

WHAT IS THE MILLENNIUM DOCTRINE?

The word millennium derives from the Latin *mille*, meaning thousand, and *annus*, meaning year, hence a thousand years. The millennium doctrine springs from Revelation 20:2-7, where the words “thousand years” are mentioned six times. The teaching is extrapolated from this passage and many others to show that following Jesus’ return, he will usher in a literal thousand years of peace and abundance on the earth. Technically, this belief is called pre-millennialism, because its adherents believe they are living **prior** to the millennium. Since millions of Christians embrace pre-millennialism, especially among so-called Evangelicals, the purpose of this article is to examine whether it is biblically sound.

Since pre-millennialism is based upon taking the thousand years of Revelation literally, let’s begin there. The Bible, and particularly Revelation, often employs numbers as symbols, which a sensible person knows are **not** always to be taken literally. By far the most commonly used number in the Bible is seven. And though it is usually to be taken literally, it also has a symbolic meaning—fullness, completeness. The seventh-day Sabbath refers to God’s rest following the **completion** of His physical creation. The Jews observed seven-day festivals, seventh-year land Sabbaths, Jubilees, and much more based upon the number seven.

In Revelation, we find the number seven used more than in any other book besides Genesis. Moreover, Revelation is a book filled with symbolism and numerology, most of which should not be taken literally. For example, the apostle John was told to “write in a book and send it to **the** seven churches which are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4,11). The only problem is the Bible tells us there were many more than seven congregations of Christians in Asia at that time. Jesus’ message is meant to include all the congregations of Christians for all ages—the full and complete and universal congregation of the saints.

Now let’s look at the number one thousand. Does the Bible sometimes use it symbolically? The answer is an emphatic yes, and it does so many times. The Bible often uses one thousand to symbolize an **immense quantity** of something. Isaiah wrote of the prophesied Messianic time in symbolic terms, “A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation...” (Isa. 60:22). Here are some other examples:

“If one wished to contend with him [God], he could not answer him one time out of a thousand” (Job 9:3).

“For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills” (Psa. 50:10).

“Which my soul still seeks but I cannot find: One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found” (Eccl. 7:28).

“...A thousand thousands ministered to him [God]; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him...” (Dan. 7:10).

Even in today’s vernacular we often use one thousand symbolically to denote a large number. Five “large” means \$5,000. Have you ever said, If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times? Or, I can think of a thousand reasons...

Whenever the Bible uses the number one thousand in reference to time, it is **always** meant to be symbolic—of a long period of time—up to and including infinity.

God says He “show[s] love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Ex. 20:6; *NIV*). Can this be taken literally? Why not 999 or 1,001? Biblically speaking, a thousand generations is literally 20,000-40,000 years. Is that how long God’s love lasts? No, God’s love has no end! In I Chronicles we read,

“Remember His covenant always, the word which He commanded, for a **thousand** generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, and confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an **everlasting** covenant...” (16:15-17; Psalm 105:8; Deut. 7:9).

Here we see one thousand symbolizes forever. In Psalms we read, “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand...” (Psa. 84:10); and, “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night” (Psa. 90:4). The apostle Peter wrote, “...With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (II Pet. 3:8).

So the pre-millennialist is forced to defend the belief that a number, which in reference to time is **always** used symbolically outside Revelation, should suddenly be taken literally in Revelation, the most symbolic book in the Bible. Any reasonable person would find that position untenable. At this point, a fair-minded pre-millennialist might concede that the millennium may simply last a long time. He might then say, “So what? It’s a small point. The millennial concept is still in tact.” And he would be right, but it is a beginning. So we must go further.

Revelation does not read like many novels which have a linear theme from start to finish. Rather, in Revelation, a theme is taken up for a time, and then halted in order to take up another one. This is repeated throughout the book. And so just because Revelation 19 describes the second coming of Jesus, it does not necessarily follow that Revelation 20 continues that theme. Nevertheless, pre-millennialism assumes this to be the case. It should be self-evident that an assumption should never be a basis for a doctrine.

How does Revelation 20 begin? In metaphorical imagery, the apostle John described the binding of Satan **prior** to the thousand years,

“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” (Rev. 20:1-3).

Pre-millennialism says this event takes place soon following Jesus’ return. But isn’t this conclusion based upon the above assumption? Rather than assume, let’s look elsewhere to see when this takes place. The oldest prophecy in the Bible predicted Jesus’ victory over Satan. God told the serpent in the Garden that one day Eve’s “seed,” the Christ, will “bruise your head” (Gen. 3:15). When was this to be fulfilled?

Immediately following his baptism and anointing by the Holy Spirit, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil” (Mtt. 4:1). Satan tried to seduce God in the flesh to worship him! Jesus’ first act as the Christ was to begin to fulfill that oldest of prophecies, as he

overcame Satan's temptations. And so began many confrontations between Jesus and Satan and his minions, the demons.

Satan and his demons knew that when Jesus came, their time of unrestrained influence was nearly at an end. Two demons actually wondered if their time had been cut short when they asked Jesus, "What have we to do with you, Jesus, you Son of God? Have you come here to torment us **before the time**?" (Mtt. 8:29). Before the time of what? Before the time when Satan and his demons would be restrained. Just days before his death, Jesus predicted, "...now the ruler of this world [Satan] will be cast out" (Jn. 12:31). And again, on the night of his arrest, Jesus proclaimed, "...the ruler of this world is judged" (Jn. 16:11).

Paul showed that at the cross Jesus triumphed over the evil spirit world, when he wrote, "Having disarmed principalities and powers, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15). Paul's language clearly evokes the image of a Roman triumph, in which a conquering general would march the streets of Rome alongside his captured and bound slaves, surrounded by a cheering crowd. The apostle Paul wrote, "...When he [Jesus] ascended on high, he led captivity captive..." (Eph. 4:8). Satan, the arch Captor, along with his fallen angels, were now made captive and bound, and openly displayed in a triumph in heaven following Jesus' resurrection.

In Hebrews we read, "[Jesus], through death...destroy[ed] him who had the power of death, that is, the Devil" (2:14). John wrote, "...For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the Devil" (I Jn. 3:8).

Now some would reasonably argue: if the Devil is presently bound, how can he still be at large "like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet. 5:8)? The answer is: the binding of Satan is a specific restriction on his ability to "deceive the nations," better translated "Gentiles," not all other activities. Remember the story of Job and the specific restrictions God put on Satan. Why has God put restraints on Satan during the church age?

Jesus came into a world "blinded" and enslaved by the Devil, under a shroud of spiritual darkness and death—a world filled with idolatry and polytheism. When one reads about the faithful men and women recorded in the Old Testament and Hebrews 11 and counts up how many people of faith there were in the four millennia prior to Jesus, the sum represents only a tiny handful of people compared with the millions who lived alongside them. And further, how many from that tiny handful were Gentiles? For the gospel to spread like a mustard seed or like leaven, something had to be done about the Devil!

While speaking to the Pharisees in the context of the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of Satan, Jesus delivered a most compelling and revealing parable (Mtt. 12:22-29). He said the Devil would have to be **bound** before his house could be plundered. God has restrained the Devil so that the kingdom of God (the church), armed with the light of the gospel, could plunder his house (a world of darkness and death) like Christian soldiers, winning souls for Christ! Jesus told Paul that he was sending him to the Gentiles "to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God..." (Acts 26:18). Paul could have gotten nowhere in his ministry among the Gentiles without Satan being restrained. And ever since, Satan has been unable to prevent the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles

The fact that the Bible very demonstrably shows that the Devil was bound 2,000 years ago puts a serious dent in pre-millennialism. Even so, we must continue reading in Revelation 20, where we see people reigning as kings on thrones, serving as priests, and given the authority to judge, among other

things (vs 4-6). Pre-millennialism teaches that these people are the saints made immortal at Jesus' return, who reign with Christ over physical people who survived the tribulation, and their descendants, for a thousand years. Could there be another more plausible interpretation?

First, what does the Bible say about Christians reigning as kings, and more importantly, **when** do they reign. Must they wait until the resurrection and a future millennium? The answer is no. The apostle Peter wrote that the collective saints are **now** a "holy nation" and a "royal [kingly] priesthood" (I Pet. 2:9). John wrote, "[God] has made us **kings** and priests...and we shall **reign** on the earth" (Rev. 5:10; 1:6). All Christians of all ages have been seated by God on thrones reigning—over what?

God told Cain, the first murderer, "...Sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule [reign] over it" (Gen. 4:7). That is good advice for everyone. All Christians have been called and charged by God to be kings who reign over sin, as Paul wrote,

"Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body..." (Rom. 6:12).

"For if by one man's [Adam's] offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17).

So either sin/death reigns over us, or we reign over it. And the sense of Paul's words were that we would "reign in [**this**] life," not just in the life to come.

We have already seen where both Peter and John wrote that all Christians have been ordained as priests **now**. What is the duty and responsibility of a priest of God now? Peter wrote it plainly, "you... are... a holy priesthood, to offer up **spiritual sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 2:5). How do we do that? Paul wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1).

Only Jesus had to die to offer himself as a sin offering. But there were many other types of offerings under the Old Covenant, just as there are many ways Christians may offer themselves as sacrifices. The sacrifices required under the Old Covenant required that they be the best—"firstfruits" or "firstlings," and so it is also required of New Covenant sacrifices. We may sacrifice by sharing with those in need (Heb. 13:16; Phil. 4:18). Paul wrote, "Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Phil. 2:17).

We may serve by using the spiritual gifts God has granted all of us to the benefit of others. Our financial offerings to further the spread of the gospel are sacrifices. In Hebrews we read, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Heb. 13:15). Perhaps our greatest duty as a priest of God is our prayers for others. The Bible calls these incense offerings (Rev. 5:8; 8:3,4; Ps. 141:2). How many other ways have you found to perform your priestly duties?

What does it mean to be a Christian judge? It does not mean that we may judge the world. God does not even do that now. It does not mean that we may judge our spiritual brothers and sisters. Jesus made that clear. So then who may we judge? The answer is our self. But more importantly, we should ask, **what** should we judge. When God committed judgment to us, He meant discernment, the ability to distinguish between good and evil, right from wrong, to discern the will of God. This is what king

Solomon asked God for when he prayed, “Therefore give to your servant an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of yours?” (I Kgs. 3:9).

This kind of judgment is one of the most important ingredients missing in the world today. How can we acquire it? We must practice it, we must grow in it, as Hebrews tells us, “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:14). Paul wrote, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment” (Phil. 1:9). Only through maturity and exercise may we grow in wise judgment. We must practice every day.

So John’s vision of kings, priests, and judges does not have to be future. Rather, it is a perfect description of the duties and responsibilities of all saints throughout the Christian age. In fact, it should begin to dawn on us that the “thousand years”—that long period of time—just might **BE** the present Christian age, rather than some future one. But let’s continue with a further description of this time in Revelation 20.

John wrote of the thousand years, “This is the first resurrection” (Rev. 20:5,6). What does this mean? Is it future? Let’s understand. If we were to sum up in two words the world into which Jesus came, it would be darkness and death. Darkness because of Satan, and death because of sin. But Jesus brought light and life. He bound Satan, and atoned for sin. What kind of life did Jesus bring? It was life from the dead—a resurrection. He announced it,

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live (Jn. 5:24,25).

Jesus was not talking about the physically dead, but those spiritually dead because of sin. He said that because of their faith they had “passed from death to life.” The last time I checked, that would be a resurrection. John repeated Jesus’ words when he wrote, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren...” (I Jn. 3:14).

So this first resurrection is not future, because it happens every time a person turns to God in faith and repents. He is then regenerated—brought back to life—by the Holy Spirit (Tit. 3:5)! It has been happening for nearly two thousand years. This is the **first** resurrection because “the rest of the dead [will] not live again [be resurrected] until the thousand years [are] finished” (Rev. 20:5). This will be the Final Judgment—the second resurrection. So we see in the term “first resurrection” still another description of the present Christian age, not a future one. So to make the point, Revelation 20 simply does not describe some future golden age on this earth following Jesus’ return.

By way of extrapolation, we may conclude that the Beast, along with its image and mark (Rev. 20:4), are **not** confined to some end time manifestation, since the saints have been martyred for rejecting the same throughout the thousand years—Christian age. You may read more about the Beast in the article “Understanding the Book of Revelation—Part II: The Beast.”

We should now consider one more argument the pre-millennialist can make: what about all the Old Testament prophecies, of which there are scores, which describe a future time of abundance, peace, and prosperity under God’s rule? Surely they describe the future millennial reign of Christ. Well, they

cannot since we have seen that Revelation prophesies no such age. First of all, these prophecies are not universal. They only describe a restored **Israel**, not the whole world. The mistake pre-millennialists make is not properly identifying to **which** Israel the prophets refer.

The major themes of their prophecies include: a “second” exodus; a new covenant; forgiveness of sins; abundant water for those who thirst; abundant fruit; people at rest; no walls or bars; safety from harm; no war; knowledge of God; Holy Spirit. Though some are metaphors, these themes sound suspiciously contemporary, not future. And the reason is because they are actually **all** Christian themes. In fact, the Old Testament prophets foresaw the “Israel of God”—the church—as they wrote of her in beautiful and inspiring metaphoric and poetic language.

Let’s look at pre-millennialism in a practical sense. It teaches that during the thousand years Satan will be “bound” and unable to influence people **in any way**. How wonderful, except that would be unfair since all other generations of people have had to battle the Devil’s influence. The apostle Peter said, “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34), yet this teaching creates a special class of people.

As mentioned earlier, this golden age is envisioned as replete with every material and spiritual benefit. It includes perfect weather for abundant agriculture, perfect health, nothing dangerous, no war *et al.* In addition, with Christ and the saints made immortal reigning over the world, there will be perfect knowledge. This would be the ultimate special class of people. Will they lack anything? Actually, yes. In fact it would be the most critical ingredient required for salvation. Can you guess what it is?

Jesus said, “When the Son of man comes, will he really find faith on the earth?” (Lk. 18:8). People living during a millennium would have no need for faith, which is the most important thing Jesus said he was hoping to find upon his return! This special class of people would not need to take up “the shield of faith with which [they] will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one” (Eph. 6:16). Think, no devil, no shield of faith. No less than four times the Bible says, “The just **shall** live by faith” (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). Did you notice, “shall,” not will? It’s an imperative. With everyone living on easy street, there will be no trials during this imagined age. Yet trials are for the purpose of building faith and character (I Pet. 1:6,7). With nothing adverse to resist, how will character be developed? Without faith and character, what kind of people will be living on the earth? When carried to its ultimate conclusion, the pre-millennialists’ vision is more dystopian than utopian.

Paul said, “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (II Cor. 5:7). And again, “But without faith it is impossible to please [God]” (Heb. 11:6). Since no one will need faith, how will any of these future people please God?

Now let’s read Revelation 20:7-9,

“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” (v7-9)

Pre-millennialism blinds its adherents to a terrible truth. It teaches that Satan will not be released until the end of the thousand years (Rev. 20:7-9), that is to say, at least a thousand years from now. Ask

yourself, why would God end His thousand-year golden age by releasing Satan, who then spoils everything? It makes no sense. The terrible truth is Satan will be released at the end of the church age. When will that be? No one knows, but it could happen at any time, and pre-millennialists may be unprepared.!

At the end of the church age, and shortly before Jesus' return, Satan again will be unrestrained, and will do what he was prevented from doing for the past 2,000 years—"deceive the nations." To what purpose? Annihilate Christianity! To bring about a holocaust against **spiritual** Jews. But first, how do we know that the object of Satan's wrath is Christians? Notice again John's description of the objects of Satan's wrath. The people of faith have always been depicted in the scriptures as "strangers and sojourners" on the earth, **camping**, tenting, in tabernacles with God. The "beloved city" is not Jerusalem, which is called "Sodom and Egypt" (Rev. 11:8). It is "heavenly Jerusalem...[the] church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:22,23).

This event is prophesied over and over in both the Old and New Testaments. It is the time of spiritual "Jacob's [new Israel's] trouble" (Jer. 30:7); the "war against the saints" (Dan. 7:21,25); the time to "shatter...the power of the holy people" (12:1,7); "tread the holy city under foot" (Rev. 11:2); the time the Beast "make[s] war with the saints" (13:5-7); this is the "great tribulation" spoken of by Jesus in his Olivet prophecy (Mtt. 24:21,22). Pre-millennialism risks its believers being unprepared for the worst time of human suffering ever.

The purpose of this article was to examine whether pre-millennialism is biblically sound. We have found that it is not. But worse, it is a debilitating belief. It tends to diminish the truth that the saints have been given the high calling to be kings, priests, and judges now throughout this age, a calling we are counseled not to neglect.