

Revelation Study Guide

Chapter 20 – The Millennium

Up until this point we have been talking about pretrib, midtrib, and posttrib as the primary differences in interpreting the book of Revelation. We have defined these terms and understand them to be describing the timing of Jesus' return as related to the tribulation. Will Jesus return for the first time before the tribulation (pretrib), in the middle of the tribulation (midtrib) or after the tribulation (posttrib)? As we have talked about throughout the study there is a much different perspective about the end times if there is a pretribulation rapture versus a posttribulation rapture. Our messaging throughout the study has been to recommend prayer for a pretribulation return of Jesus, but to be emotionally and spiritually prepared for a posttribulation return. In this chapter we introduce three new terms that also differentiate how people interpret the book of Revelation known as premillennial, amillennial, and postmillennial.

The premillennial, amillennial, and postmillennial understandings of Jesus' return are often differentiated by theologians more than church members and specifically refer to the interpretation of what happens after Jesus' return. Although it is inevitable and profitable for us to look at these differences and to understand the consequences for their beliefs, we should also measure their importance with realizing that once Jesus returns it will be somewhat inconsequential what happens to Jesus' followers. It will be all good once Jesus is on the scene and we can trust that once He is fully in control that there won't be further problems. And yet this chapter defines a period of time consisting of a thousand years referred to as the millennium. The differences in its interpretation are that premillennial believers understand Jesus will return *before* a thousand-year reign. Amillennial believers understand Jesus will return after a *symbolic* or *spiritual* thousand-year reign and postmillennial believers understand Jesus will return *after* a thousand-year reign. The premillennial and postmillennial understandings both believe in a literal thousand-year reign one is before Jesus' return (Post) and one is after Jesus' return (Pre). The amillennial understanding is a symbolic or spiritual reign. Refer to the chart below for more information about each of these views.

The interpretation of John's seven final visions which begin in Revelation 19 and end in Revelation 21 are the verses that are in question and their understanding is what determines whether one refers to themselves as premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial. These are the seven visions that we are referring to:

19:11 – Jesus' Return

19:17 – The Supper of God

19:19 – The Last Battle

20:1 – Satan Bound

20:4 – The Thousand Years (1st Resurrection, Gog & Magog, Satan Defeated)

20:11 – The White Throne

21:1 – The New Heaven and Earth

There are basically two views of these seven visions – they are either #1 Literal and Sequential (premillennial) or #2 Symbolic and Repetitive (amillennial & postmillennial). The premillennial understanding is the plainest interpretation from the text and its order but it is also the most

difficult to reconcile with the whole of Scripture. That is part of the difficulty in determining the most accurate interpretation because there are positives and negatives of each. The two most likely interpretations in light of current societal deterioration and conditions are the amillennial and the premillennial views. I mean no disrespect to postmillennial believers but the reality of a Christianized world before the return of Christ seems less and less likely every day and it takes the seven final visions out of order. Because this view has the least historical support and seems to base at least part of its likelihood on the condition of the society I find it an unlikely interpretation. I find either of the other two views logically plausible but both with difficulties and inconsistencies to wrestle with. We have talked throughout this study that there is intentional mystery and hiddenness provided by God throughout the book of Revelation and sometimes it may be beneficial for us to prioritize the importance of the doctrines and consider the frailty of our understandings compared to God's infinite wisdom. For instance, this chapter is probably the most divisive and alienating chapter in the entire book and it is the same chapter that describes Satan's destruction. I don't believe this is an accident as Satan would rather have theologians and church members fighting over interpretations about the millennium than declaring his demise. If you prioritize the most important subjects in this chapter with regard to the significance for the believer the millennium wouldn't even be #2. The defeat of Satan would be the most important followed by the judgment of the living and the dead and then finally the thousand years would follow somewhere behind these two. Yet if there is a discussion about Revelation Chapter 20 you can probably be assured that it will be about the millennium first and foremost. So even though it is not the most important topic I will provide some thoughts about the differences between the premillennial and amillennial views.

The amillennial view is the official doctrine of the Lutheran Church of which I am apart and although there is very little included about it in the Augsburg Confession the Reformers largely interpret this section of Scripture symbolically with regard to the thousand years as prescribed by Augustine. The first interesting note about these two views is that the premillennial was the first view of the early church. It is apparent that Justin Martyr (100-165); Irenaeus (130-200); Tertullian (160-225); Hippolytus (170-235); Victorinus (3rd Century) all interpreted Revelation 20 to be a literal thousand-year time period following the return of Christ. There were others who interpreted it differently but by and large this view dominated the early church until Augustine in the 4th Century interpreted the thousand years as non-literal. Augustine was a revered and influential theologian and after this time the primary interpretation of the church became amillennial. In fact, one of the arguments for the amillennial interpretation is that it was regarded as the view of the historical church for such a long period of time and there was almost uniform agreement with some of the greatest theologians who ever lived like Luther and Calvin. In recent years the pendulum has swung back in favor of the premillennial view in the church due to the prominence of the "Left Behind" series by Hal Lindsey and other theologians.

Since you already know my interpretational understanding because of my doctrinal affiliation I will start by describing some of the challenges to the amillennial beliefs in order to present a fair and balanced approach. The challenges that have to be addressed and explained with the amillennial understanding are #1 The binding of Satan is interpreted as happening before Jesus' return. Although we have seen much of the book of Revelation is not in chronological order the specificity of John's seven visions one right after another leads to a plainer understanding if they are sequential. #2 John mentions that there is a first resurrection and although it can be interpreted spiritually and there is language in Scripture that refers to being raised with Christ in salvation it is not as plain as a literal 1st resurrection of the saints (just) and a second

resurrection of the unjust. #3 It is hard to reconcile some Old Testament texts with a symbolic understanding of the millennium when it appears that they haven't transpired yet. For instance, in passages like Isaiah 65:17-25 it talks about a time frame when the wolf and the lamb will lie down together and that people will live longer lives. How are these verses to be interpreted if not in a millennium? They don't appear to be talking about eternity because offspring are born and yet it doesn't appear that these types of conditions have happened yet.

The challenges that have to be addressed and explained for the premillennial view are #1 This is the only place in all of Scripture that a literal thousand-year kingdom would be mentioned. This is also the only place in Scripture that specifies a first resurrection. There are verses about the resurrection of the just and 1 Corinthians 15:22-25 specifies that there is an order to the resurrection but it is unclear as well. It is hard to make such important theological implications with one reference. #2 I find it hard to believe that the Gog and Magog battle (v.8&9) is separate and different from the Battle of Armageddon because of the implication that the entire earth is fooled a 2nd time to side with Satan. I know the depravity of man and the sinful condition of the heart, but I can't fathom people being stupid enough to oppose Christ after what He does at the Battle of Armageddon if this is a separate literal event. Even if they are separated by a thousand years it is hard to believe that the whole earth would try to oppose Christ a second time. #3 One of the overarching questions for me about a literal millennium is about who would be present on the earth at that time? It appears that according to the book of Revelation and the New Testament that the antichrist kingdom will unfortunately prevail (even though briefly) throughout the world and require strict allegiance and adherence to their leader the antichrist by taking the mark of the beast. We know that anyone who takes the mark of the beast will not be left to inherit the earth and that believers will have largely been martyred so who exactly is part of this kingdom? And how much of the earth is left after the plagues of the "great tribulation"?

I don't think there are easy answers for either view. There are answers but they are complicated and difficult to prove either view as an undisputed clear understanding of the millennium. I hope that you will pray, study, search the Scriptures and most importantly continue to depend on Christ for your salvation and assurance as we approach the end of days. I also hope that you take Christ's command to take up your cross and follow Him much more seriously than trying to figure it all out. At the end of the day, we are saved by faith and regardless of where you are when Jesus returns if you are following Him, it will be just fine for you. As far as the enemy goes and as far as those who do not follow Christ, they may have a personal preference for the premillennial interpretation because they will get an extra thousand years before the lake of fire, but for us Christians we will be with Christ either way! There is a quote by "Big James" in "The Chosen" where the disciples are following Jesus and talking about what is happening and he says "I actually don't understand most of this. Just pieces here and there. When good things happen. But the rest? I'm just following." It is interesting to think about how the entire Jewish population believed in a literal king with a literal kingdom and that wasn't correct. I wouldn't be surprised if the entire church thought there wasn't going to be a literal kingdom and then there was.

Premillennial

Christ's Return
Satan Bound
Resurrection Of Christians
(1st Resurrection)
Thousand Years
Satan's Destruction
Resurrection Of All
Judgment

(The thousand years comes
after Christ's return)

Amillennial

Satan Bound (Church Age)
No Thousand Years
Christ's Return
Satan's Destruction
Resurrection Of All
Judgment

(The non literal thousand
years before Christ's return)

Postmillennial

Satan Bound
Thousand Years
Christ's Return
Satan's Destruction
Resurrection Of All
Judgment

(The thousand years comes
before Christ's return)

V.1-3 The Binding of Satan The first section of Chapter 20 starts by describing how Satan was bound. It indicates that there is one angel and not even a mighty angel or an angel accompanied with a large army, but he has the key. This key enables him to lock the Abyss over Satan and prevent his release. We are reminded of the angel who unlocked the Abyss with the 5th Trumpet when the demonic locusts poured out upon the earth. We are told because of this binding that Satan is not able to deceive the nations any longer. The premillennial interpretation is that this is a literal binding of the person of Satan during the millennium and the amillennial interpretation is that Satan was bound spiritually at the cross and resurrection of Christ which prevents his destruction over the nations during the church age. Regardless of your view it is interesting that it only takes one single angel to subdue Satan. We saw that at Jesus' ascension and coronation that Satan was thrown down out of heaven and now we see his binding. In Revelation 12 it was revealed that it had to be the work of Christ that removes Satan from heaven but now that he is defeated it only takes one angel with the authority of Christ to carry out the command. The only bad news here is that we are told that after this time period he will be released for a little while.

It is at this point that you may ask the question why Satan "must" be released again? I mean wouldn't it just be easier at this point to throw away the key and never see him again? In our humanity that would be the best route for sure but unfortunately God has a different plan. I think there are several reasons that we could find from Scripture to support this decision including entering into the suffering that Christ experienced and giving God the glory for rescuing His people from attack, but none of them make it any easier when you are dealing with suffering, persecution, and oppression. When Satan attacked Job the accusation that he made to God was that Job loved God because of how blessed he was. God then proceeded to allow Satan to remove the blessings from Job's life until there was nothing left and an interesting thing happened – Job didn't give up his faith, he didn't curse God, he didn't accuse God, and in all that transpired he was found without guilt. That could be part of what is happening here but on a larger scale to the church. Without God's protection the ramifications are devastating, but the results are clear. When God allows Satan his little time of trouble it will be very evident who still has faith despite their circumstances.

In some ways I wonder if this time has already begun as we have seen in recent years the defamation of the church. It appears that the church is under judgment and the Lord is seeking

to purify her for His return. Whether it was the scandalous revealing about the life of a major apologetics preacher or the downfall of the International House of Prayer we have begun to see cracks in the foundation and it has not been pretty. Gateway Church, Morningstar Ministries, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, etc., etc. It doesn't appear that Satan is bound at this juncture and the results in the church have been catastrophic. Although we know that there will be a time at the end where this is a reality God remains in control and is preparing to send His Son to save His bride and obliterate the enemy.

V.4-6 The First Resurrection Since the entire introduction was dedicated to the discussion of the millennium, I would like to use this section of Scripture to discuss the phrase "the first resurrection". Since the thousand years is mentioned three times in these verses and it is so central to our thought processes because of the previous discussion I am going to provide a translation of this passage without any references to the thousand years to see if it will help us in narrowing down the meaning of the first resurrection. This is from the ESV without including the phrase "the thousand years".

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. **(The main question in verse 4 is whether those seated on the thrones are different than the ones who were beheaded and didn't take the mark or are they three descriptives of the same people?)**

They came to life and reigned with Christ. **(Whoever they are they are reigning with Christ and we get the impression that there is a unique status for these individuals who remained faithful unto death during the tribulation period)**

The rest of the dead did not come to life. **(Is this referring to the rest of the dead believers, the rest of the dead unbelievers, or the unregenerated people without faith? This will be largely determined by your view of the millennium)**

This is the first resurrection. **(We know that this resurrection includes the tribulation martyrs but who else does it include or exclude?)**

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. **(We know that the second death is the lake of fire or hell so is this indicating that all followers of Christ are part of this first resurrection? Will we all be priests of God? – this would be consistent with the Scriptures)**

One interesting parallel to consider with this passage is in Daniel 7:9-27. It appears that many of the same things that John is seeing in Revelation – Daniel saw as well. From the passage in Daniel there are two resounding truths that are apparent - #1 the kingdom will be given to all the saints of the Most High. #2 The kingdom that is described is an everlasting kingdom. Although many premillennialists believe that this text (Revelation 20) indicates that there will be two physical resurrections most of the church believes in one general resurrection for all. Regardless there are many Biblical truths that we can agree on and that is one of the values of the Creeds because they define commonalities for the body of Christ instead of highlighting

differences. It is easy to get caught up focusing on what we don't agree on instead of what we do. What the church can agree on regarding the return of Christ:

Christ Will Reign

Physical Resurrection of the Body for All

Judgment by God for All

There Is an Eternal Lake of Fire

There Will Be a New Heavens and a New Earth

People Will Spend Eternity in the New Heavens OR the Lake of Fire

V.7-10 The Destruction of Satan In these verses of Scripture we see the release of Satan, the deception of the nations, the gathering for war, and the eternal destruction of Satan. This is the most important section of Scripture in this chapter and it is very clear that Satan will meet his end and be destroyed alongside his compadres the antichrist and the false prophet. As I already mentioned in the introduction the question about the battle of Gog & Magog here in Revelation is whether it is a retelling of the Battle of Armageddon or whether this is a new battle being described after a thousand years. Either way Satan makes no headway and before there appears to be an attack, the battle is over. Fire comes down from heaven and consumes all of Christ's enemies.

V.11-15 The Judgment The awesome sight of the White Throne Judgment is imposing and glorious. It says that earth and sky fled away from God's presence. It is hard to say whether this sight is literal or not because in other places in Scripture it appears that the world will be restored and in the very next chapter, we hear that everything is being made new. I picture a resurrected earth instead of a recreated earth but it's God's – He'll do whatever He wants to do and if he wants to suspend billions of human beings in time and space while He judges them and then creates a new planet earth then that's how that will be.

The next question to ponder is whether this is God the Father or God the Son on the throne in this scene. We aren't told by John and we don't get a description so I think you could say either especially since it was God the Father who was on the throne in Revelation 4&5 and we know that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father typically. But I believe it is very likely Jesus on this throne for several reasons. #1 Revelation 22:3 tells us that in the New Earth that the throne will belong to God and the Lamb. This reminds us that they are not fighting over the throne and the Father is not jealous when Jesus sits on it. God the Father is the chief justice but He has appointed the Son of Man to judge and so that is who I envision here. #2 We know that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord and I can think of no better practical application than this happening at such a judgment. #3 In Acts 17:41 Paul is explaining to the Areopagus that God has appointed a man to judge every human being and He has confirmed who that man is through the resurrection of the dead. That man is Jesus. #4 In the parallel passage in Daniel 7:9-10 where we see the picture of the Ancient of Days He is described as having some similar characteristics as Jesus in Revelation Chapter 1 and then it says "the books were opened". This is exactly what John sees that the books are being opened to establish the records of who is in the book of life - as if Jesus really needs a book to remind

Him about someone's life but maybe it provides tangible evidence for the angelic host and humankind.

Next, we clearly see two things that have complete agreement in the church – that all will be raised from the dead to receive resurrected bodies and that every person will be judged. What isn't as clear is whether there is one judgment or whether there are multiple judgments at different times. Some believe that there are up to three judgments – the judgment of the nations; the judgment of salvation (White Throne Judgment); and the judgment of rewards (Bema Seat). The term Bema Seat comes from 2 Corinthians 5:10 where we see the specificity of the phrase "Judgment Seat of Christ". In the Greek this is called "Bema" and so it is often referred to as such. The understanding is that the White Throne Judgment is where salvation is determined and the Bema Seat is where Christian's rewards are determined. A large majority of the church believes in one general judgment which is viewed here in Revelation 20 and also pictured in the separation of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. It is clear throughout Scripture that there will be different levels of rewards and punishments based on people's actions during their lives. We also know that salvation is by grace through faith alone, but once the eternal destination is determined it seems prevalent throughout God's Word that your actions will determine the degree of rewards or punishment that will be received in eternity. (Matthew 12:36-37; Matthew 16:27; Luke 12:47-48; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15) I would compare this to an analogy with our earthly lives in the sense that where we are born is completely out of our control and you could say it is completely by grace. You could be born in one of the greatest cities of America or you could be born in Lagos, Nigeria or Tripoli, Libya. Once you are born though how you live your life will largely determine your conditions in that place. It is not a perfect analogy but I believe it helps us understand the value of the words we say and the things we do in this life because they will matter in eternity. There will be a resurrection of the body and there will be a judgment of the living and the dead.

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