

MILLENNIUM

The doctrine of the end times advanced in many Christian circles today teaches that just before a supposed future seven-year Tribulation period the church will be “raptured,” or caught up, and taken out of this world to be with the Lord. Those remaining on earth will be left to undergo the terrors of the Tribulation period. According to this view, at the end of this future Tribulation Christ will return to earth in His Second Coming and set up His Kingdom in Jerusalem, where He will reign for one thousand years. After this thousand-year Millennium, God will judge the world, this present earth will be destroyed, and a New Heaven and New Earth will be created.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate from the Bible that the Millennium is not some far off (or imminent) period lasting 365,000 days (plus leap year days). Rather the Millennium is in fact this current age in which we live, which began with the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ and His seating at the right hand of the Father and will conclude at His glorious return at the end of the world.

Q. What is the meaning of the word “millennium?”

A. The word millennium literally means “a thousand years,” from the Latin words mille (thousand) and annus (year).

Q. Where in the Bible is the Millennium mentioned?

A. The word “millennium” is not found in the Bible. The only chapter in the Bible where the “thousand years” are mentioned is Revelation 20. It is mentioned nowhere else, at least not by the name “a thousand years.”

Q. So what does Revelation 20 have to say about this “thousand year” period?

A. There are actually three characteristics of the “thousand years” described in Revelation 20: (1) verses 2 and 3 say that Satan will be bound from “deceiving the nations” for a thousand years; (2) verses 4 and 6 say that Christ will reign for a thousand years; and (3) verses 4 and 6 say that those who are martyred for Christ, those who refuse to worship the beast, and those who have a part in “the first resurrection” will reign with Christ for a thousand years.

Q. The first characteristic of the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 is the “binding” of Satan. What does that mean?

A. In Revelation 20:1-3, John records a vision in which he sees an angel coming down out of heaven with a key and a great chain. In the vision, John sees the angel bind Satan with the chain and then lock him in the abyss. John says the angel “bound him [Satan] for a thousand years.”

Q. So Satan is going to be totally locked away for a thousand years? That’s what I have heard. It will be a time of perfect peace on earth, right?

A. Well, let’s finish reading the God-inspired sentence John wrote. Most people seem to stop at the end of verse 2, but the remainder of the sentence is significant: “...and he bound him for a thousand years...so that he might not deceive the nations any longer...” (v.3). In Greek, we call this last phrase a “hina clause,” from the Greek word ἵνα (hina), as found in verse 3. Hina means “so that” or “in order that.” A hina clause always introduces a passage that answers the question “what for?” or “why?” thus providing the reason or purpose of an action. In other words, Satan is bound for one specific purpose: so that he might not deceive the nations any longer.

Q. So? What’s the significance of that?

A. Revelation 20:3 does not teach that Satan will be prevented from all activity. The verse says that Satan will be bound from specifically only one activity: “deceiving the nations any longer.” Those who assume that the “binding of Satan” suggests that he will be totally inactive during the “thousand years” go beyond the specific limits described in the text itself. During the “thousand years” Satan will be restricted from doing just one particular thing that he had previously been doing throughout history, namely, “deceiving the nations.”

Q. And what does “deceiving the nations” mean?

A. Two words are crucial to the understanding of the phrase “deceiving the nations.” The first is the word translated “deceive.” It is the Greek word πλανᾶω (planao), which means, “to lead astray.” The second key word is the word translated “nations.” This is the word εθνος (ethnos), which means both “nations” and (significantly) “Gentiles.” Thus the activity of Satan prior to His binding could properly be translated as “leading the Gentiles astray.” And it is this activity (and, according to the text, this alone) from which he is bound during the “thousand years.”

Prior to the coming of Jesus, the whole world (apart from the Jews) dwelt in spiritual darkness, deceived in sin by the “prince of darkness.” Throughout the world were the “nations,” in which dwelt the “Gentiles,” who were being constantly “led astray” by the deceiver. But with the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World, darkness was driven out. As Isaiah predicted, at the coming of Christ “[t]he people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them” (9:2). “Gentiles” living in the “nations” formerly had no hope, but Jesus came to bring light to the blind and release to the captives. Thus, He told his disciples to go into the world and to disciple the nations, baptizing them and teaching them all Jesus had commanded. Thus the Gospel itself, wherever it is preached, is the “great chain” which binds the deceiving power of Satan.

Q. Are you saying that Satan was bound at the First Coming of Jesus? I always heard that he was going to be bound at Jesus’ Second Coming.

A. Yes, that is a popularly taught but historically recent interpretation. However, the first three Gospels make it clear that Jesus’ power was already binding Satan’s influence even during Jesus’ earthly ministry. And the fourth Gospel confirms it.



Matthew 12:29, Mark 3:27, and Luke 11:22 all speak of Satan being bound through the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ as Jesus rescues a demon-possessed man from the clutches of Satan. Jesus says that He could not “enter into the strong man’s (Satan’s) house and carry off his goods (the formerly possessed man) unless he first binds the strong man.” Matthew and Mark use the same Greek word for “binding,” δεῖω (deo). This is exactly the same word used in Revelation 20 to describe the binding of Satan. Luke interprets the word by saying that Satan is bound “when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him.”

Who is stronger than Satan and who attacks his kingdom? Who “carries off Satan’s goods” by delivering men from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light? Who is it that “binds the strong man?” It is Jesus and the power of His Spirit, working through the Gospel.

When was Satan bound? At the first coming of Jesus, when the power of the Gospel began to be extended, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. In John’s Gospel, Jesus expresses His binding of Satan by saying, just a week before His crucifixion, “Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out” (John 12:31). Satan’s power was finally destroyed through the Cross, he was “cast out,” and he was bound from leading astray the Gentiles any longer.

Q. What a minute! Are you saying that Satan is bound now? Then why is there so much sin and suffering in the world?

A. It is difficult to change your thinking to this biblical view when you have been taught for years that the time of the Millennium will be a time of perfect peace and righteousness (exactly where is that taught in the Bible?). But we must not ignore the plain fact that Revelation 20 speaks of the binding of Satan in only one aspect of his former power.

He no longer deceives the nations, he no longer holds the Gentiles captive. The Gospel has gone out to the Gentile world, and millions upon millions of formerly deceived Gentiles have been set free from bondage to the evil one. But Revelation 20 is specific, narrowly-defined binding that does not at all require that Satan have absolutely no power. The concept of a totally impotent Satan is not found in Revelation 20. Many people have been trained to see it there, but in fact it is not there.

Q. Well, if Satan is bound now, then that means the thousand years is now. Are you saying we are now in the Millennium?

A. Before answering that, let’s look at the other two characteristics of the Millennium as described in Revelation 20 (and remember, Revelation 20 is the only passage in the Bible which mentions the “thousand years”). First comes the binding of Satan. Then the second of the characteristics is the reign of Christ during the “thousand years.” The third is the reign of the believers with Christ for the “thousand years.”

Q. So if we are now in the Millennium, then all of these conditions of the “thousand years” must be in effect now, right?

A. Correct. Right now, Jesus is reigning, and the “saints” (the church) reign with Him. After His Resurrection, Jesus said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” Peter said that “God has made Him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). At his stoning, Stephen saw Jesus “standing at the right hand of God,” the place of ultimate authority and power (Acts 7:56). Verses showing that Jesus is now ruling could be multiplied, but these suffice to show that from the New Testament perspective, Jesus has been ruling from the throne of David ever since his Resurrection (cf. Peter’s explanation in Acts 2:29-32).

Q. But I thought this reign of Jesus was to be on the earth. He is in heaven now, not on earth, right? Are you saying his reign is from heaven, not from the earth?

A. That's right—He reigns from heaven. What is there in this Revelation 20 passage which would make one think it is describing an earthly reign of Jesus? Notice that John says (in v.4) that in the presence of the reigning Christ that he saw "the souls of those who had been beheaded...and those who had not worshipped the beast..." Where would one expect to see such souls? In heaven, not on the earth! The New Testament Greek word for "soul," when followed by the genitive case (as this usage is) is never used of a "whole" embodied person living on earth. These are souls, the same ones described in Revelation 6:9 as being under the altar in the heavenly temple, obviously in heaven in the period between the First and Second Comings of Christ. Remember that this description is of John's vision, not a tangible reality, but the truth it conveys is that Christ is reigning over this world right now from His heavenly throne, where He sits at the right hand of the Father.

Q. OK, so who are these "beheaded" people and "those who had not worshipped the beast" in verse four?

A. These two groups represent all Christians and their presence in heaven. The early church had (as we also should have) a high regard for those who had sealed their testimonies with their blood—martyrs "because of the testimony of Jesus" (v.4). Thus they are singled out for special mention as being there in heaven in the very throne room of God. "Those who had not worshipped the beast" are all other Christians throughout the ages who have remained faithful to their Lord. We are assured that resisting the "beast" will be rewarded in the presence of God. "They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (v.4). Again, these are the same souls referred to in Revelation 6:9, obviously in heaven with Christ.

Q. And who are the ones who have "a part in the first resurrection" in verse six?

A. There has only been one resurrection thus far in the history of the world—the Resurrection of Jesus. Plainly, then, His must be the "first" one. (The cases of Lazarus and others Jesus raised from the dead are properly called "resuscitations" rather than resurrections in the sense that Jesus was resurrected. All those who were brought back to life by Jesus eventually died, whereas Jesus is alive again forevermore—as someday will be all believers in Him.)

Revelation 20:6 tells us that those who have "a part in the first resurrection" are "blessed and holy." They need not fear "the second death" ("the lake of fire," cf. v.16), they will be "priests of God and of Christ," and "they will reign with Him for a thousand years."

Now who are these people who reign with Christ? Well, answer the question for yourself. According to the New Testament, what group of people is called blessed? Christians. Who are the holy ones? Christians. Who need not fear the lake of fire? Christians. Who are priests of God and Christ, a "royal priesthood"? Christians. The answer in every case is: Christians! It is believers, both in heaven and on earth (through their position "in Christ"), who reign with Him for the thousand years.

Q. So you are saying that Christians are now reigning with Christ in heaven and on earth?

A. I believe that is what this difficult passage teaches. But, fortunately, there are at least two other very important passages in the New Testament which confirm that Christians are even now reigning with Jesus. The majestic passage in Ephesians 2 informs us of our position "in Christ": "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places..." (Ephesians 2:4-6).



Notice how this passage parallels the description in Revelation 20: In both passages Christians are made alive together with Christ, and in both they reign with Jesus, being seated in the heavenly throne room with Him. This means that right now Jesus is reigning, and the “saints” are reigning with Him.

In addition, in the great section of Romans 5 in which Paul describes the believer’s union with Christ and His righteousness, the Apostle writes that those who receive Christ’s gifts of grace and righteousness “will reign in life” (not simply after death) by the power of Christ. Once again we see that believers, both on earth and in heaven, are reigning now with their Lord Jesus Christ. Realizing that we are reigning with the one who is now ruling from the throne of David in the heavenly throne room can make a great difference in the way we view our lives, our trials, and our present victory in Jesus.

Q. So the three conditions of the Millennium are already met...now?

A. Yes. We have seen (1) that Satan is bound from deceiving the nations any longer, (2) that Jesus is reigning now, and (3) that His people are now reigning with Him. In the only passage in the Bible that mentions the “one thousand years,” these are the only three characteristics mentioned by which we can determine what and when the Millennium is. It seems clear that all three conditions of the “thousand years” have been met, beginning at the time of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

Q. Well, I can think of a big problem with that viewpoint. It has been much longer than a thousand years since Jesus rose from the dead! The thousand years have already run out!

A. Good point. If the “thousand years” literally means the time the earth takes to orbit around the sun a thousand times, then certainly we have a problem. But a little biblical investigation will show that when the phrase “thousand years” is understood from a scriptural perspective, there is no problem at all.

First, let me ask you this: What is the most symbolic, figurative book in the Bible? Nearly everyone will surely agree it is the book of Revelation. Second, what book contains the most numerology, that is, significant numbers with special meanings? Again, most everyone will agree that it is the Revelation. In that book we find threes, fours, sevens, twelves, 666, 144,000, and other significant numbers. Most students of the Revelation understand these numbers to have figurative or symbolic meanings: four is the number of creation, six is the number of man, seven is the number of God, twelve is the number of the church, and so on.

Now, with all of this numerology in the Revelation, does it seem to be a good interpretive approach to say, “Yes, I know that six is the symbolic number of man, and seven is the symbolic number of God, and twelve is the symbolic number of the church, but, by golly, when we come to that number ‘one thousand’ in chapter 20, it is literal! That one is not symbolic; it’s a statistic!” I think you’ll agree that such an approach to interpreting of the meaning of the passage in chapter 20 would be inconsistent at best.

This “statistical” approach is especially troublesome when we look at the meaning of the number 1,000 as it is found elsewhere in the Scriptures. On the one hand, when “pure history” is being recorded, as in, say, 1 Samuel 15:4, where Saul is said to have summoned 10,000 men of Judah to war, then we should take that number literally, or at least as an accurate “rounding” of the number of men summoned. (If there were 9,998 or 10,012 men, that wouldn’t mean the Bible is in error, of course.) That passage is history, not poetry or vision, and we should take the Bible’s historical accounts literally, or statistically.

But what about this verse: “For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills...” (Psalm 50:1)? Are we to understand that God owns the cattle on literally only “a thousand hills” and that, therefore, if I can find hill #1,001, I can keep all the cattle I find there? Of course not. The sensible reader will understand that God means that He owns all the cattle (and everything else) on all the hills (and everywhere else).

The number “thousand” is used in the poetry of Psalm 50 to mean the “wholeness” or “completeness” of God’s ownership.

Here’s another: “Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to the thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments...” (Deuteronomy 7:9). What does this mean? That if I am in generation #1,001, God won’t love me? Of course not. God means He will always love those who love Him and keep His commandments... even to the thousandth generation! Once again we see the number “thousand” used in a figurative sense to mean a “wholeness” or “completeness,” this time of God’s love.

Q. So you are saying that the number “one thousand” in Revelation 20 is also figurative or symbolic?

A. Don’t you agree? Does it make sense to take a number which is frequently used elsewhere in Scripture in a poetic or figurative way and then “demand” that in the most symbolic book in the Bible it must be understood as a literal statistic rather than as a figure or symbol?

As in the other figurative uses we have seen, the number “thousand” in Revelation 20 means “wholeness” or “completeness,” in this case the wholeness of the time between the First and Second Comings of Jesus, the time between His Resurrection and His Return, the time during which God’s redemptive plan is being completed: the Millennium!

Q. I have to think about that... it’s all so new to me.

A. Take your time...but DO think about it. Look at it this way: Revelation 20 begins with a figurative representation of the earthly ministry of Jesus, when Satan is bound “for a thousand years” through the power of the Gospel (vv. 1-3). Then this age between His Comings, in which we now live, symbolically is represented as that same “thousand

years” when believers reign with Christ (vv. 4-6). Finally, “when the thousand years are completed” (and Satan is apparently released for a short time to deceive the nations once again), the end of the world will come with the casting of Satan into the lake of fire (vv. 7-10) and the final judgment of mankind at the Great White Throne (vv. 11-15). Revelation 20 is thus a condensed version of redemptive history from the First Coming of Christ until His Second Coming at the Judgment Day.

Q. But I have always heard that the Millennium was a time of worldwide peace, when the lion lies down with the lamb. The world sure doesn’t look like that now!

A. I agree that the world doesn’t look like that now! The question before us is, Does the Bible really say that the Millennium will be such a time?

The passage quoted to describe what many have been taught about the Millennial period is Isaiah 11:6-9. Here we learn that a time is coming when “the wolf will dwell with the lamb,...and the lion will eat straw like the ox;...they will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain...” Other idyllic descriptions of this future age are found in these verses, but these will suffice to convince us that whenever this time is, it is not now!

Q. I agree that’s not happening now. So the period Isaiah describes must be the Millennium when Jesus rules on the earth and brings worldwide peace...right?

A. We have already shown that the Millennial reign of Jesus is not earthly, and a careful reading of Isaiah will confirm that this passage in Isaiah 11 does not describe the Millennium.

To prove that, let’s look at another passage: Isaiah 65:25. There Isaiah writes, “The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox;...and they shall do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain,” says the LORD.”



Sound familiar? Would you agree that this passage, written by the same prophet, is parallel to the one we read in Isaiah 11, and that it is describing the same thing, the same era?

Q. Yes, I would agree...the two passages use exactly the same words. I guess it would be difficult to say that this passage was not describing the same time as the other.

A. I think you are correct. But I say again that the era described in Isaiah 11:6-9 and again in Isaiah 65:25 is not the thousand year Millennium, envisioned as a so-called "Golden Age of Peace."

Q. How can you be so sure?

A. Look at the passage which forms the beginning of the paragraph in which Isaiah 65:25 is found. The paragraph begins in Isaiah 65:17:

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." The following verses (concluding in verse 25) figuratively describe the conditions that will exist in the new heavens and the new earth!

According to Revelation 21:1, God will create the "new heavens and new earth" after the Final Judgment. Revelation 21 and 22 depict this new creation as exactly the kind of perfect, idyllic world prophesied by Isaiah, where "the wolf will dwell with the lamb."

Thus these passages do not describe a literal thousand-year Millennium of peace after the Tribulation and before the final Judgment, with Jesus reigning from earthly Jerusalem. Rather they describe the new eternal world, the heavenly Jerusalem, which comes into being after the end of this age.

Conclusion

1. The thousand year Millennium is mentioned in only one chapter of the Bible: Revelation 20 (though the word "millennium" itself is not found anywhere in Scripture). In that chapter, three characteristics unique to the thousand years are mentioned: (a) Satan is bound from deceiving the nations (i.e., leading Gentiles astray); (b) Jesus reigns; and (c) believers reign with Christ. According to the New Testament, all three of these characteristics have been in evidence since the earthly ministry, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus.
2. The number "thousand" is used in Scripture figuratively to mean "completeness" or "wholeness." It is inconsistent with the symbolism of the book of Revelation and with the use of "thousand" in the rest of Scripture to insist that the "one thousand years" of Revelation 20 are a literal, statistically precise 1,000 calendar years.

3. The so-called "Golden Age of Peace" of Isaiah 11, taught by many to be a description of the Millennial period is actually a description of the new heavens and new earth, as also described in Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 and 22.

Therefore, the Millennium is not some future thousand-year period during which Satan will be bound from all activity and Christ will rule the earth. Rather, the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 is this present age in which we live, the period between the First and Second Comings of Christ, when the Gospel is preached to all the earth (since by the power of the Gospel Satan is bound from deceiving the Gentiles) and when the saints reign victoriously with Christ in the heavenly places, awaiting the day of His glorious Return, when He will gather His people to Himself, judge the living and the dead, and open the gates of eternity for all who are His at His Coming.