

Revelation 20:4-6 “The Real *Reich*: The Thousand Year Reign of Christ”
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In 1933, Adolf Hitler ascended to power in Germany through a series of sinister schemes. His goal, to establish an Empire that would last 1,000 years, the Third *Reich*. *Reich* is the German word for “empire,” “kingdom.” The First *Reich* in Germany was the medieval Holy Roman Empire which lasted 1,000 years from AD 800-1806. The Second *Reich* was the German Empire of Otto von Bismarck which lasted from 1871-1918. The Third *Reich* of the Nazi regime was to last a millennium, 1,000-year reign. It lasted all of 12 years, thankfully.

In our text today, there is a millennial empire, the 1,000-year reign of Christ. When we examine the text, we learn that *because believers will reign with Christ in His kingdom then you can take hope that your suffering for Christ is not in vain.*

The Present Time of the Millennium

Chapter 20 is a new vision. The *Millennium* as it is commonly called. *Millennium* is the Latin word for 1,000 which number is mentioned six times in first seven verses. In verses 1-3, the 1,000 years during which Satan is imprisoned in the Abyss; verses 4-6 the 1,000-year reign of Christ. The most popular understanding of the Millennium today is to view this age as that immediately following the Second Coming of Christ. Which would seem logical. Clearly, chapter 19 ends with the Second Coming of Christ. There is no scholarly dispute. So for Westerners unfamiliar with apocalyptic literature it makes perfect sense to read chapters 19 and 20 sequentially, in chronological order on the timeline. Accordingly, the Second Coming of Christ is before the Millennium, or “pre” millennial. This ushers a golden age here on earth during which Satan is imprisoned. He can no longer deceive the nations bringing a time of universal peace and utopia while Christ reigns on earth for a literal 1,000 years. After the 1,000 years are completed, Satan is released from prison, unleashing hell on earth, inciting an insurrection. The nations of earth rebel against Christ’s rule and Lordship.

This view of premillennialism is what I was weaned on and grew up believing. It is the dominant view in evangelical Christianity today. It is the basis for the popular Christian movies, *Left Behind*. The books, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Indeed, this view of the Millennium is almost a litmus test of orthodoxy. If don’t hold to it you’re not a true Christian. Yet in my spiritual journey I abandoned this view because it presents some critical theological concerns. It presents the redeemed community living in resurrected bodies, transformed into the likeness of Christ, in their glorified state, living alongside the defiant human race in its fallen condition. So there are people who somehow escape the judgment of chapter 19 then repopulate the earth. Their descendants become the nations which rebel against Christ after the 1,000 years expire. Unregenerate mankind subject to disease and death co-existing alongside the redeemed community in its glorified state, resurrected bodies. The mortal dwelling with the immortal. So it just gets really bizarre.

To let you know my perspective, I have been profoundly influenced by the Protestant Reformers. That means my view of the millennium didn’t make the movies. It didn’t make the bestseller list in the Christian bookstores. I subscribe to the view set forth in the historic creeds of the Protestant Reformation, Westminster Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, originally

articulated by Augustine in his classic *The City of God*. Augustine views the Millennium as the timeframe from the first coming of Christ until His Second Coming. 1,000 is simply a symbolic number as it is commonly found in Scripture. *The LORD owns the cattle on 1,000 hills. One day with the LORD is like a thousand years.* The 1,000 years simply symbolizes perfection, completion. A perfect time between Christ's advents. The entire church age.

How do we know? Because it is indicated in the text. When does the Millennium begin as shown in verses 2-3? With the binding of Satan and his expulsion into the Abyss where he is imprisoned in the bottomless pit. When did these two events occur? During Jesus' earthly ministry. As Jesus teaches. When he cast demons out of a man, his enemies accuse him of being an ally of Satan. Jesus counters, "*Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house*" (Mat 12:29 NAS). That Jesus is able to cast out demons is evidence that He has already bound Satan. Satan is restrained. His activity restricted in a specific realm. Satan is bound during the earthly ministry of Christ. When does the expulsion of Satan occur? His being cast out, thrown into the Abyss (v. 3)? "*Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."*" (Jn. 12:31-32 NAS). As Jesus hangs on the cross, the ruler of this world is cast out. Satan is thrown into the Abyss by Jesus crucifixion. The exegetical evidence shows that the binding of Satan and his expulsion, his arrest and imprisonment, occurs during the earthly ministry of Christ. Which two events, according to this vision, mark the beginning of the Millennium. This means that the Millennium is not an era yet distant in the future. It has already begun. We are in it.

The Location of the Millennial Reign: In Heaven

There is more about the Millennium. Notice the location of the millennial reign. Where is it? Verse 4, *Then I saw thrones*. John sees thrones. Throughout the book of *Revelation*, we see thrones. The word is used 47 times. Where are the thrones located? With the exception of Satan's throne (2:13) and the throne of the Beast (13:2; 16:10), all the thrones in *Revelation* are located in heaven. For example, beginning with chapter 4, John is caught up into heaven and given a glorious glimpse of the One who sits on the *throne*. In chapter 12, the big red dragon standing in front of the pregnant woman is unable to devour male child because He is caught up to God and His *throne* in heaven (12:5). In the *Revelation*, the thrones are in heaven *until* heaven descends to earth (ch. 21). Then God's throne is located in the New Jerusalem from which throne the river of life will flow, and on each side the Tree of Life. Until the New Earth, God's throne is in heaven where Christ is now sitting at His right hand, reigning at His right hand.

If still not convinced that the location of the millennial reign is in heaven, all doubt is easily removed when we notice what is seated on the thrones. What does John see? Verse 4, ... *Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony for Jesus and for the word of God*. John sees souls. Sometimes in the New Testament, the word *soul* is used to refer to a person. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 *souls* are added to the church (Acts 2:41). But here John doesn't see people. He sees souls without bodies, disembodied spirits. The disembodiment is emphasized. *I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded*. John sees the souls of those who were decapitated. He doesn't see their headless bodies but the souls of those whose heads were cut off. No flesh-and-bone bodies are in view. The millennial reign is not a physical reign on earth. It is a spiritual reign in heaven. John sees the souls.

To whom do these souls belong? Obviously, the martyrs. Verse 4, ... *Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony for Jesus and for the word of God.* The souls on the thrones are those of dead believers who paid the ultimate price for allegiance to Christ. Christians faithful to the point of death. But there is another group of souls here reigning with Christ. Verse 4, *Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony for Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.* So there are two groups of souls reigning on thrones. A narrower group of martyrs among a wider group of dead believers. Who stood fast in the face of the Beast, who refused to bow to the Beast. Who refused to renounce their faith in Christ. They refused to receive the mark of the beast. For which refusal, they were sorely persecuted. Blackballed by the Labor Unions, fired from jobs, left unemployable in the city. Banned from marketplace. Arrested, imprisoned, exiled. They suffered for Christ and thereby proved their fidelity to Him. But in the end, died at home in their sleep. I stress this because there are some commentators who say, "Here is the Millennium, but it is only for martyrs." All due respect to the martyrs, the problem with this view is that it overlooks how terribly disappointing it would be to the Apostle John. Since he would not be included. No participation in the millennial reign. Because he isn't a martyr at this point and actually never was. The only apostle to die of old age. Although he doesn't worship the Beast nor its image, nor receive its mark and for his unrelenting fidelity to Christ is consequently banished from Ephesus and exiled to the prison island of Patmos and suffers untold hardship. Faithful to Christ, although in the end, not killed for Christ. Which then leaves him excluded from this vision. Not too convincing. What qualifies one to reign with Christ is not the manner of one's death, but one's fidelity to Christ until death. That is the focus, faithfulness. Renouncing the world. Overcoming tribulation. Holding fast to the gospel.

Unbelievers are Excluded from the Millennial Reign

With that said, however, there are people excluded from the millennial reign. Not John and other Christians who die late in life of natural causes or even in childhood. It is not faithful believers who are excluded, but unbelievers. Verse 5, *The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.* The rest of the dead. Those in distinction from the believing dead reigning with Christ. Those from the defiant human race who die in unbelief. They have no part in the millennial reign. What is said about their condition? *The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.* What does this mean that *they did not come to life*? It means the exact opposite of what is said about the believing dead. Whereas after death the souls of believers enjoy eternal life with Christ, the souls of unbelievers remain in the realm of the dead, Hades. Indicated in Verse 13, *And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them...*Hades is the realm of the dead. It contains the dead. The House of Death, as called in Greek mythology, located in the underworld. There the unbelieving dead experience the torment of Hades.

Until, *until the thousand years were ended.* A change. What kind of change? This word *until* doesn't imply that after the 1,000 years end the unbelieving dead will suddenly live and reign with Christ. It simply indicates that something will happen after the end of the thousand years. Alluded to in Verse 6, *Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power.* After the 1,000 years end, unbelievers shall experience a second death. Which is explained in Verse 14, ...*Then Death and Hades were*

thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. The second death is everlasting torment after the resurrection of the body. As far as unbelievers are concerned, there will be a change in their after-death experience when the Millennium expires. But it is not a change for the better, it is a change for the worse.

It is not a coming to life known as the first resurrection. Notice the comment about the unbelieving dead. Verse 5, *The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.* This statement is parenthetical. The NIV does an excellent favor putting parenthesis around it. It is an incidental comment about the rest of the dead. Then we return to the main idea of coming to life and reigning with Christ for 1,000 years, defined as *This is the first resurrection.* The first resurrection is not a bodily resurrection. John sees *souls*. The first resurrection is the translation of the soul from earth to heaven. Souls do not automatically fly away to heaven at death. “There is an act of the risen Christ upon the soul at the instant of death purifying it from all sin and transforming it from a soul adapted to a human body into a soul adapted to heavenly life” (Engelsma, 58). That is the first resurrection. The second is the resurrection of the body which will take place when Christ returns after the end of this millennial age. The souls of believers shall inhabit resurrected bodies which are perfectly compatible to live the adventure of eternal life on the New Earth. But until the New Earth, the present millennial reign is that of resurrected souls. John sees disembodied spirits. The millennial reign of Christ is not a physical reign on earth, but a spiritual reign in heaven.

Beloved, this is the only place in the Bible that there is any mention of a Millennium. Notice what is not said. Very important. There is no mention of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, the reinstatement of sacrificial system (which, by the way, would be invalidate Christ’s once and for all time sacrifice). Furthermore, there is no mention of a golden age of a civilized humanity. Christians are severely persecuted to the extent of beheading, serious suffering. Whether pre-millennial or post-millennial, there is no golden age of utopian peace on this planet. We must remember what Jesus teaches about the nature of His kingdom. On trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus is asked by the Roman governor, *Are you king of the Jews?* To which Jesus responds, *My kingdom is not of this world.* Christ’s kingdom is not a physical realm on earth, but a spiritual kingdom. Therefore, we prayed, *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.* Christ’s millennial kingdom is a heavenly spiritual reign not an earthly physical reign.

The Millennial Reign is Heaven

Disappointing? I hope not, because the millennial reign is a description of the destiny of the believing dead until the New Earth. Have you ever wondered what happens at death? What might we expect? This is it, yet another description of heaven. Portraying what? Two aspects which unveil hope to suffering Christians. Vindication and intimacy. One, vindication. Verse 4, *Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed.* The reigning includes the authority to judge. This could simply mean that the souls agree with Christ and give thanks for the judgments that He makes. Or it could mean that those sitting on the thrones are given opportunity to judge in earthly matters. As per Paul’s correction to the Corinthians, ² *Do you not know that the saints will judge the world ...* ³ *Do you not know that we will judge angels? ...* (1Co 6:2-3 NIV). At the very least, reigning with Christ apparently includes participating in Christ’s judging activity. The tables are turned. While on earth, believers are judged, condemned, imprisoned and executed. Now they sit as judges over their persecutors. Vindicated before the watching world.

Second, intimacy. How else is the reign characterized? Verse 6, ... *but they will be priests of God and of Christ*. The souls reign as priests. A beautiful image depicting incredible intimacy. In the Old Testament, the Levitical priesthood is a great privilege for one to enjoy. To the extent that the tribe of Levi doesn't receive an inheritance of land. The priesthood is their inheritance. What is the privilege of the priesthood that others don't enjoy? Access to God. The priest could draw closer to God than anyone else. The tabernacle, later temple, is the symbolic location of God on earth. God dwells in the Holy of Holies, behind the veil, between the cherubim. The priest enjoys access to God's dwelling place. Allowed to draw near to God while others are forced to remain distant, removed from God. That is the big picture here. These the souls of dead believers are made priests of God. Now given the privilege to draw close to God and remain there forever. To abide with God and never leave His presence. What more could anyone possibly desire? The Millennial reign is a picture of heaven, portraying what dead believers are now doing with Christ. Reigning with Christ.

The Millennial Reign Unveils Hope to Suffering Christians

Do you know why Christians today come up with the really bizarre interpretations of the *Revelation*? To make heaven appealing to modern materialistic Americans so addicted to the obsessive pursuit of pleasure and entertainment that they are inoculated to the bliss of heaven. Therefore Bible teachers feel the need to add all this hype and drama to the Millennium to make heaven seem exciting. But there is no such need for John's original readers. First century Christians living in the Roman Empire, relentlessly persecuted for their faith in Christ, for whom this description of the Millennial reign unveils hope. The Millennium matter to Johns' readers. Way relevant to suffering Christians.

No doubt we are all still shocked and horrified by Wednesday's protest at the Capital which turned into a riot. Right-wing fanatics invading the Rotunda, looting the House chamber and offices. I am a veteran and took an oath "to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic." What I saw were domestic enemies of the Constitution attacking the seat of our government. Even those who sympathize with their concerns condemn the rioting as abominable. That said, difficult to use that event to illustrate this text because we view the violence through the lens of American political identity, rather than our identity as Christians.

Allow me to switch illustrations to another protest turned violent of which most are unaware. Some years ago, the Egyptian military opened fire on thousands of Christians protesting in Cairo. 35 Christians were massacred, many beyond recognition. Over 300 wounded. You would not know this from main stream media which feels some innate compulsion to present Islam in the most favorable light. The media reported the slaughter as "sectarian strife" which conveys the idea of equally powerful forces struggling for dominance. Not the case in Egypt. The Coptic Christians in Egypt are a persecuted minority. BBC reported, "Egypt troops dead after Coptic church protest" (later changed). CNN tried to explain the tension and blames the Copts for establishing more churches, portraying the Copts as equally responsible for the Islamists who murdered them. Even Fox News, favorite of conservatives, broadcasted the propaganda of equal intolerance. In its "fair and balanced" report, Fox interviewed one Egyptian soldier in tears while nearby 20 members of the police were beating, dragging, and kicking a Christian for protesting the burning of his church. That was the issue, the cause for the protest. The string of Egyptian churches being burned by Muslims while the state police not only allow it

but help direct the mobs. The governor himself, appearing on state TV denied any church being torched, calling it a “guest home.” Disinformation was incredible. Having read the *Revelation*, we understand why. The False Prophet prophesies falsely. A false news narrative to support the Beast’s regime and persecute Christians. The Christians gathered to protest in Maspero, Cairo. The reason for the place, it is the location of the Egyptian media through whom they hoped to draw international attention to the religious persecution. They went to protest peacefully, were not only massacred for it, but they were portrayed as the aggressors by the very media that they had hoped would make their plight known to the world.

You want to know what really happened? According to an eyewitness, armored vehicles “came at great speed and drove into the crowds, going backwards and forwards, mowing people under their wheels...blood was all over the place” (Raymod Ibrahim). Imagine yourself in that horrible situation. As you lie dying, bleeding, gasping for breath, what is it that you would most desperately want to know? Superbowl teams? What words might best convey the power and presence of God? *They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. Amen.*