

4. Understanding the Millennium

What is Millennialism?

Since the notion of Rapture is inseparably connected to a certain way of thinking about the millennium, we must first consider what exactly is meant by the millennium. Remember that in the view of many, the Rapture takes place immediately *before* the start of the millennium, and the second and decisive return of Christ happens immediately *after* the millennium.

What is this millennium? When does it start and when does it end? How is this time characterized in the Bible? In answering these questions, we will already lay the groundwork needed for a proper understanding of the Rapture.

To be sure, the word “millennium” is not actually found in the Bible. In Revelation 20:1-2, we read that an angel from heaven binds the dragon or serpent (who is the devil or Satan) for a thousand years. The original word that is used for “thousand” is *chilia*, therefore the teaching about an actual millennium is often called “chiliasm.”

When connected to a certain view on the Rapture, this teaching is called “premillennialism.” In this line of thinking, the Rapture takes place *before* the millennium. When the Rapture is said to take place *after* the millennium, we call it “postmillennialism”.

There are also those who deny that there is any period of time called a millennium, and they are called “amillennialists.” Perhaps most people have taken this position because it is relatively safe and comfortable. As an amillennialist, you do not have to come to grips with typical millennial events such as the great tribulation and the revealing of “the lawless one.” Without actually denying that a *special* period of time is indicated in the Bible, they still do not want to speak in terms of a *literal* period of one thousand years.

“Realized Millennialism”

And there is yet another viewpoint that must be mentioned. There are those who want to hold to the idea of a millennium because the Bible teaches it, yet believe that it is not a special time at the *end* of history but a *current* time. In other words, these people do not *expect* a millennium; rather, they believe that they are already *in* the millennium.

A good proponent of this view is Jay E. Adams who speaks about “realized millennialism” in his commentary on the book of Revelation (*The Time is at Hand*, Reformed and Presbyterian Publishing Co., 1966, Nutley, N.J.). According to Adams, the millennium is happening and being realized right now. Adams wishes to retain the Biblical notion of a millennium without falling into the confusions of many millennialists.

I agree fully with the position of Adams. It is not a new position, but one that has been well worded. It is the classic Reformed and Presbyterian position on the millennium. I am truly a millennialist, but I wholeheartedly believe that the millennium is taking place right now. We are *in* it, although it is impossible to say exactly how far we are into it and how much time is yet to come.

The Book of Revelation

All this has to do with another question: how do we view the book of Revelation? It is not my intention here to discuss each and every interpretation of the book. That would be impossible and lead us too far afoot. But we do need to have a basic understanding of what this fascinating and difficult Bible book is about.

Should we divide history into all kinds of diverse periods or dispensations, or should we see history – in the case of Revelation, the last days – as *one* period of time? The book of Revelation describes various sequences of events, but they all lead to the great Day of Judgment. In each sequence, we may get a deepening of knowledge, but the events are basically the same and culminate in the same occurrence.

The book of Revelation covers the period of time from Christ's ascension to his return. In Revelation 4:1, John's attention is directed to the throne of God in heaven. He is told, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." This is followed by the appearing of Christ in heaven and the opening of the Scroll, as found in Revelation 5. With this, the *last days* are set into motion and they will end with the fall of Babylon and the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem. We have entered the final period of history.

Some take the words, "Come up here," in Revelation 4:1 as indicative of the Rapture of the church. But that cannot be the case, for it is a command directed only to one person and not to the whole church.

John must come up because he must see what is to happen *before Christ returns* and report this in his letter to the churches. The words "after this" refer to the central facts in the book of Revelation: the resurrection of Christ and his *ascension* into heaven, from where he governs and guides all things to their goal. Revelation is about the Lamb who was slain but is now standing and governing all things.

It is the time in which we live. The book of Revelation is very comforting: in all that happens in the last days, we stand under the power and protection of Christ and will share in his victory. We live in a difficult yet exciting time, for Christ will realize the plan of God and descend in glory on the clouds of heaven.

In Revelation 20, this period of time is described in terms of a thousand years, a millennium. But the millennium is not to be isolated from the totality of the book. We get a deepening of knowledge and, again, the outcome is the same. What is said of the millennium applies to the *whole book*, the time from Christ's ascension to his return.

Why the Number 1000?

We are interested now in the meaning of the number 1000. Why is the last age described in terms of a thousand years? Could the Lord have chosen any

other number? The trouble with numbers is that they are easily interpreted in a literal manner, and many millennialists have indeed done so.

Why speak of a *thousand* years if the period of the last days may take 2000 or 5000 or more years? In John's time, there was an ardent expectation of and intense longing for Christ's return. Why then use the number 1000 if a different time span may be meant? Is apocalyptic language not confusing?

Numbers in the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Bible often have a *symbolic* meaning. Since the meaning of the numbers is generally known and widely accepted, these numbers do not really pose much of a problem.

The number 1000 symbolically has to do with time. Ten years comprise a decade. A *long* time is a hundred years, a century. Most people do not live that long. Multiplied by ten, we get 1000 years, a millennium, more than ten lifetimes – a *very long and complete* period of time. And that is why the Bible speaks of a thousand years.

The word “millennium” finds its origin in Latin, where *mille* means “a thousand” and *annus* means “year.” So it means a period of time “lasting” a thousand years, much longer than a human span of life, which is needed to come to a pre-determined point. The millennium is the time it takes for God to achieve his goals in Christ Jesus.

Example: The Number of the Beast

Often, symbolic numbers are best understood when you break them down. Let me illustrate this first by looking at another well-known number in the book of Revelation: the number 666. We find it in Revelation 13:18 where we read, “If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.”

In Revelation 12 and 13, two beasts are introduced: one from the sea and one from the earth. These two represent the acme of political and ecclesiastical power. When the two (church and state) merge, they form an almost invincible foe. But the number given to the beast is only 666.

We are told that we must take good note of this number.

Notice the word “calculate” in the above text. The KJV has the translation “count.” The number is not just a random number, but one that needs to be counted or calculated. This means that it has a deeper meaning, and therefore Revelation 13:18 actually begins with, “This calls for wisdom.” This wisdom is not mathematical genius, but insight into God’s Word with fear for his Name.

Biblical numbers need to be calculated with wisdom. In the case of the number 666, we are given clear direction: it is a *man’s* number. Whatever height the beasts may reach in their conquest of mankind and opposition to Christ, they remain creatures under God’s power. No creature can ever take the number of the Creator.

The Lord does not play number games with us. The use of a number is quite simple, but also very powerful and memorable. Its meaning is not a dark mystery, but a clear revelation.

The symbolic number of God is the number seven, which speaks of holy perfection. The number six is one short of seven. It is a *man’s* number, meaning that man can never become God. The number may be doubled and multiplied by hundreds, but no matter how you calculate it, the number of the beast remains below seven and 700.

For Christians, the number 666 is actually very comforting. Even the beasts from the earth and the sea, great though they are, will never surpass the power and glory of God. The beasts cannot climb higher than man, and man will not rise beyond his divinely set limit. The old lie of Paradise (“You will be like God”) remains a lie until the very end of time. Satan will never achieve his goal. This is central to the book of Revelation.

Calculating 1000

We need to calculate or count the number 1000 as it is used in prophetic literature. As indicated earlier, the root number of a thousand is the number ten, that is, a decade. The number ten always has to do with the element of *time*, its purpose and duration. Multiply this by ten and we get

100 years, a century, a very long time. Multiply this again by ten and we get 1000, a millennium, an unimaginable length of time. The number 1000 in Revelation therefore denotes *the full measure of time (surpassing human time) that God requires to complete his plan of salvation*. In short, the millennium simply means *ample* time!

God has time and he takes the time. Time is neither wasted nor rushed. On the one hand, the Bible can tell us that Jesus Christ does not unnecessarily delay his coming: “Behold, I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:7, 12). On the other hand, God in his mercy holds back final judgment so that all his children may indeed be saved (2 Pet 3:9). The Lord is not slow, but patient and merciful. The eternal God is not subject to time, but he does use it wisely and carefully to realize what he has determined.

The period of 1000 years, also called the millennium, is a decisive time and therefore Satan is bound. It is also a turbulent time when many judgments will come over the earth and Satan’s latitude and power will increase by God’s sovereign permission. The man of lawlessness will become evident. This time will not be easy, but it is the millennium: it comes to an abrupt end when God decides that time is up. God is so much in control that he can even “shorten the days” (Matt 24:22).

Congruent Lines

The millennium is a very important and decisive time in the history of the world. Were it not for the events set in motion in the millennium, the history of salvation would never be completed. The millennium is the closing chapter of the history of the church and the world. It starts when Christ ascends into heaven; it ends when he returns. This is a crucial matter for the proper understanding of all the Scriptures, God’s plan of salvation, and the amazing flow of the book of Revelation.

Before we end our discussion of the millennium, there is an important matter that must still have our attention because it also has a bearing on the teaching about the Rapture. In the millennium, there are two congruent lines – congruent because they run together yet remain separate and distinct.

The one line is that the sins of the world must come to their fullest manifestation. As in the case of the Canaanites of yore, the measure of the sins of man must become *full*. We therefore read about beasts, the man of lawlessness, and a great delusion sent by God. The inside must come out, fully. The rebellion of mankind, so clearly displayed in the city of Babylon, will become visible in all its ugliness as never before. The church will be persecuted with a hatred and intensity never before shown. This is the great tribulation that will become unbearable. It is the dark side of the millennium.

The other line is that the church of Christ, the redeemed, will be gathered into the garner of the Lord. *All* God's children will be saved, including those who die before his return. When Jesus returns in the glory of full victory, all his chosen ones will be raptured to be with him forever more. Just when it seems that the church will go under, the Lord will save her. Even creation will come to her aid. Angels standing by will come into action to support the church and restrain evil. And nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord. We will come through the great tribulation, out of the condemned city of Babylon, freed from the man of lawlessness to be with Christ in Zion forever. That is the bright side of the millennium.

When the church has been gathered, the world will be judged and destroyed. It will have fulfilled its function and outlived its time. What is set to disappear must indeed pass away. The redeemed will be raptured, to eternally enjoy the presence of Christ. The ungodly will be cast into the lake of fire, to be condemned forever.

All this is realized by Christ in the glorious conclusion of history that is called the millennium.