

What Does the Bible *Really* Say About The Millennium?

The book of Revelation speaks of a thousand-year period—known popularly as the Millennium—when the devil will be imprisoned and resurrected saints will reign with Christ. Many thousands believe the Millennium is *now* in progress, that the “thousand years” is a figure of speech meaning a very long period of time, that the saints are *now* reigning with Christ in His kingdom, and that the devil is *now* bound, and has been since the resurrection of Christ. Is this so? What does the Bible *really* say?

Will Christ return *before*, or *after*, the Millennium? Or will there even *be* a “Millennium”?

If you believe the Second Coming of Christ follows the Millennium, you are a “postmillennialist.” If you believe Christ’s return precedes the Millennium, you are a “premillennialist.” If you believe in no Millennium, or that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 is metaphorical and does not pertain to an actual reign upon this earth, you are an “amillennialist.” However, the distinction between amillennialism and postmillennialism is blurry in some cases, for postmillennialism does not demand belief in a literal thousand-year reign. Some postmillennialists, like amillennialists, believe the expression “thousand years” stands for a long period of time—perhaps *thousands* of years.

Postmillennialists and amillennialists may be distinguished in that the former generally believe that the church will reign triumphantly in this world before the Second Coming. This brand of postmillennialism is known as “theology of the latter-day glory (*The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Tradition*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1989, p. 300). The “Christian Reconstruction” movement, with its “theology of dominion,” has done much in recent years to popularize this belief.

The premillennial view was popular during the early centuries of Christian history, though many ideas—such as the “secret rapture”—often associated with modern premillennial dispensationalism, were unknown to the earliest Christian apologists. But since the time of Augustine, post- and amillennialism have been the prevailing views.

Many post- and amillennialists claim that the binding of Satan (Revelation 20:1,2) has already happened, and that it was a “definitive” binding rather than a literal restraining; that the expression “thousand years” is not a literal thousand years, but represents the Christian era, from the church’s beginning to the Second Coming, during which the saints “reign” with Christ by joining His army of overcomers who wield the “sword of the Gospel” against the deceptive spiritual forces of this world; that the

“first resurrection” (verses 5,6) is a spiritual “awakening,” not an actual raising of the dead; that everyone—sinner and saint alike—will rise in the resurrection that takes place after the Millennium (verses 11,12).

Such views were held for centuries by virtually every “orthodox” theologian, and today seem to be making a comeback—perhaps due in part to the failed predictions of several overzealous premillennialists.

But does the Bible support such views? Or should we attribute their popularity to the influence of Augustine?

Augustine and the Millennium

Augustine (often called “Saint” Augustine), who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, when “Christianity” was the state religion of the Roman Empire, abandoned his premillennial view and adopted instead a “spiritualized” interpretation of Revelation 20.

Though he allowed for the possibility that the “thousand years” was a literal thousand years that would precede the Second Coming, his preferred belief was that the “thousand years” was a figure of speech—a symbolic number—that represented the period between the first and second advents of Christ, when the saints would “reign” over God’s “spiritual kingdom” on earth, and the devil’s powers of deception would be limited.

At least part of the reason Augustine altered his view of the Millennium was due to his own views on sex and morality, and to his encounter with certain Chiliasts (“thousand-yearists”), who believed the Millennium would be a thousand years of reveling in sensual pleasures and gratifying carnal appetites.

Augustine’s belief in the holiness of celibacy and his battle against the burning lust that once consumed him set him at complete odds with the Chiliasts, which led him to rethink the meaning of Revelation 20. His conclusions played an important part in shaping the millennial views of traditional Christianity for centuries to come.

Let’s look at some of those views, and see if they truly

find support in the Holy Scriptures.

The "Thousand Years": Literal or Figurative?

While the Bible has much to say about the Kingdom of God and reign of Christ upon the earth, the only place a reign of a thousand years is mentioned is Revelation 20. Notice what this chapter says about the thousand years:

"And I [John] saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the devil, and Satan, and bound him a *thousand years*. And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the *thousand years* should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season.

"And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived [were made alive] and reigned with Christ a *thousand years*.

"But the rest of the dead lived not again until the *thousand years* were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a *thousand years*.

"And when the *thousand years* are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea" (Revelation 20:1-8).

Notice that the phrase "thousand years" is mentioned six times in this section. All six obviously refer to the same period of time.

If the phrase "thousand years" really represents two thousand years, or *more*, as some claim, then why didn't John say what he meant? Is it reasonable to think that "thousand years" really means "two thousand years"? Are there any good reasons to think that the specific "thousand years" means anything other than an actual *thousand years*? None whatsoever!

Some claim the phrase "thousand years" was used in much the same way we might use "million years" or "lifetime." For instance, we might say, "I haven't seen you in a million years," or, "It's been a lifetime since I've seen you." Everyone understands these expressions to mean "very long period of time," and nobody takes them literally.

Many post- and amillennialists say the same is true of

the "thousand years"—it's just an expression meaning "a long, indefinite period of time."

But if John meant "long time" or "indefinite period," why didn't he use terms that mean just that? Such terms do exist, and are used in the New Testament. The phrase "long time" is used several times in the New Testament. In fact, it is twice used of the period between the Ascension and the Second Coming (Matthew 25:19; Luke 20:9)—the very period many post- and amillennialists claim is represented by the "thousand years."

If "thousand years" really means "indefinite period" and refers to the period between the Ascension and Second Advent, then why didn't John simply say that the devil was "bound unto the end of the age" and was unable to deceive the nations "until the end of the age"? Or why didn't he say that the saints "lived and reigned with Christ unto the end of the age," and that the "rest of the dead lived not again until the end of the age"? After all, did not Christ promise He would be with His followers "unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)?

John had plenty of available terms he could have used to describe a very long or indefinite period. But he didn't use those terms. Rather, he used the specific figure "thousand years"—and he used it *six times*! It seems unlikely that a definite numerical figure would stand for an indefinite number of years, and we have no good reason for thinking the thousand years is anything other than a literal thousand years.

Even if it turns out that the Millennium is longer than a literal thousand years, the important question is: *When* is the Millennium? Is it now in progress? Or will it begin after the return of Christ?

In order to have the Millennium presently going on, one must conclude (1) that Satan the devil has already been bound, (2) that the "first resurrection" has already taken place, or is an ongoing process and is now taking place, (3) that the saints are now reigning with Christ.

Let's take a closer look at each of these three points and see if there is any real biblical support for any of them.

The Binding of Satan: "Definitive Defeat" or Full Restraint?

Look at the world around you. Do you see abounding godliness? Do you see a trend toward improved moral standards? Do you see the continual growth of *real* Christianity? In other words, is good winning over evil?

You know it is not!

According to statistics, only a relatively small percentage of those who attend church or synagogue are deeply convicted. That means that even if the mainline denominations represent true biblical Christianity, only a small por-

tion of their members are truly converted Christians. And if the mainline denominations do not represent biblical Christianity, there are even fewer true Christians in this world.

Yet, many post- and amillennialists believe the devil, the “old serpent” and deceiver of all nations, was bound some *two thousand* years (two millenniums!) ago. How do they explain the evils of this world? How do they explain the fact that most of the world is still under the veil of deception?

According to Gary Workman, “For Satan to be ‘bound’ simply means that he will be restricted in some way and to some degree, but it does not necessarily indicate that he will be rendered completely inactive as far as man is concerned” (*Studies In the Revelation*, Valid Publications, Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, TX, 1984, p. 196).

This suggests that John’s description of the devil being bound with a great chain and shut up and sealed in a bottomless pit “that he should deceive the nations no more” is not quite enough to indicate a complete restraining of the devil.

Actually, such a description could hardly indicate anything but a complete restraining! Nevertheless, post- and amillennialist writers continue to interpret their way around the obvious.

Postmillennialist David Chilton writes, “The whole message of the New Testament...stresses that Satan was definitively defeated in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ” (*The Days of Vengeance*, Dominion Press, Ft. Worth, TX, 1987, p. 502). According to Chilton: “it is generally suggested by both postmillennial and amillennial authors that the binding of Satan...refers to his [Satan’s] inability to prevent the message of the Gospel from achieving success. And, as far as it goes, this interpretation certainly has Biblical warrant: Before the coming of Christ, Satan controlled the nations; but now his death-grip has been shattered by the Gospel, as the good news of the Kingdom has spread throughout the world” (ibid., pp. 502,503).

There is no question that Christ “definitively defeated” Satan at His first coming (Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14), but does the “definitive defeat” of Satan fit the description John provides in Revelation 20?

Hardly! Notice that the purpose of Satan’s binding is “that he should deceive the nations no more.” Are the nations less deceived now than they were in the time of Christ?

Further, if the binding of Satan is “definitive binding,” then his loosing (Revelation 20:3,7) must be a “definitive loosing.” To put it another way: Satan’s loosing at the end of the thousand years must mean that he makes a comeback (a “definitive comeback”?) after having been “definitively

defeated in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ”—which means that Christ’s life and work loses its effect.

Do you see how complicated the argument becomes when we attempt to read such an idea into an otherwise clear passage?

Indeed, the Bible does teach that true Christians have been delivered from the powers of spiritual darkness, but this passage (Revelation 20:1–3) is not speaking of the saints’ deliverance from Satan’s deceptive influence, or “death-grip”; rather, it speaks of a complete cessation of the devil’s activities in this world.

That time has not yet come, as the Bible clearly shows. Satan is called the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), and “that old serpent...which deceiveth the whole earth” (Revelation 12:9).

Peter wrote: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Obviously, this is a “roaring lion” that has not yet been caged! (Sorry, a “definitive caging” doesn’t prevent him from devouring his victims!)

Paul wrote: “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness [or *wicked spirits*] in high places” (Ephesians 6:11,12).

Clearly, Satan the devil has not been bound. Definitively defeated? Yes. Bound? *No!*

Seeing, then, that the binding of Satan is future, what about the “first resurrection”? Is it a “spiritual” resurrection, or renewal of some sort, that is now going on? Or is it a literal resurrection that has not yet occurred?

The First Resurrection: Spiritual or Actual?

Most post- and amillennialists believe there will be only one literal resurrection, and that all, sinner and saint alike, will stand before the judgment seat of God. Of course, this view demands that the “first resurrection” (Revelation 20:5) be a “spiritual” resurrection, or symbolic reference to something other than an actual raising of the dead.

Workman claims the first resurrection is “the experience of living and reigning with Christ in that realm beyond the grave” (*Studies In the Revelation*, p. 204). Chilton argues that the “First Resurrection is taking place now” (*Days of Vengeance*, p. 519), and describes this resurrection as “Spiritual and ethical, our regeneration in Christ and union with God, our re-creation in His image, our participation in

his Resurrection” (ibid., p. 518).

These arguments are a classic example of how post- and amillennialists spiritualize away the first resurrection in order to spiritualize away the Millennium. But John’s description does not allow for either of these arguments.

Notice: “and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus...and they lived [were *made alive*] and reigned with Christ a thousand years....This is the first resurrection” (Revelation 20:4,5).

How can anyone deny that John is speaking of a literal resurrection? In this visionary scenario he sees certain *dead* saints who are *made alive*. He then describes the saints’ coming to life as the *first resurrection*, and says that the “rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished” (verse 5). A few verses later he describes the resurrection and judgment of the “rest of the dead” (verses 11–15).

Many post- and amillennialists agree that the resurrection of the “rest of the dead” is a literal resurrection—and they are obviously correct. Does it make sense to claim that the resurrection of the “rest of the dead” (those not in the first resurrection) is literal but the first resurrection is spiritual or figurative?

Of course not! Such an interpretation does violence to the sound principles of scriptural interpretation. If the one is an actual raising of the dead, it naturally follows that the other is as well.

The scenario John presents is clear: (1) The devil is bound. (2) The dead in Christ are resurrected. (3) The Millennium commences. (4) The devil is loosed after the Millennium. (5) The rest of the dead are resurrected after the Millennium.

Clearly, the Millennium is not going on now. The devil has not been bound. The saints have not been resurrected.

And this brings us to the third and final question:

The Reign of the Saints: Present or Future?

John said the saints “lived [were made alive, resurrected] and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

We have seen that the resurrection of the saints is yet future, and takes place before the Millennium. It naturally follows, then, that their reign with Christ is also future.

Yet, post- and amillennialists argue vigorously that the reign of the saints is going on at this very moment. “They are now ‘reigning with Christ,’ even while they live in the sinful world” (Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Philadelphia, PA, 1954, p. 134).

Some see the reign of the saints as some sort of

“reign” that takes place in heaven. Others see it as both heavenly and earthly, since the saints “in heaven” and the saints on earth are all part of the same church. To some, the reign of the saints includes massive evangelization and ever increasing dominion over this world’s political and educational institutions.

Christ is now on His throne in heaven, so does not need to be enthroned on this earth, they claim. He reigns now, from heaven, and His saints “reign” with Him. They “reign” by allowing Christ to reign in their lives, by being instruments through which Christ reaches others with the Gospel, and by helping restore godly principles to government and education.

But is that what John was describing when he said the saints “lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years”?

To accept this “Kingdom Now” teaching, several scriptures have to be twisted beyond recognition. Take, for instance, Christ’s promise as recorded in Revelation 2:26,27:

“And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give *power over the nations*: And he shall *rule them with a rod of iron*; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.”

Such language simply does not fit the view of a “reign” in heaven or of the slow, centuries long process of changing the world through evangelization and Christian activism. Further, the promise applied to the first-century Christians (to whom it was originally made) as much as it applies to twenty-first-century Christians. Can anyone by any stretch of the imagination claim that the persecuted Christians to whom John wrote ever had power over the nations or ruled them with a rod of iron?

Note also that the promise of rulership is given to the *individual* who overcomes: “And *he* that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to *him* will I give power over the nations: And *he* shall rule them....” This is definitely not about the influence of the church in history; it is a promise to the individual overcomer!

Moreover, the reign of the saints takes place on the earth, not in heaven. They will receive power over the *nations*, and will rule them with a rod of iron. The nations the saints will rule are on this earth, not in heaven. This is further confirmed by the words of the angelic “elders” and “living creatures.” Notice: “And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou [Christ] was slain, and hast redeemed us [or *them*: the saints] to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us [them] unto our God kings and priests: and we [they] shall *reign on the earth*” (Revelation 5:9,10). □

