

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #74: THE THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN OF CHRIST (PART ONE)

By John Temples

In this two-part article we will examine a doctrine called *millennialism*, which is defined as “the belief that Christ will return and establish a kingdom on earth for a duration of one thousand years.” The term comes from the Latin word *millennium*, which means a thousand years. This doctrine is espoused by large numbers of people and taught as dogma by many churches. Here are some typical descriptions of the Millennium:

- “The great majority of evangelical Christians believe that the kingdom of God shall have universal sway over the earth, and that righteousness and peace and the knowledge of the Lord shall everywhere prevail. This happy time is commonly called the Millennium, or the thousand years’ reign.”
(International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, article on the Millennium.)
- “[When Jesus] has returned back to our earth for the second and final time—what exactly is He going to do? He is going to be setting up a 1,000 year Millennium Kingdom in which He will literally rule this entire earth from the city of Jerusalem.... The Bible says this period will be a time of perfect peace.... Men will no longer war with one another and even the wild beasts like tigers and lions will be tame. All of the saints who have been living with Jesus in heaven will be coming down with Him to help Him rule the nations of this world.” (Internet article, author unknown.)

Is this true? Will the Lord indeed set up an earthly kingdom and rule mankind on earth for a thousand years? The correct answer to this is important for our understanding of Scripture and for our future. But right away, we see...

SOME MAJOR PROBLEMS WITH THE MILLENNIAL THEORY

First, it is based on the premise that Christ has not yet set up His kingdom. But multiple Bible passages affirm that He has, and that the kingdom of Christ and the

church of Christ are the same institution. Mark 9:1 says, “And He said to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.’” (Either Jesus established His kingdom in the first century, or there are some 2,000-year-old disciples walking around.) Paul said in Colossians 1:13, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (note the past tense of the verbs). John, writing about AD 95, said he was in the kingdom (Revelation 1:9).

Second, the millennial theory assumes that Christ is not now ruling or reigning over His people. But 1 Timothy 6:15 states that Christ is now King of kings and Lord of lords, not that He will become such in the future. And 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 poses multiple problems for those who believe in a millennial reign. It says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then comes *the end*, when He *delivers the kingdom to God the Father*, when He *puts an end to all rule and all authority and power*. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”

Note the points made in this passage:

- Christ’s coming will mark the end, not the beginning of His kingdom reign.
- Verse 24 states that when He returns, it will be to deliver up the kingdom, not set up the kingdom.
- Paul further affirms that when He comes back, it will not be to assume earthly power, but to put an end to all earthly power and rule.
- Christ must reign until death is destroyed (verse 26). People are still dying, so death has not been destroyed; hence, Christ is still reigning.

Third, we learn from 2 Peter 3 and other passages that when the Lord returns, the earth will pass away, not become a paradise. “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens [the atmosphere and space] will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10).

Fourth, Christ already has a throne--the most glorious throne possible. He is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven (Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1). Why would He want to exchange that throne for a dusty, fumigated, renovated earthly throne in Jerusalem, the city where He was rejected and crucified? And I know the faithful ones who have died in Christ, and are enjoying rest, are going to be thrilled to hear Jesus say, "Come on, folks, let's all go back down and live in physical bodies on the physical earth and sit on physical thrones for a thousand years"!

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN?

If this doctrine (a thousand-year reign of Christ on a paradisiacal earth) is true, it would be a major and sensational Bible subject. Surely the Bible would teach and declare it in multiple passages. So, let us look up and examine every Scripture in God's word that mentions a thousand-year reign.

Don't worry--there's only one. It's Revelation 20:1-6—"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while. And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years."

Well, that's not exactly shouting out a millennial reign of Christ on earth. In fact, if you read Revelation 20 carefully, you will see that NONE of the basic tenets of millennialism is found in the text:

- It does not speak of a return of Christ to earth.
- It does not speak of a reign of Christ on earth.
- It does not mention a reign of Christ at all; rather, it speaks of a reign of souls with Christ.
- It does not say anything about Jerusalem. The location of the reign is not stated.
- It says nothing about a universal time of peace and prosperity.
- It does not speak of a reign of all the saints, but rather a specific subgroup (those who were beheaded for their witness to Jesus--martyrs).

SO WHAT IS THE THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN OF REVELATION 20?

Whatever this thousand-year reign is, it begins with the binding of Satan (verses 1-3a). The only thing I know that can bind or restrain Satan is the word of God. So the text evidently speaks of a decree from God ending some power Satan previously had over the earth. During a large part of the time since Christ was on the earth, Satan was NOT bound. Revelation 13:7 says that, for a time, "authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation." (Satan basically had a blank check to persecute the church.)

Compare Revelation 13:7 with 20:3:

- In 13:7, Satan has almost unlimited authority over the nations.
- In 20:3, he is "bound...shut up...and sealed," unable to "deceive the nations anymore."
- So the "binding" of Satan has to do with curtailing the extent of his power to deceive mankind.
- What connects 13:7 with 20:3 is the common term "the nations."

When, we ask, did Satan have power to deceive the nations and use laws and governments to persecute Christians? The most likely time, in my view, was the

Dark Ages (ca AD 500-1800). During that time, the Roman church had almost total political and religious power. The popes routinely used the governments of nations (particularly in Europe) to control the masses and put to death those they considered to be heretics.

Toward the end of the Dark Ages, ca AD 1500-1800, several things happened that broke Satan's power over the nations:

- Courageous individuals like John Wycliffe and Martin Luther translated the Bible into the language of the common people, over the objections of the Roman church.
- The printing press was invented, and the first book to be printed was the Bible.
- The Protestant Reformation brought about a revolt against the power of the Roman popes.
- The Restoration Movement in the early 1800s was a powerful effort to restore New Testament Christianity.
- The French Revolution, which began in 1793, marked the beginning of the end of the political power of the Roman popes.
- An explosion of missions, Bible scholarship and translation, and archeological discoveries beginning around 1800 further weakened the control Satan had over the nations.

All these events, converging on the beginning of the 19th century, could legitimately be called "the binding of Satan." His authority over the nations was taken away. He could still tempt people individually, but no longer could he use political force to try to destroy the church.

So if this is correct, when did the thousand-year period--the binding of Satan and the millennium--begin? That question and others we will answer, Lord willing, in Part 2 of this article. --John Temples