

# What and When Is the Millennium?

Peter Ditzel

The word "millennium," although not found in the Bible, has become a common term in Christianity. Verses 2-7 of Revelation 20 mention the words "thousand years" six times. The word "millennium" comes from the Latin "*mille anni*" found in the Latin Vulgate of Revelation 20 and means "thousand years." Thus, the thousand years spoken of in Revelation 20 has come to be called the millennium. From these few verses in Revelation has come a controversy among Christians that has lasted for, well, millennia. There are three basic views concerning the millennium, which also happen to be views as to what will happen when Jesus Christ returns: premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. There is also another view, full preterism, that says the return of Christ has already occurred and we are living in the aftermath. In this article, I will state what each of these positions believes, and then I will briefly point out which of these positions I believe is best supported by the Bible.

## **Premillennialism**

Premillennialism holds that Jesus will establish a physical kingdom over which He will reign on the earth for a thousand years. This millennium separates a "first" resurrection from a "second" resurrection. These resurrections are both bodily resurrections. Satan will be bound at the beginning of the thousand years and loosed to incite a rebellion near the end. Christ will put down the insurgents. The final judgment comes immediately after the "second" resurrection. After this, is the creation of a new heaven and earth.

There are two kinds of premillennialism, historic and dispensational. I won't get into the differences concerning the so-called "secret rapture," the two-stage Second Coming, and so forth. But I will point out that dispensationalists believe that the nation of Israel will be saved as a distinct group from the church and that God must still fulfill His promises to national Israel. Thus, they assert that Jesus will again have a special relationship with national Israel, will rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and that He will reinstitute the animal sacrifices. Historic premillennialists do not believe this about Israel, but they do believe that, upon His return, Jesus will establish a visible kingdom of God on the earth.

Copyright © 2013 wordofhisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact. Unless otherwise noted, Bible references are from the *World English Bible* (WEB).

millennium.pdf

## **Postmillennialism**

Postmillennialists believe that a period of worldwide peace and righteousness brought about by Christian evangelism, the eventual universal acceptance of the Gospel, and—according to some views—the uniting of the church with the state to hold dominion over the populace precedes the return of Jesus Christ to earth. This, to them, is the millennium, although they disagree over whether the thousand years is literal or symbolic. Postmillennialists also disagree over whether the millennium begins abruptly or gradually. Some who believe in a gradual beginning think that the millennium has already begun.

According to postmillennialism, the triumph of the Gospel over unbelief is the binding of Satan. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released. This results in the great tribulation and the rebellion, culminating in the Battle of Armageddon and the return of Christ in judgment, the resurrection, Christ's delivering up the kingdom to the Father, and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

It is interesting to note that, although premillennialism and postmillennialism are very different in many ways, they are similar in one respect. They both believe that the kingdom of God during the millennium is a physical kingdom.

## **Amillennialism**

Amillennialism literally means "no millennialism," but this is really a misnomer. Amillennialists believe that the millennium has already begun. They are also called nuncmillennialists, which literally means "now millennialists." Amillennialists differ over whether the millennium began with Jesus' death on the cross, His resurrection (this seems to be the most common view), when He ascended to heaven, Pentecost, or AD 70. Some merely say it began with Christ's first coming (not specifically stating at what point during His first coming). But they agree that we should understand the millennium spiritually and not as a physical, one-thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth. By His victory, Christ has bound Satan so "that he should deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were finished" (Revelation 20:3). Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father, is now reigning from heaven through His people. The thousand years of Revelation 20 is a metaphor of the present age. Near the end of this age, Satan will be released so that he again deceives the nations. At the end of this age, Jesus will return and there will be a resurrection of the just and the

unjust and a final judgment followed by the new heavens and new earth.

### **Preterism**

There are a number of variations or gradations of preterism. Full preterism, disparagingly called hyper-preterism, teaches that the end of the Old Covenant and beginning of the New Covenant, Jesus' second coming, the resurrection from the dead (which they believe to be a spiritual resurrection, although some believe that once in heaven the spirits are given bodies), the overthrow of Satan, the judgment, and the new heavens and new earth all occurred in AD 70 with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Full preterists also believe that the millennium ended in AD 70; that is, they claim that the millennium was from AD 30 to AD 70.

Although there are differences of opinion among partial preterists, in general they believe that many of the above events occurred in (or by) AD 70 (or, some would say, during Nero's persecutions of Christians), but the second coming of Christ is still a future event. His return will bring the resurrection of the dead and the new heavens and new earth.

### **What the Bible Says**

*The bodily resurrections of the just and the unjust are not separated by one thousand years:* Revelation 20:4-6 are the verses premillennialists cite to try to prove their claim of two, bodily resurrections separated by a thousand years.

I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as didn't worship the beast nor his image, and didn't receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead didn't live until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over these, the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him one thousand years.

Revelation 20:4-6

But this is not the only pertinent Scripture. We must let the Bible interpret itself. In John 5:25 we read, "Most certainly, I tell you, the hour comes, and now is, when the dead will hear the Son of God's voice; and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). In this verse, Jesus tells us of "the dead" becoming alive. This is a resurrection. But Jesus doesn't say these people are in graves or tombs. Notice some key points about this verse. Jesus says "the hour comes, and now is." It is hard to mistake the meaning of "now." Jesus was speaking of a resurrection of the here and now, and yet Jesus also says, "the hour comes." So this is a resurrection present in Jesus' time and continuing into the future. Notice something else that is important. Jesus says, "the dead will hear the Son of God's voice; and those who hear will live." Who will live? Only those who hear. Jesus would have no reason to say this if all heard and all lived. Only a portion will hear and live.

Now read just a few verses away of Jesus speaking of *another* resurrection: "Don't marvel at this, for the hour comes, in which all that are in the tombs will hear his voice, and will come out; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). The reason I say this is another resurrection is because it has significant differences from the one in verse 25. Jesus does not say this resurrection is now. He only says that "the hour comes." This is a resurrection of the future. Further, Jesus specifies that this resurrection concerns "all that are in the tombs." He doesn't just use the word "dead" as in verse 25. These people are clearly physically dead and in their tombs. Most importantly, Jesus says that all who are in the tombs "will hear his voice." He doesn't say, "those who hear" as in verse 25. He says, "all that are in the tombs will hear." In this same hour, all will hear and all will come out of their tombs. And this "all" includes those who, according to the different Greek verbs Jesus used, "made good" and those who "practiced evil." The former will receive life and the latter will receive judgment or condemnation.

The resurrection in verses 28 and 29 is what is called the general resurrection. Contrary to what the premillennialists say, this resurrection occurs at one time, and it is of the just and the unjust. This agrees with Paul, who declares, "that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust" (Acts 24:15). There will be one bodily resurrection for both groups.

So, what is the resurrection in John 5:25? It is the resurrection every true Christian has already received. Jesus said "You must be born anew" (John 3:7). This is a resurrection. If you have trouble believing

me, read this: "But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4-6). Yes, our sins killed us. We were spiritually dead, as are most people on the face of the earth. But God made us alive; He "raised us up" with Christ. That is a resurrection. It is a spiritual resurrection, but it is a resurrection all the same, and it is the resurrection Jesus is speaking of in John 5:25. Bear in mind that this passage also tells us that we now "sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." This will become important as we look at Revelation 20.

Let's look at a couple of other Scriptures to drive home the point. "For our citizenship is in heaven, from where we also wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). And, "If then you were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3).

So, there are indeed two resurrections for God's elect. One is spiritual. It occurs when we are born again and given new life in Christ and we are made to "sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." This may boggle the mind a bit, but it is true. The other resurrection is a physical one when everyone, the just and the unjust, will be raised bodily and either rewarded or condemned.

Now, let's look again at Revelation 20. As you read Revelation 20:4, you will see that John said he saw "the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus." John does not say he saw the people or the bodies, but the souls. This isn't the first time John has seen such souls. In Revelation 6:9-11, he says, "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been killed for the Word of God, and for the testimony of the Lamb which they had. They cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, Master, the holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' A long white robe was given to each of them. They were told that they should rest yet for a while, until their fellow servants and their brothers, who would also be killed even as they were, should complete their course." These are dead martyrs whose souls—not resurrected bodies—are at this time in heaven.

Among commentators who agree that what this verse pictures are not the bodily resurrected saints in some future millennium but the souls of the saints right now, some say only martyrs are in view. But others point out that Revelation 20:4 goes on to say, "and such as didn't worship the beast nor his image, and didn't receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." In other words, this verse may be depicting the souls of all of the saints—those physically dead and those physically alive—living and reigning with Christ in heaven. Does this seem too astounding? Don't forget Ephesians 2:4-6: "But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Read Romans 8:30: "Whom he predestined, those he also called. Whom he called, those he also justified. Whom he justified, those he also glorified." "Glorified" is not in the future tense. This is an example of what theologians call "now, not yet." Our glorification and reigning with Christ is a reality right now, although a fuller realization of this still awaits us. But one of the pitfalls of premillennialism is that while its adherents are waiting to reign in a future millennium, they are missing the heavenly reign the Bible says we have right now. The *ekklēsia* (often incorrectly translated "church") is God's assembly, not just an assembling. It is the assembly, the legislature of the kingdom of God, and, "Most certainly I tell you, whatever things you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever things you release on earth will have been released in heaven. Again, assuredly I tell you, that if two of you will agree on earth concerning anything that they will ask, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:18-20). (For more information about the *ekklēsia*, see "*Ekklēsia* or Church, Does It Matter?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/ekkleisia.htm>.)

So, Revelation 20:4 represents the spiritual resurrection of regeneration, being born again and reigning with Christ right now. Verse 5 goes on to explain. "The rest of the dead didn't live until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection." The first sentence is an inserted thought, a parenthetical statement. This is about something that will happen later, and John will begin to elaborate on it in a few verses. The second sentence is a label for verse 4. What John showed us in verse 4, the present reign of the born again, spiritually resurrected saints is the first resurrection. In

verse 6, John further states: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over these, the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him one thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). And, indeed, we are right now a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

After this, in Revelation 20, we see what happens after the millennial period with the release of Satan and the rebellion he will lead. But I want to come down to verses 11-15. Here we see what John alluded to in verse 5. This is the general, bodily resurrection that has not yet happened. It is the only general, bodily resurrection. It is immediately accompanied by judgment, and, as verse 15 says, "If anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire."

So, there are not two, physical, bodily resurrections separated by one-thousand years. There is only one such resurrection, and it is at the time of the judgment. But there is the first resurrection that is a spiritual resurrection of God's saints when they are born again and begin to reign with Christ in heaven.

*When Christ comes, He comes to deliver up the kingdom to His father:* "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then those who are Christ's, at his coming. Then the end comes, when he will deliver up the Kingdom to God, even the Father; when he will have abolished all rule and all authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:22-24). There is no gap of a thousand years between Jesus' second coming and His delivering up the kingdom.

*The saved of Israel and the church are not distinct:* The Bible says that all, Jews and Greeks (representing Gentiles) are members of *one body*: "For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all given to drink into one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13; see also Colossians 3:11). Now notice Galatians 3:27-29: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise." This not only tells us that there is no longer a distinction between Jews and Gentiles, but that Gentiles in Christ are as much the heirs of the promise as are saved Jews. Further, Paul tells us, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly,

neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit not in the letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28-29). If being a Jew is now a spiritual matter, not dependent upon nationality and circumcision of the flesh, then it is logically impossible for Jewish and Gentile Christians to be treated differently. They are both one and the same people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Peter 2:9).

*All of God's promises to Israel have been fulfilled; not a word has failed:* "And the lord gave to Israel all the land which he swore by an oath to give to their fathers; and they inherited it, and dwelt in it. And the lord rested them round about in so far as he swore by an oath to their fathers. Not one rose up before them of all their enemies; the lord delivered all their enemies into their hands. Not a word failed from all of the good words which the lord spoke to the sons of Israel; all came to pass" (Joshua 21:43-45, *Apostolic Bible Polyglot*).

*A return to animal sacrifices would be blasphemous:* The writer of Hebrews says that "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4), and that "now once at the end of the ages, he [Christ] has been revealed to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this, judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, without sin, to those who are eagerly waiting for him for salvation" (Hebrews 9:26-28). The animal sacrifices merely pictured the reality of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. They were repeated as reminders of sin until Jesus' sacrifice took sin away. To return to the animal sacrifices would be to blasphemously deny what Jesus Christ accomplished with His death and put Him to open shame (see Hebrews 6:6).

*The Bible tells us that, contrary to postmillennialism, in the last days, things will be bad, not good:* "But know this, that in the last days, grievous times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, fierce, no lovers of good, traitors, headstrong, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.... But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:1-4, 13). Jesus commissioned us to preach the Gospel to the world, but He never said that this would result in the

conversion of the whole world (see Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15-18).

*The kingdom of God is not a carnal kingdom:* In John 18:36, Jesus said, "My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight, that I wouldn't be delivered to the Jews. But now my Kingdom is not from here." Jesus was clearly saying that His kingdom was not connected to the politics and nations of this world—not Israel, Rome, the United States, or the United Nations. It does not have and cannot have anything to do with them. (For more information, read "Why did Pilate find nothing with which to charge Jesus?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/pilateqa.htm>). Yet dispensationalists connect it with the nation of Israel, all premillennialists believe Christ will reign over a physical kingdom on the earth, and the postmillennialists envision Christians using politics, national governments, and laws to create what would really be a carnal, worldly "kingdom of God." I think the principle of Paul's admonition to the Galatians could well apply to these people: "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). Maybe, since Jesus says we must be born again to see the kingdom of God (and this would not be the case if it were physical), historic premillennialists, dispensational premillennialists, and postmillennialists should take Jesus' advice to the Laodiceans and anoint their eyes with "eye salve" that they may see.

*The general resurrection is a bodily resurrection:* The accounts of Jesus' resurrection show that His body was gone from the tomb (see, for example, Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-15). Later, the resurrected Jesus appeared to His disciples. "But they were terrified and filled with fear, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is truly me. Touch me and see, for a spirit doesn't have flesh and bones, as you see that I have'" (Luke 24:37-39). Jesus in His resurrected form was a flesh and bone body.

Speaking of the death and resurrection of the body, Paul said, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is also a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). The natural body's life comes from nature; it is sustained by the oxygen we breathe that is conveyed to the cells by our blood (Genesis 2:7; 9:4; Leviticus 17:11). The spiritual body's life comes from the Spirit. That is why Paul calls it a spiritual body. It can do things the natural body cannot (Luke 24:31; John 20:19). But it is still a body with flesh and

bone, and the absence of Jesus' body from His tomb after His resurrection shows us that the change from the natural body to the spiritual body concerns an instantaneous change of the source of life, the giving of what we would consider to be supernatural powers, and a glorification (1 Corinthians 15:43). It is no longer corrupt flesh and blood. It is incorruptible, but it is still our resurrected body, a body that is recognizable as the one we had before death (John 20:27). Thus, the full preterist claim that the general resurrection is past and that it was a resurrection of the spirit that is later given a body is inconsistent with Scripture.

*Jesus' return will be personal, bodily, and visible:* "When he had said these things, as they were looking, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. While they were looking steadfastly into the sky as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white clothing, who also said, 'You men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who was received up from you into the sky will come back in the same way as you saw him going into the sky'" (Acts 1:9-11). "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him. All the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Even so, Amen" (Revelation 1:7). Revelation is largely written in symbolic language, but this statement is introductory and appears to be in plain language. Everyone will see Him, and the people of all races, clans, nations, and so forth will mourn. But in the full preterist account of the return of Christ, He did not return bodily and visibly. And He returned only to Jerusalem. Certainly, the people of all tribes would not have mourned because they would not have even known about it.

Surely, the period between AD 30 and AD 70 was the last days for Israel. With the culmination of those days in the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple and the fearful signs that witnesses recorded that accompanied this, God showed outwardly that He had already ended the Old Covenant. He showed that He had previously terminated His special relationship with Israel as a nation. This period was *a* coming of Christ in wrath against the unbelieving, disobedient Jews who had rejected the Messiah. But the full preterist position—that this was *the* final coming of Christ in glory during which the resurrection will occur and the saints meet Him in the air—does not fit Scripture.

## **What Eschatological Position Is Left?**

I could have given many more arguments against premillennialism, postmillennialism, and full preterism. But these Scriptures are enough to refute these systems. What is left is amillennialism and some forms of partial preterism that agree with it.

Certainly, Jesus is right now "seated at the right hand of the power of God" (read Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). After His resurrection, Jesus said, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). Speaking of the authority the Father gave Christ, Paul wrote, "For, 'He put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when he says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is evident that he is excepted who subjected all things to him. When all things have been subjected to him, then the Son will also himself be subjected to him who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:27-28).

Jesus Christ is now reigning in heaven. We are living in the kingdom of God (see "The Gospel of the Kingdom of God" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/gospelkingdom.htm>). You will not see this with your physical eyes. You must perceive it by faith, and you will have that faith only if you are born again: "Most certainly, I tell you, unless one is born anew, he can't see the Kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

The fact that, since Jesus' resurrection, the Gospel has successfully reached people around the globe shows that the nations are no longer, as they were under the Old Covenant, in total darkness. Satan is bound so that he cannot deceive the nations. He is bound and his house is being plundered as the Gospel is preached to all nations. Jesus is saving His people and Satan can do nothing to stop it. This does not mean he can do nothing at all. Satan is very active in this world. He snatches the Gospel away from the non-elect (Matthew 13:4, 19), but he is now unable to keep the world in complete spiritual darkness.

We must understand that the picture of Satan being bound in Revelation 20 is figurative language. Satan's hands are not literally bound; he has not literally been thrown into a bottomless pit. We are meant to understand that God is limiting Satan's powers. Second Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 tell us of the sinning angels—the demons—whom God in ancient times cast into Tartarus and put under chains. Yet, in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, demons are very active.

Apparently, if they had not been limited, they could have been even more active. Similarly, Satan their chief is now also bound. He cannot stop Christ's kingdom. His efforts at blinding the elect will fail. His attempts to turn them from the faith will not succeed. His strivings to accuse the brethren are in vain because they overcome him through the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 12:10-11). The saints will always ultimately persevere. Satan is furious: "Woe to the earth and to the sea, because the devil has gone down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has but a short time" (verse 12). But he is bound and cannot do all that he would.

In the future, he will be released for a short time (Revelation 20:7-10). He will again deceive the nations. It may be that no one will be saved at that time, but this does not mean that God is thwarted. It would only mean that all of the elect will have already been saved. Satan will also persecute the saints. I personally believe that this may come about through a reversal of the separation of church and state, freedom of religion, and religious toleration. Only state-sanctioned, false religions will be tolerated, and those who believe the truth will be persecuted. That is my opinion. But the Bible tells us that God will defeat Satan, and he will be thrown into the lake of fire.

For reasons I have given above, it is foolish to believe that Jesus' return for His saints and the general resurrection have already occurred. The return of Jesus followed by the resurrection of the just and the unjust, the final judgment, and the coming of the new heavens and new earth are yet to happen. But we are living in the kingdom of God and the "millennium" right now.