

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #74:

THE THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN OF CHRIST (PART TWO)

By John Temples

In this two-part article we are studying a widely-believed doctrine called *millennialism*, which is the idea that when Christ returns, it will not be to destroy the earth but to set up an earthly kingdom and rule for a thousand years. This doctrine is based on Revelation 20:1-6 (the only place in Scripture which speaks of a thousand-year reign), which is reprinted here for reference:

”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.”

We learned in part one that there are major Biblical problems with the idea of a future earthly reign of Christ; principally, that He already has a kingdom (the church) and is already reigning in heaven.

We further saw that this thousand-year period spoken of in Revelation 20, whatever it is, is marked by two events: the binding of Satan (restraint of his power

over nations) and the reign of certain martyrs with Christ. We noted that during the Dark Ages, Satan had almost unlimited power over governments of nations (Revelation 13:7 states that the beast, an earthly agent of Satan, had “authority over every tribe, tongue, and nation”), but that at some point in history that authority was taken away.

We further suggested that events like the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and the Restoration Movement were earthly forces used by God to bind and restrain Satan. All these events occurred during the period AD 1500-1800. If this is correct...

THE MILLENNIUM--THE THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN--BEGAN AROUND AD 1800

But immediately, people will say, “we can’t be in the millennium now, because we don’t see universal peace and prosperity, and people are still tempted to sin.” But the Bible does not define the millennium as a time when there is no sin or temptation, and everybody lives happily ever after. Rather, it is a time when:

- God’s word is freely available, and Satan cannot prevent people from reading it and obeying it;
- Satan is restrained from using “the nations” (human governments) to persecute the church.

In his Gospel Advocate commentary on Revelation, John T. Hinds wrote, “The millennial period is not a time of absolute and universal righteousness on earth, but a time of such restraint of Satan’s power that all may have the privilege of serving God as the Scriptures teach, if they so desire.”

The immediate response might be, “Oh, then, we’re safe--if the millennium began in 1800 it won’t end until the year 2800.” But don’t get too complacent--the term “thousand years” is almost certainly figurative. “A thousand” is one of several round numbers the Bible uses to symbolize some indefinite period of time. Wayne Jackson, in his book of studies in Revelation, points out that “the numeral ‘thousand’ is used more than twenty times in the book of Revelation, and *not once is it employed in a literal sense.*”

WHO DOES THE REIGNING?

Note that at the same time Satan is bound, certain individuals are seated on thrones and reign with Christ. These are not the entire body of Christians, but only certain ones--those who were "beheaded for the witness of Jesus" (Revelation 20:4). Furthermore, John is clear to point out that it is the *souls* of these individuals who reign with Christ, not their *bodies*. So we are not dealing with a literal resurrection and reign. Verse 4 is an unmistakable reference to the martyrs of the early centuries of the church who perished under Roman persecution before and during the Dark Ages. In Revelation 6:9, these same souls are seen under the altar and are described as "those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held."

Note the contrast in the condition of these saints between Revelation 6:9 and 20:4:

- In 6:9, they are dead and in a state of humiliation, having been put to death as heretics by the Roman government and the Roman church.
- In 20:4, they are alive and reigning with Christ--they have gone from *heretics* to *heroes*.
- They have moved from under the altar to being seated on thrones.

All of this is figurative, of course. This must be the meaning: during the Dark Ages, the early martyrs were maligned and labeled by the Roman church as heretics. When the Bible began to be freely circulated once again after the Dark Ages, the martyrs were honored and respected once again. Their cause was taken up anew. In a sense, they "came back to life." *That is a resurrection*--a figurative one, the resurrection of the spirit and courage of the martyrs. John calls this "the first resurrection."

Commentator Albert Barnes has this to say about the resurrection of the martyrs: "The doctrine which has been held, and is held, by those who maintain that there will be a 'literal resurrection' of the saints to reign with Christ during a thousand years, can receive no support from this passage, for there is no ambiguity respecting the word 'souls' The meaning, then, so far as the language is

concerned, must be, that there would exist, at the time of the thousand years, a state of things *as if the martyrs were raised up from the dead*—an honoring of the martyrs as if they should live and reign with Christ. Their names would be vindicated; their principles would be revived....” (From Barnes' Notes, Electronic Database Copyright © 1997-2014 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Quite a lot to think about here. Here is a summary of this explanation:

- We are now in a period called the “thousand years,” during which Satan is restrained from deceiving the nations (although he can still deceive us as individuals).
During this thousand-year period, the Bible is freely available and the church is relatively free from persecution.
- Looking back on the early centuries of the church’s existence, we honor and view as heroes those courageous individuals who died for Christ under Roman political and religious persecution--they have “come back to life” and are reigning with Christ. The spirit of the martyrs lives in the church.

So we are in the millennium now. Satan is bound (restrained) now. Christ is reigning now.

But here is the rest of the story: the millennium may be coming to an end. Earlier we read Revelation 20:1-6. Here are the verses following that text, verses 7-10: “Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

Three times in Revelation 20--in verses--3, 7, and 8--God warns us that Satan will be loosed from his restraints for a short period just before Christ returns. Notice how “the nations” (human governments) will be involved in all this: “Now when the

thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive *the nations...*" (Revelation 20:7-8). We might call this...

SATAN'S SECOND COMING

He came once before using the nations to oppress the church (Revelation 13:7); and, for reasons known only to God, he will be allowed one final opportunity to use human governments to try to destroy the church. And what are we increasingly seeing today?

- Increasing hostility of governments and the general public toward Christianity.
- Legal approval (at state and national levels) of practices directly contrary to Scripture, such as abortion and same-sex "marriage."
- Removal by court edict of traditional protections for churches, such as Sunday "blue laws," freedom from certain taxes, etc.
- Lawsuits brought to force businesses, colleges, and other institutions to violate sincerely held religious beliefs.
- Laws being passed at a national and global level that put restrictions on religious assemblies and/or on public proclamation of the word of God.
- Determined efforts through force, violence, and legal and political means to eliminate Christianity from the public arena.
- And lately, the arrest or levying of fines on Christians for worshipping or observing other religious activities under arbitrary COVID-19 restrictions.

If we are indeed in the early stages of Satan's "second coming," what happens next? Revelation 20:8 says the culmination of this (thankfully short) period will be a gathering of nations in battle array against the church, verse 8.¹ The forces of evil, controlled by Satan, will "surround the camp of the saints." But it will not work. Verse 9 says, "And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

¹ No, this is not a literal "battle of Armageddon" fought by earthly armies, but a spiritual onslaught aimed at completely destroying the church of Christ.

CONCLUSION

So is a thousand-year reign involving Christ taught in the Bible? Yes, in a highly figurative part of the book of Revelation. But it is not a literal reign of Christ on earth; rather, it is a spiritual reign of certain souls with Christ. Furthermore, the millennium is not a time of universal peace and prosperity, but a time when Satan cannot use human governments to attack the church. For reasons we have given, it is likely that we are in the millennium now; but it is probably coming to an end.

In regard to the doctrine of millennialism, I believe this quote I found on the Internet aptly sums up the matter (author unknown): "Instead of a future thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth, the Bible teaches that He is now reigning from heaven over His kingdom, which extends throughout heaven and earth. King Jesus now sits on His heavenly throne, where He has been reigning ever since He ascended to the Father. When He comes again, He will not come to begin a thousand-year reign on earth; rather, He will come to end His present reign. Any interpretation that contradicts this view is built on an incorrect interpretation of symbolic language and contradicts literal passages." --John Temples

