

What's All This About The Millennium?

What have we missed out?

We have been preaching our way through the book of Revelation over the past few months. It may not have escaped your notice that we skipped hurriedly over some of the later chapters. We omitted a study on chapters 17 and 18, chapters about 'Babylon the Great' and its destruction. Babylon is a picture of the Roman Empire of John's day and of all human empires and powers that set themselves up as rivals to God – from Babel to Babylon to Rome and through to contemporary world powers. I touched briefly on the message of these chapters on setting the background to Revelation 19:1-10, *The Marriage Supper of the Lamb*.

The other passage we skipped over was the latter half of Revelation 19 and the whole of chapter 20. The first half of Revelation 20 concerns a special period of 1000 years – a millennium. This is a controversial passage of Scripture and we did not want to skip over it as if there were nothing to be said on it, or as if it were an embarrassment to the views we hold and have preached here, but neither did we want to deal with it on a Sunday morning. It requires a different kind of approach in that we need to consider carefully some of the interpretations of this passage. It has fallen to me to look at this subject.

Let's first read the passage – **Revelation 19:11-20:15 (p.1248)**.

What does this passage describe?

The first thing to be said is that if you don't understand the first half of Revelation 20, it's not the end of the world. Nevertheless, it is part of Scripture, written for our benefit and blessing, and we ought to try to understand what God has to say to *us* through it.

Let's begin by sketching out what 19:11-20:15 appears to describe.

In Revelation 19:11-16 we read of a rider on a white horse. He is called 'Faithful and True' (v.11); he has eyes like blazing fire and is crowned with many crowns (v.12); his name is 'the Word of God' (v.13); he has a sharp sword in his mouth (v.15); he also bears the name 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (v.16). Who is this man who leads the armies of heaven in their war against the beast and the kings of the earth? It is the risen and triumphant Lord Jesus, described in terms which recall John's initial vision recorded in chapter one. The latter half of Revelation 19 is therefore a picture of the return of Christ in judgment and his destruction of all those forces that opposed him and his people (see 19:20-21).

But then, in chapter 20 we read of Satan being bound for a period of 1000 years, a millennium. Satan (otherwise called the dragon, the serpent or the devil) is locked up in an Abyss or pit so that he is unable to deceive the nations any longer until the thousand years have ended (20:1-3). Then we read in verse 4 that those who were killed for their testimony to Jesus were given life and were set upon thrones to reign with Christ for these thousand years. They enjoy a raised life which means that the 'second death', the judgment to come, can have no power over them (v.6).

But at the end of the one thousand years, Satan is released from his imprisonment and becomes the leader of the final rebellion against God. Deceiving the nations, he leads a large army of peoples not just in rebellion against God but in determined warfare against his people (vv.7-9a). But this rebellion is speedily defeated by the power of heaven and Satan is now thrown into the lake of fire (vv.9b-10).

After this, the final judgment takes place. Every person who has ever lived is raised to stand before God (vv. 11-12). Those whose names are not written in the book of life follow Satan in being consigned to the lake of fire. Indeed, death and Hades are themselves cast into the lake of fire and are no more (vv.13-15).

All of this provides the backdrop for the ensuing vision of the New Jerusalem which is the renewed creation in which God now dwells with his people in paradise for evermore.

So it would seem, from this simple reading of these chapters, that Christ's return (19:11-16) is followed by a period of one thousand years in which his people reign with him on earth – since that is where Jesus must be after his return. This view is referred to as *premillennialism*, i.e. Jesus' return precedes the millennium – his one thousand year reign with his people.

A few words of caution

Here I would like to make a few cautionary observations.

1. It's dangerous to build large castles on small foundations

Have you ever played Jenga? It's a game played with long, slim wooden bricks. The first layer is made of three bricks laid out parallel with but separated from one another, the outline forming a square. Three more are then laid on top of these at right angles to the first layer. Further layers are piled on until all the bricks have been laid out. The game then proceeds with each player in turn having to pull one brick out from the tower (from anywhere beneath the top two layers) and placing it on top of the pile, so increasing the height of the tower. The game ends when one hapless individual, seeking to pull out a brick from an increasingly unstable tower, finally sends the whole thing crashing to the ground. The lesson of this game is simple and, quite apart from the obvious one of keeping your distance when the tower begins to sway it is this: it's dangerous to build large castles on small foundations.

Revelation 20 is the only passage in Scripture which speaks of a millennium – of a special 1000 year reign of Christ with his people. True, it is mentioned five times in Revelation 20:1-7, but the millennium is not spoken of elsewhere in Scripture. Nevertheless, many premillennial schemes build extraordinarily elaborate edifices on this notion of the millennium. Many suggest that this is the very period in which numerous unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament will at last be fulfilled both literally and exhaustively. Nevertheless, as they pull out Old Testament prophecy after Old Testament prophecy from its Old Testament foundation and pile it up on the millennial foundation their tower begins to totter. One prophetic scheme clashes with another and the warfare of the nations turns into warfare among the premillennialists over such issues as the relation between the rapture, the great tribulation and the resurrection. It's difficult to know which brick to place where if the tottering tower is not to fall.

A brief examination of the vast and varied literature, particularly from American premillennialists, is enough to suggest that there is something wrong with the way this theory has been built up: far too much has been built on far too small a foundation.

2. It's important not to lose sight of the wood for the trees

It's easy to get sidetracked into the speculative and the superficially exciting, but in doing so we can all too easily lose the plot. We need constantly to keep in mind Scripture's big picture or big story.

God purposes to put right a world that has gone wrong. He has done this in a definitive way in the Lord Jesus Christ, particularly through Jesus' death and resurrection. The world will be put fully and finally to rights at Jesus' return, when God comes to judge the world in righteousness (i.e. to make all things right). In that day, all that is wrong with the world will be abolished – it will be no more. In that day, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, a renewed creation in which God will dwell with his people for ever. The man Christ Jesus, by his resurrection from the dead is an anticipation of our own resurrection and of the renewal of all creation. He will be at the centre of that new world as the one in whom we are forever reconciled to God.

The Christian, through faith in Christ and the possession of the Spirit, has entered already (though not fully) into the life of the new creation. The Christian has begun already to live the life of the age to come. The Christian is an agent of heaven's invasion of earth – one dedicated to bringing in the kingdom.

This is the BIG PICTURE, and we do well to keep it in focus and to let nothing distract us from it. It is this big picture that must shape our reading of Scripture.

3. Pay attention to the structure of the Book of Revelation

As we have worked our way through the Book of Revelation, we have noted that it is structured in a series of overlapping cycles: seven seals are followed by seven trumpets and then by seven bowls. It is not possible to read the Book of Revelation as if it were intended as a sequential future historical narrative – as if it were telling us step by step what is going to happen in the future.

For instance, in chapter 6 we read of those who have been put to death for their witness to Jesus. From their place before the altar of God in heaven they cry out, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' (6:10). A little later, when the sixth seal is opened, we read of all those who opposed God and his people seeking to hide from God and the Lamb 'For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?' (6:15-17). And in the following chapter we have a beautiful picture of the blessings which God's people will enjoy in that last day, 'they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' (7:15-17). Does this mean that everything we read after chapter 7 must describe things that take place after Jesus' return?

Or again, when we come to the seventh trumpet, we read in Revelation 11:15, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.' The passage goes on to speak of God's wrath having come and of the time having arrived for the judging of the dead and rewarding of God's servants. To read the Book of Revelation as if it were a sequential foretelling of what is

going to happen would leave us with a very bizarre picture indeed – many final judgments and many final periods of peace and blessedness, not just two! You just cannot read Revelation in this way without making it into nonsense.

And so also with the chapters we are looking at this evening. Chapter 19 forms the end of one of these cycles, ending in a picture of final judgment and of the marriage of the Lamb. Chapter 20 begins the final cycle with its culmination also in judgment (latter half of chapter 20) followed by the final union of God with his people. Chapters 21-22 of Revelation provide the fullest and most glorious picture of the future that awaits the people of God, forming a glorious conclusion to the whole book.

It is a mistake to try to read Revelation chapters 19 and 20 as if they describe a sequence of future events. You just can't read the book of Revelation that way. No-one can, not even the most ardent premillennialist.

4. Look at those who are spoken of as coming to life in 20:4

Who are those who come to life and reign with Christ for one thousand years? They are described as 'The souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony to Jesus' (v.4). They are the same as the martyrs of 6:10 – note verbal echoes in the two descriptions. It was their cry, 'How long?' that we heard in 6:10 and which has run on through all the pages of this book. It is that cry which finds an answer here, for these are they who reign with Christ for one thousand years.

The focus here, then, is not upon some general resurrection – that comes in the latter part of the chapter. Here is a vision concerning those who have given their lives for the sake of the gospel, particularly those who have been put to death in the period when John is writing – beheading was a form of Roman execution, one which may have been the fate of the apostle Paul.

Putting it together – How are we to understand Revelation 20?

1. The need for humility

You may have heard of the preacher who liked to write 'stage directions' for himself in the margin of his sermon notes. Feeling that one of the points he wished to make was a little doubtful, he wrote in the margin, '*Shout loud! Argument weak!*' Sadly, there is a universal human tendency to compensate for weak evidence with loud words. This is, by any estimate, a difficult passage and one which demands our humility rather than our dogmatism.

Nevertheless, this chapter is here for our learning and for our blessing. We should not ignore it but, in humble dependence upon the Spirit of God, should seek to understand what God is saying to us through it.

2. We need to recognise that Revelation is a book full of symbols

The book of Revelation is full of symbolic language. In particular, Revelation continually picks up symbols and language used elsewhere in Scripture, expecting the reader to recognise the reference and to read Revelation in the light of it: think, for instance of the references to the rider on the white horse having his robe dipped in blood and treading the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God (19:13,15, cf. Isaiah 63). It may be helpful to recall two such instances of symbolic language used elsewhere in the New Testament.

a) Firstly, let me remind you of Jesus' language concerning the fall and binding of Satan. In Matthew 12, Jesus heals a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. The Pharisees accuse him of casting out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus rebuffs their blasphemous suggestion by saying, 'How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.' (Matthew 12:29). Jesus is saying that he has come to bind Satan and rob him of his power and of the kingdom he has fraudulently claimed for himself.

On another occasion, when the disciples have returned from a 'successful' mission of preaching and healing, Jesus says that he 'saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven', saying that they have power to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:18-19). Satan has been robbed of his power and of his kingdom.

The defeat of Satan was anticipated in Jesus' ministry, but the definitive moment of his defeat was at the cross. Speaking of his imminent death, Jesus said, 'Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' (John 12:31-32). At the cross and by his resurrection, Jesus was to triumph over all the powers of darkness (see also Colossians 2:13-15). It was there that Jesus robbed Satan of his power to deceive the nations and, as a result, he is able to draw all peoples to himself through the post-ascension preaching of the gospel.

The New Testament pictures Satan as having been robbed of his power through the cross of Christ.

b) Secondly, we need to remember that the New Testament uses the language of resurrection to describe the life that the believer has in Christ. In Romans 6 Paul speaks of believers as having died with Christ and having been raised with him – this is part of the symbolism of baptism (Romans 6:1-4, 11-14). In Ephesians 2:6 the point is made even more explicitly as Paul writes, ‘God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus...’ The new life, a life which we shall know in all its fullness at Christ’s return when we are raised bodily from the dead, is a life into which the believer has entered already; the Spirit of the risen Christ has given us life and we reign with him. By virtue of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, death itself cannot rob us of this life (see John 11:25-26).

3. Putting it all together

I want, now, to try to put all of this together and to suggest how we might read Revelation 20. Whether I have managed to avoid building the tottering tower of Jenga you must judge for yourselves.

Within the context of the book of Revelation, with its overlapping cycles, each spanning the period from John’s day (at the end of the first century) to the time of Christ’s return, and given the symbolic nature of the language of this book, might we not read Revelation 20 as follows:

Christ’s victory over Satan, accomplished at the cross, results in the loss of his power. Satan is bound and his ability to deceive the nations is curtailed. The kingdom is now advancing and cannot be stopped, advancing among all the nations of the earth as it never did in any other era. Now at last God’s promise to Abraham finds its fulfilment, for it is in Jesus that all nations shall be blessed.

That might not be the way it seemed to John’s contemporaries, for many were suffering persecution and some were being put to death for their witness to Christ. But it is the very purpose of this book to draw back the curtain and reveal what is really happening – what is happening in heaven and what is really unfolding on earth. John sees that those who have been put to death for the gospel are not dead at all; they live, and they reign with Christ, sharing in his victory and in his judgments. In reality it is Rome which is the broken power while these Christians reign over all the world. The gospel which they proclaimed will spread throughout the world until a countless number from every nation and language on earth shall bow the knee to Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, and own him as Lord of all.

And although Satan may still have his day and may still do great damage in the fury of his death throws, yet he, and all the powers that have set themselves against God will be utterly defeated and destroyed. And at the last, death itself shall be destroyed, and those who belong to Christ will live forever with him in a renewed creation where every tear, every pain and disappointment, is wiped for ever from the eyes of God’s people.

As I say, I present this reading of Revelation 20 with some hesitation, yet I believe it is the most satisfactory reading of this passage both within the context of the book of Revelation itself and within the wider context of the Scriptures as a whole. This chapter bears witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ; it is only through his death and resurrection that the promise to Abraham finds its fulfilment; it is because of the cross that all nations and peoples on earth are urged to come and enter into the blessings of God. And this is the very meaning of this present age; it is an age in which the nations are being undeceived through the power of the gospel.

Key points for Understanding and Action

1. Christ *has* defeated Satan and has robbed him of his power. He is a broken power and his kingdom is being taken from him.
2. Just as Jesus’ death was not his defeat but was rather his triumph, so also, those who lay down their life for the gospel reign with him. No genuine service for Christ ever results in loss!
3. The present gospel age is planned by God for the increase of the kingdom, for the plundering of the strong man. Let’s get on with the plundering of his goods before that last day comes.

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