

WHAT IS THE MILLENNIUM?**REVELATION 20:1-10**

I'll start this morning with my favorite joke about the Millennium. Actually, it's the only joke I know about the Millennium! One Christian asked another Christian, "So, what position do you take on the Millennium? Are you a postmillennialist, a premillennialist, or an amillennialist?" His friend thought for a moment and said, "I'm not any of those. I'm a panmillennialist!" The other guy said, "A panmillennialist? I've never heard about them! So, what do you believe?" His friend said, "I just believe it's all going to pan out in the end!" That's not bad theology actually!

Today, we continue on in a series of messages I've entitled "In The Last Days: What Does The Bible Say About The End Times?" If you've missed the first two messages in this series, you should know that it deals with something called "eschatology" which literally means "the study of the end times." Now, today I want to discuss the Millennium about which one Bible scholar has said, "Few issues have divided the church for as long a time as this." (Grant Osborne) The word "millennium" doesn't actually appear in the Bible. It comes from the Latin words "mille" which means "thousand" as well as "annus" which means "year." Everyone is pretty much agreed that the only place where the millennium is explicitly mentioned in the Bible is in Rev. 20:1-10 which we'll look at it together later today. What, then, is the Millennium? It's a long period of time – either 1,000 literal years or, if you think the number 1,000 is symbolic, a very long time – in which Jesus reigns over the Earth. That's about where any agreement begins and ends! I want to accomplish three things this morning. First, I want you to be aware of four different millennial viewpoints held by Bible-believing Christians. Second, I want you to hear one interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10. Third, I want you to hear again why any of this matters.

FOUR VIEWPOINTS ON THE MILLENNIUM

Now, as we get into this topic, let me make a couple of observations. I have found over the years that some Christians demonstrate a foolish trust in their own theological independence. It can sound something like this. "Well, there may be all of these different viewpoints about the Millennium – all these different theological camps when it comes to eschatology. None of that matters to me. I just believe and teach what the Bible says." Please run away from people like that! Why? Because such an attitude totally ignores the fact that we are discussing today topics that Bible scholars, sincere Christians, and very intelligent believers have debated, argued about, and struggled with for centuries. It's highly unlikely that you or I are going to come up with some new interpretation of what the Bible teaches on the Millennium. What you and I believe has been believed and taught by someone somewhere. Not only that, but what you and I believe about eschatology, generally, and the Millennium, specifically, probably fits into one of these four theological viewpoints or some variation of it. There's nothing wrong with that at all! As the Bible itself says, "History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new." (Ecc 1:9)

It is also my strong conviction that followers of Jesus with a high view of Scripture can hold any of these four viewpoints. What do I mean by “a high view of Scripture”? That means that you believe the Bible is inspired by God Himself. While it was written by human beings, the Holy Spirit so worked in the minds of the men who wrote it that what they wrote is exactly what God intended and wanted written. It also means that you believe the Bible is authoritative. Because it is God’s Word, you can never have a “take it or leave it” attitude toward it. This is not a collection of human opinions, but God’s truth and God’s direction for your life and mine this day and every day. I believe you can love God deeply, trust in Jesus for salvation, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and believe the Bible from cover to cover and hold any four of these views. You’ll discover today – if you don’t know already – that there are some very profound differences between these viewpoints. People from each viewpoint can capably and reasonably defend why they believe what they believe. So, it’s not necessary to doubt someone’s salvation or doubt their belief in the Bible just because their viewpoint on the Millennium is different than yours. You’ll find out today which viewpoint makes the most sense to me, but I want you to hear me say very clearly that I believe followers of Jesus who hold one of the other positions have just as high a view of the Bible as I do. We just differ on how best to interpret the Bible at some points. So, with that said, let’s begin!

The first viewpoint is known as postmillennialism. It’s called that because those who hold this view believe Jesus’ Second Coming will happen after (post) a millennial period of time. They believe the Millennium is a time in the future when the Christian faith will become the dominant influence all over the world. By no means do they believe everyone will be saved. But eventually most people will indeed trust Jesus as Savior. Moreover, God-given justice, righteousness, and peace will permeate the entire planet. You could say that postmillennialists are optimistic. They believe that the faithful teaching and preaching of the Gospel of Jesus will eventually triumph. They believe that when Jesus told us to go and make disciples of all nations, that will actually happen one day because God is sovereign and in charge. Postmillennialists believe the number of 1,000 years is symbolic for a very long period of time. At the end of this millennial period, a brief outbreak of satanic evil will happen and possibly a literal Antichrist figure will emerge who will persecute God’s people. But then Jesus will return literally and personally in great glory. Satan and all his cohorts will be defeated in a great final battle. This will end the Millennium. Shortly thereafter, everyone who is dead will be resurrected. Followers of Jesus will receive resurrected bodies just like Jesus. A final judgment will be held and everyone will enter their eternal state. Those who have trusted in Jesus will enter the new Heavens and the new Earth forever. Those who rejected Jesus will enter Hell or eternal damnation forever.

Perhaps you’re tempted to dismiss postmillennialism by asking, “Can’t they see things are getting worse not better?” The postmillennialist would say, “Don’t limit God’s plan to what might be happening today or even in this century. Remember, a thousand years is like one day to the Lord and one day is like a thousand years.” You should also know that postmillennialism was the majority position of conservative Christians between the years 1500-1900. Four hundred years! Great Christians like Augustine, John Calvin, the hymn writer Isaac Watts, and the great American pastor and theologian, Jonathan

Edwards, were postmillennialists. But here's maybe the most important fact in favor of postmillennialism. It's estimated that in the year 350 there were some 32 million Christians in the world. In the year 2011 there were some 2.1 billion Christians around the world! Christianity is the majority religion in the world today by far. Sure, some are Christian in name only and not truly born again. Nevertheless, that's impressive growth by any standard. So, is postmillennialism really hopelessly naïve and optimistic?

The second and third viewpoints are both premillennial. What does that mean? Those who hold either view believe Jesus' Second Coming will come before (pre) a millennial period of time. Now, the first viewpoint might be labeled historic premillennialism. One reason for that label, "historic", is that most scholars agree – not all, but most – that most Christians in the first three centuries: 0 – 300 AD were premillennial in some way, shape, or form. Now, premillennialists don't believe, like postmillennialists, that Christians will bring in the Millennium with the help of the Holy Spirit. Instead, they believe conditions will deteriorate until ultimately a great tribulation will occur – a time of great suffering and persecution of Christians led by a person known as the Antichrist. Instead, the Millennium will begin when Jesus arrives in great glory and power in His Second Coming along with all of His followers already in Heaven. During the Millennium, Satan will be kept in a kind of spiritual prison by God, and rendered basically inoperative for that entire period of time.

The Millennium will be a time when Jesus literally and personally rules and reigns on the Earth. Some believe it will be literally 1,000 years while others think it could be symbolic for a really long time. It will be paradise on Earth. Followers of Jesus will rule and reign with Him. Righteousness and justice will prevail. The Earth will experience worldwide peace and God's will will prevail everywhere. Not everyone will love Jesus or be His followers during the Millennium, but their influence will be non-existent. At the end of the Millennium, the devil will be released by God for a brief period of time. He will launch one last, desperate rebellion against Jesus and His righteous rule of the Earth. This will be completely crushed by Jesus. After that last battle, everyone who is dead will be resurrected. Followers of Jesus will receive resurrected bodies just like Jesus. A final judgment will be held and everyone will enter their eternal state. Those who have trusted in Jesus will enter the new Heavens and the new Earth forever. Those who rejected Jesus will enter Hell or eternal damnation forever.

The third viewpoint has been called dispensational premillennialism. Like the historic version, it too teaches that Jesus' Second Coming will come before (pre) a millennial period of time. That word "dispensational" refers to the teaching that God has had different dispensations, different administrations, or different ways of intervening in human history over the years. No Christian denies that fact, by the way. After all, the fact that we have an Old Testament and a New Testament points out that reality. But not all Christians agree with how dispensationalism defines or describes those periods of time. The founding father of dispensational theology was an Irish attorney back in the 1800s turned Anglican priest, John Nelson Darby. He eventually became a leader in another Christian group called the Plymouth Brethren. Darby's theology was greatly popularized by Charles Scofield who put together a very famous and much loved

reference Bible that combined the biblical text with his commentary or notes on it. While I'm sure it was never Scofield's intent, some Christians began to consider his notes almost as inspired as the Bible itself.

You should know – if you don't already – that dispensationalism has been the dominant eschatological perspective of American evangelicals for the last 100 years. It's become identified with conservative Christianity and, in many cases, all other viewpoints (including the ones we're discussing today) have been dismissed as the fruit of liberal theology that doesn't embrace the full inspiration of Bible. Virtually all well-known TV preachers and radio teachers are dispensational premillennialists: Warren Wiersbe, Charles Stanley, Chuck Swindoll, Billy Graham, Luis Palau, the late Bill Bright, James Dobson, the late Jerry Falwell, David Jeremiah, Kay Arthur, and Beth Moore. Some evangelical denominations include this viewpoint in their statement of faith. Many evangelical Bible colleges, seminaries, and parachurch organizations are dispensational premillennialists. Most of your prophecy specialists – Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, co-author of the "Left Behind" book series, and Pastor John Hagee – promote this viewpoint. If identifying with the majority position is most important to you, you will choose to be a dispensational premillennialist. Sadly, many Christians are simply unaware, however, that there are other interpretive options that remain true to Scripture. For many believers, the dispensational view of the end times is as much a foundational, fundamental doctrine as the deity of Jesus or salvation by grace alone.

So, what's the big difference between historic and dispensational premillennialism? The primary difference is the role of Israel. We'll get into that subject more in depth a few weeks from now, but let me put the dispensational position like this. God has two distinct peoples (national, ethnic Israel and the Church – those who trust in Jesus of all races all over the world) with two distinct plans and two distinct destinies. God made a special covenant with Israel that is unconditional and they remain His special people. When Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God set Israel aside for a period of time (the age we live in now) and began to work His will through the Church. Before Jesus' Second Coming, an event called "the rapture" will occur. It is thought that Jesus will come down from Heaven and take all of His followers out of the world and back with Him to Heaven. All dead Christians will be resurrected and go to Heaven as well. Then a seven year Great Tribulation will occur under a man identified as the Antichrist. He will kill two-thirds of the ethnic Jewish people all over the world. Just when it seems that all Jewish people will be wiped out, Jesus will return in great glory with His followers in His army. He will defeat Antichrist as well as all the nations allied with him. So, the rapture of all Christians and Jesus' Second Coming are two distinct events separated by seven years or, if you prefer, one event with two distinct phases.

The Millennium begins and will last literally for 1,000 years. What's different about the Millennium from the dispensational viewpoint, is the belief that it will have a very Jewish tone. This will be the time when all of God's promises to the nation of Israel back in the Old Testament will be fulfilled. Jesus will rule from the actual city of Jerusalem. The Temple will be rebuilt and the system of animal sacrifice will be reinstated, although the sacrifices will be only for memorial purposes and not to take away anyone's sins.

Jewish festivals like the Passover, the feast of Tabernacles, new moon observances and the Sabbath will start up again. The Mosaic system, the Levitical priesthood, and Aaronic worship will be observed again. So, according to dispensationalism, the present period of time in which we live is a kind of parenthesis in God's primary redemptive purpose which is, in fact, the fulfillment of His promises to the nation of Israel. During the Millennium, Satan will be kept in a kind of spiritual prison by God, and rendered basically inoperative for the entire millennial period of time. At the end of the Millennium, the devil will be released by God for a brief period of time. He will launch one last, desperate rebellion against Jesus. Jesus will crush him. After that final conflict, everyone who is dead will be resurrected. Followers of Jesus will receive resurrected bodies just like Jesus. A final judgment will be held and everyone will enter their eternal state. Those who have trusted in Jesus will enter the new Heavens and the new Earth forever. Those who rejected Jesus will enter Hell forever.

Despite the fact that it's the most popular position among evangelical Christians in America, dispensational premillennialism makes the least sense to me personally of any of these viewpoints. Again, I firmly believe people who hold this position have a high view of Scripture, love God, and are my brothers and sisters in Christ. We just interpret the Bible differently. At this point in my life, I identify myself with amillennialism. The "a" in front of millennialism means "not." Most of us are familiar with the word "apolitical." That means a person who doesn't vote, has no interest in politics, or takes no political positions. Amillennialists do not believe the Bible teaches that there will be a future Millennium. Instead, we believe that we are living in the Millennium right now – this period of time between the first and the second comings of Jesus.

Obviously, this is a very different understanding of the Millennium! We believe that Jesus will indeed reign and rule literally and personally on this Earth, but that will happen when the new Heavens and the new Earth are created. Amillennialists ask, "If Jesus is going to rule the Earth then eternally and permanently, why do we need a Millennium at all?" Since Jesus never once even mentioned anything close to a Millennium, we don't feel forced to believe in one because of ten verses in Revelation 20 that are open to other interpretations. If you want to use that term "millennium", we believe it is better understood as the reign of deceased Christians – particularly martyrs – with Jesus in Heaven right now. The Millennium is not precisely 1,000 years in length. It's not earthly, it's not visible, it's not physical, but it is, nevertheless, absolutely literal and real. We don't believe the Church will be able to Christianize the entire world or become the dominant influence on the planet. Instead, good and evil will grow and expand until Jesus' Second Coming. We believe Satan is severely limited by God and it could be a whole lot worse than it is. We believe conditions will probably get even worse and the Church will probably experience greater suffering and persecution. In fact, we think the Bible indicates that just before Jesus returns, we Christians will go through a time of intense persecution and there may indeed be a literal Antichrist.

But then Jesus will return literally and personally in great glory. It could happen in the next five minutes or 1,000 years from now. Our job is to be prepared and live expectantly, not try and figure out when Jesus is returning. What happens then? At

Jesus' Second Coming, Satan will suffer a complete and final defeat. Everyone who is dead will be resurrected. Followers of Jesus will receive resurrected bodies just like Jesus. In other words, the rapture of Christians and Jesus' coming will happen all at the same time and won't be separated by a seven year period of great tribulation. Very soon after Jesus' coming, a final judgment will be held and everyone will enter their eternal state. Those who have trusted in Jesus will enter the new Heavens and the new Earth forever. Those who rejected Jesus will enter Hell forever. Now, let's turn our attention to the one passage in the Bible that is a primary text for those four viewpoints.

AN INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION 20:1-10

Let's read it just now. Now, I'm going to share with you the amillennialist interpretation of that text. Why? It's the one that makes the most sense to me personally. It may be the first time that some of you have ever been exposed to another viewpoint, because all you've ever heard is the one offered by dispensational premillennialism. It's going to be very brief, because I'm running out of time this morning. If it makes sense to you, great! If it doesn't, that's perfectly fine. Study it for yourself, be open to other interpretations, and choose one that makes sense to you.

John has a vision of the binding of Satan for a period of 1,000 years. I suggest that because symbolic numbers are used often in Revelation, that the 1,000 years mentioned here are symbolic for a very long time rather than literal. I also suggest that John is seeing a period of time between the first and the second comings of Jesus rather than a time completely in the future. He has in mind, then, a period of time in which both his original readers – followers of Jesus in those seven churches located in Asia that he addresses in chapters two and three – and we, today, both live in. His original readers and we all live between the first and second comings of Jesus. Right now, Satan is being prevented from doing all that he could do and particularly leading the unsaved nations of our world into a premature final battle with Jesus. Because Satan is restrained, the good news about Jesus can spread beyond the borders of Israel and bring salvation to the entire planet – Jews and non-Jews.

John also sees in his vision martyred followers of Jesus – those who have refused to worship the Beast – whether Antichrist be thought of as a specific person or as the focus of rebellion and hatred of Jesus in every generation – and who remained faithful to Jesus despite losing their lives. Despite losing their physical lives, they have been raised to new, spiritual life. They rule and reign with Jesus up in Heaven between the first and second comings of Jesus. Think of what an encouragement that truth alone would have been to those Christians in those seven churches who had already begun to experience the brutality of Roman persecution! Think of what an encouragement that truth is today to Christians in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and other parts of the world who are experiencing the brutality of radical Muslims! Yes, dear brothers and sisters, you may lose your life for Jesus, but you will reign with Him in Heaven!

Near the close of this period of time between the first and second comings of Jesus, God will remove the restraints that He has imposed on Satan. He will be allowed to

deceive unbelievers and will somehow organize an assault on Jesus by attacking God's people – the Church of Jesus Christ. But before any such attack can succeed, Jesus will return in great power and glory along with all of His followers already in Heaven. Satan and all of his allies will be crushed completely by King Jesus. Satan will suffer his greatest and final defeat and we will never hear about him again. Isn't that good news?

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Here's three quick, final observations. First, a high view of Scripture demands agreement on the essentials. Despite all of our differences as to the Millennium, please don't overlook what Christians with a high view of Scripture all agree upon when it comes to eschatology. Jesus will return to this Earth one day literally and personally. One day everyone will be resurrected from the dead – believers and non-believers. Followers of Jesus will receive a resurrected physical body like the resurrected body of Jesus. A final judgment before God will take place. That judgment will determine your destiny and mine. Those who followed Jesus in this life will enter into the new Heavens and the new Earth for eternity. Those who rejected Jesus in this life will enter into Hell and eternal damnation. Friends, these are the essentials that Christians with a high view of Scripture all agree upon. Let's recognize and celebrate that reality!

Second, a high view of Scripture allows liberty on the non-essentials. Nobody is going to get into Heaven or be excluded from Heaven because of your interpretation of the Millennium! Study the Bible for yourself, and only then, come to your own conclusions. By all means, hold onto and advocate your position, but do it with humility and grace. Resist any divisive spirit that calls into question the spiritual faithfulness of other followers of Jesus who have different views on eschatology. I have no idea who Rupertus Meldenus happens to be, but the following saying is attributed to him: "In essentials unity, in doubtful matters liberty, in all things charity." That is the biblical standard of how fellow followers of Jesus ought to treat each other!

Finally, a high view of Scripture knows that eschatology is important. As I've said before, a study of the end times reveals God's ultimate and overall plan. It reveals where we're all headed and why. It's kind of like taking a road trip across our great nation. Imagine asking someone, "So, where are you headed? Where are you going?" And then hearing back the answer, "I don't have the slightest idea!" Eschatology is all about where we're headed and where we're going. A study of the end times also will encourage you and me to follow Jesus expectantly. Knowing more about the last days will give you more incentive to go and do the work Jesus has called you to do and to be the person He has called you to be. Getting a handle on this part of God's truth is an important part of being an effective and growing disciple of Jesus.

On July 25, 2000, Air France Concorde flight # 4590 took off from an airport in Paris. One hundred passengers, nine crew, and four people on the ground were killed when the Concorde banked, went into a stall, plunged to the ground, and exploded on impact in a fireball. The cause of the crash was a 16-inch strip of metal found on the runway

that burst the aircraft's tire. Then the debris from the blowout ruptured a fuel tank in the aircraft's wing. With the plane on fire the pilot couldn't halt the take off. He planned to make an emergency landing at another airport just a minute's flying time away. But, as investigators sought to discover the reason for the accident, they listened to the tapes of the pilot's conversations with the control tower. His last words as he fought to save his doomed plane were, "Too late." The Bible says each of us have only one life to live on Earth. If we fail to put our trust in Jesus and surrender to His Lordship before life ends, it will be too late. The same is true of Jesus' Second Coming. It could be before this worship service is over or it could happen a thousand years from now. Only the Father knows. But when Jesus returns – and you can be very sure He will return because the Bible makes that abundantly clear – it will be too late to choose Jesus. Be ready. Be ready every moment. Be ready every day.