bible teaches.

Let me say that there are godly people today who are premillennial. I am not denying that. I don't view this as a do or die issue. I view it as one of those issues upon which good Christians can disagree. But I will share with you tonight why I believe the millennium is the church age.

First we must deal with the question of whether the millennium is a literal thousand years long. If the millennium is a literal 1000 years, then the church age is already too long for that. But the church age can be the millennium if the 1000 years are symbolic. And that is certainly possible.

In the Bible, the number 10 is the number of quantitative fullness, while the number 7 is the number of qualitative perfection. The number 1000 is ten times ten times ten. A thousand years could be symbolic for a vast, undefined period of time which is the complete quantitative fullness of an age.

The number 1000 certainly can be symbolic. In Psalm 50:10, we read that the Lord's owns the cattle on a thousand hills. That doesn't mean that you start counting the hills, and when you get to hill 1001, the cattle there no longer belong to the Lord. The 1000 hills refer to the full number of all the hills even though there are more than a literal 1000 hills in the world.

In the book of Revelation, we find the same metaphorical usage. For example, in Revelation 21:16, we read that the New Jerusalem is 12,000 furlongs wide, 12,000 furlongs long and 12,000 furlongs high. Twelve thousand furlongs is about 14 hundred miles. Is this city literally one thousand four hundred miles in height, or is the number 12,000 here symbolic? Twelve is the number associated with God's people, and one thousand is the number associated with quantitative fullness. So the number 12,000 could be symbolic for the full number of the people of God.

According to Revelation 21:17, the walls of the New Jerusalem are 144 cubits, which is 216 feet. Now whether this is the height of the walls or even the thickness of the walls, this is all out of proportion to the height of the city, which is 1400 miles, if one takes these measurements literally. But notice that 144 is 12 times 12, and we are again using a number symbolic for the people of God.

We read further that the New Jerusalem has twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel written upon them and twelve foundation stones with the names of the twelve apostles written upon them. This also points to symbolism for the full number of God's people from both the old and new covenant eras.

What clinches the whole matter is that the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 is not a literal city anyway. It is a symbol for the Bride of Christ, which is God's elect people from all ages.

Revelation 21:9-10

- 9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife."
- 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

Let's look at one other use of the number 1000 in the book of Revelation. In Revelation chapter 7, we read about the 144,000 saints with 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Is this talking about literal numbers? It would seem strange that there are exactly 12,000 people in each of the twelve tribes. What is much more likely is that again the number 12 is symbolic for the people of God, and the number 1000 is symbolic for quantitative fullness. The 144,000 are then a symbol for the full number of God's people with an emphasis on their Old Testament roots.

Let's say that the number 1000 is also symbolic in Revelation 20, and that the 1000 years refer not to a literal 1000 years but to the church age in its totality. Let's next look at some of the characteristics of the millennium and see if they are consistent with the millennium's being the church age. In Revelation 20:1-3, the millennium is defined as a period during which Satan is bound in a limited sense. The passage says that during the millennium, Satan will no longer be able to deceive the nations. Is that an appropriate description of the church age? Yes, it is.

The nations date back to the Tower of Babel when God confused people's languages and divided them into nations

based on their languages. That occurred in Genesis chapter 11. In Genesis chapter 12, God called Abraham to be the father of a new nation which would be God's special people on earth. Under Moses, God gave this special people ceremonial laws which acted as a social and religious wall to separate them from other nations. God winked at the other nations and left them in their ignorance of the truth. As a result, the nations during Old Testament times were in bondage to demonic religion and tyrannical governments. In this sense, God allowed Satan to deceive the nations from the fall of Adam until the advent of Christ.

Jesus invaded this kingdom of darkness through the incarnation and overcame the power of Satan.

Matthew 12:28-29

- 28 "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.
- 29 "Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house."

Luke 10:17-18

- 17 Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name."
- 18 And He said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."

I John 3:8b

- 8 ... For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.

Through His perfectly lived life, His atoning death and His resurrection victory over the grave, Jesus has defeated Satan and has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. In this age, Jesus sends His people out into the nations to disciple them. The liberating news of the gospel in this age goes to every nation, tribe and tongue. Thus Satan is no longer able to deceive the nations as he did under the old covenant. In this limited sense, Satan is bound. Satan is still a roaring lion going about seeking whom he may devour, but he can't devour everyone.

1 John 5:18b

18 ... he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

Let's look at something else our passage says about the millennium. Our passage also tells us that during this 1000 years, the Christian martyrs will reign with Jesus Christ. Can this refer to the church age? Yes, it can. Our passage says that this living and reigning with Christ is the first resurrection. The first and second resurrections are defined for us in the Gospel of John, chapter five, verses 24 through 29. The first resurrection is defined in John 5:24-25:

24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

25 "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.

This is the spiritual resurrection which occurs when a lost person, who is spiritually dead, comes to spiritual life. This is also called the new birth and the new creation. Paul talks about this spiritual resurrection in Ephesians 2:4-6:

- 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,
5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),
6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ...

Notice that in the spiritual resurrection, the Christian is not only given spiritual life, but in some mystical way through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Christian is made to sit with Christ in the heavenlies and thus to reign with Him.

The second resurrection is defined in John 5:28-29:

- 28 "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice
29 "and come forth -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

The second resurrection is the physical resurrection of the dead which will occur when Jesus returns at the end of this age.

These two resurrections are called the first and second resurrections because of the chronology of their experience in the life of the Christian. The Christian first experiences the spiritual resurrection at the time of his salvation, and the Christian later experiences the physical resurrection at the time of Christ's return. The spiritual resurrection is chronologically first, and the physical resurrection is chronologically second in the Christian's experience.

Now let's go back to Revelation 20:4-6. The focus there is on the Christian martyrs who are beheaded because they are faithful to Christ in times of persecution. The martyrs seem to have suffered a serious defeat, even a fatal defeat, but that is not the reality. Even in their martyrdom, the Christian is victorious. At the time of his salvation, the Christian martyr experienced the first resurrection and began reigning with Christ. Yet at the time of his martyrdom, he began reigning with Christ in an even more obvious way. His spirit, his immaterial being, was made perfect in holiness and went to be with the Lord. The Christian martyr is now with Jesus in heaven where Jesus is reigning at the right hand of God the Father.

Our passage also says that the second death has no power over those who have experienced the first resurrection. The second death is the eternal death which the lost experience after physical death. The second death is eternal separation from God's fellowship in the lake of fire, the place of eternal torment. Those who experience the first resurrection, the spiritual resurrection at the time of salvation, will never experience the second death.

These two deaths are called the first and second deaths because of the chronology of their experience in the life of the non-Christian. The non-Christian first experiences physical death and then later experiences eternal death when he is thrown into the lake of fire for eternity. Physical death is chronologically first, and eternal death is chronologically second in the experience of the non-Christian.

Let's look at a third comment about the millennium.

Revelation 20:5a

5 But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. ...

The phrase “the rest of the dead” refers to all the departed who do not know Jesus. The verse is stating that their day of opportunity is over. They will never experience the first resurrection which Jesus mentioned in John 5:24 as a passing over from death into life. The day of opportunity is over for the departed lost, and they will never experience spiritual life. In fact, they will not experience any resurrection of any kind during the entirety of the church age. When the church age is over, then they will experience a resurrection, but it will not be a spiritual resurrection. It will be merely a physical resurrection, and it will not be a physical resurrection unto life. It will be a physical resurrection unto judgment.

Our passage goes on to teach that at the very end of the church age, Satan will be loosed for a very short season. Satan will again be allowed to deceive the nations, and there will be a

rebellion about Christ. This rebellion will be quickly cut short by the second coming of Jesus in fire and judgment. Immediately following this, there will be the judgment and eternity.

My conviction is that we are today living in the millennium. This is the age of Jesus' reign. This is the age in which Jesus has made His people to be kings (Rev. 1:6) and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Some think we don't have much to do in this age because there is always a millennium in the future during which God's people can accomplish great things for God. No, the age to accomplish things for God is not a future age. It is now. This is the age when we need to attempt great things for God and to expect great things from God. Let me close by reading our Christ given task for this age:

Matthew 28:18-20

- 18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.
- 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
- 20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.