

The Millennium

Revelation 20

Revelation 19 ends with a dramatic portrayal of the return of Jesus and the destruction of the wicked. But the story is not over. Satan's rebellion is defeated, but not ended. There is yet one more chapter in the great controversy before harmony reigns throughout the universe forever. That chapter is known as the "millennium,"—a period lasting one thousand years. The millennium is the subject of Revelation 20

The term comes from two Latin words, *mille* (thousand) and *annus* (year). The word, "millennium," does not appear anywhere in the Bible, and the topic is dealt with only here in Revelation 20. But the millennium is an important and fascinating subject.

Bible students have many different ideas concerning the millennium—what it is and when it will occur. Some believe the millennium will take place *before* Jesus returns. They believe that increasing success in spreading the gospel will eventually result in righteousness and peace spreading over the earth and a golden age of one thousand years will follow. Then Jesus will return to usher in eternity. Others believe that the millennium will take place *after* Jesus returns. Many of those holding this view also believe that Jesus will set up His kingdom on earth during this thousand-year period. A third group believes that the millennium in Revelation 20 is symbolic imagery and not an actual time period of a thousand years at all.

Let's see what Revelation says about the millennium.

Bound in the Bottomless Pit

John says,

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 until the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while (Revelation 20:1-3).

We have encountered the “bottomless pit” in connection with the fifth trumpet. There, John wrote: “Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace” (Revelation 9:1, 2). Linking these verses with Revelation 8:10, we identified Satan as the “star” that fell from heaven and as the one who holds the key to the bottomless pit. But here in Revelation 20, John pictures Satan being bound with a chain and cast into the bottomless pit by an angel who holds the key. How do we explain the change? How does Satan go from being in control of the bottomless pit to being held captive in it? Once he held the key; now another has it. What has happened?

The short answer is that the Second Coming of Jesus has happened. Satan’s position before the Second Coming is very different from his situation once Jesus has returned. As chapter 19 depicts so dramatically, the conquering Christ has descended to earth at the head of the armies of heaven. Who are saved and who are lost has been made evident to everyone, because the wicked have been destroyed and the righteous have been given immortality. Before the Second Coming, Satan was still working with men and women to oppose God. After the Second Coming, he and his angels are still in rebellion against God, but now Satan has no one on earth to use as his agents in the great controversy. Before, he could cause the smoke of rebellion to rise out of the bottomless pit. Now, he is in a bottomless pit of his own making—and he will remain there for a thousand years.

The imagery in Revelation 20:1-3 is symbolic. Satan is not literally bound with a chain and locked in a pit. For a thousand years he is confined to this desolate, unpopulated earth, bound by the circumstances he himself has created. The Greek word translated “bottomless pit” is the same word from which we get our English word, *abyss*. It is also the same word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe the earth at the beginning of creation. “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2). The word, “deep,” is this same Greek word—*abussos*, “abyss.” The tremendous chaos on earth preceding the Second Coming—the great earthquakes and hail storms and flattening of the mountains—has brought the earth back to a dark, disorganized mass similar to its condition at the beginning of creation. The prophet Jeremiah described earth’s condition during the millennium in these words:

I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and indeed they trembled, and all the hills moved back and forth. I beheld, and indeed there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens had fled. I beheld, and indeed the fruitful land was a wilderness, and all its cities were broken down” (Jeremiah 4:23-26).

This is the “bottomless pit” where Satan must remain for one thousand years. All around him are the results of his rebellion, and he has ample time to reflect on the desolation he has caused. However, “after these things he must be released for a little while” (Revelation 20:3). The final chapter in the great controversy is yet to be played out.

Reigning In Heaven

At the Second Coming, the redeemed are taken to heaven. While Satan is languishing on an uninhabited earth for a thousand years, they are living and reigning with Jesus in heaven. John says,

I saw thrones, and they [the redeemed] 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 not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (verse 4).

What will the saved do in heaven for a thousand years? It will take some time just to become accustomed to the sights and sounds of heaven, don't you think? The two final chapters of Revelation attempt to describe what heaven and eternal life will be like. We will examine those chapters, but even after doing so we still can have only a very imperfect understanding of the reality of living and reigning with Jesus in heaven. Yes, heaven will take some getting used to!

However, the saved of earth will be occupied with a number of activities in heaven during the thousand years. Verse 4 says the saints will live and reign with Christ during this time. What does this mean?

It means that during the millennium the righteous will have an opportunity to observe firsthand God's justice and love in the way He has dealt with the problem of sin. In a new way, more forcefully than ever before, the saved will grasp God's powerful attempts to save everyone who has ever lived. They will realize anew that everyone who is lost has missed out on heaven because of his or her own personal rejection of the appeals of Christ. If there is a loved one or a close friend who is absent from heaven, the saved will have an opportunity to understand more completely all that Jesus did to draw that person to Himself—and why that didn't happen. God will patiently answer any questions.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, "Do you not know that we shall judge angels?" (1 Corinthians 6:3). As the righteous live and reign with Christ in heaven during the millennium, it seems that we will have some role in reviewing the final judgment of Satan and his angels that will occur at the close of the thousand years. All this openness and review will demonstrate beyond any possible doubt that God has been fair and just in all His dealings with sin and sinners. He will be vindicated in the face of all of Satan's charges against Him.

When Does the Millennium Begin and End?

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 (Revelation 20:5, 6).

These verses have confused some Bible students, so let's look at them carefully. If we look just at the two sentences of verse 5, it might seem that the "first resurrection" is the resurrection of "the rest of the dead" and that it takes place at the close of the thousand years. Actually the opposite is true! You see, we must not look at verses 5 and 6 in isolation from verse 4 that precedes them. So let's take a close look at these three verses—4, 5, and 6—and determine exactly what they are saying.

1. There is a "first resurrection." Those raised to life in this first resurrection are "blessed and holy" (verse 6). They reign with Him [Christ] for a thousand years" (verse 6). Those living and

reigning with Christ for a thousand years include the martyrs and those who have overcome the beast and his image and his mark (verse 4). It is clear, then, that the “first resurrection” is the resurrection of the righteous at the Second Coming of Christ (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57).

2. A “first resurrection” implies that there is a second resurrection. Jesus spoke of two resurrections—a resurrection of life and a resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28, 29). Revelation 20:6 says that those raised in the first resurrection are blessed and holy, so the first resurrection is the resurrection of life that Jesus talked about. The second resurrection, then, must be the resurrection of condemnation. Those raised in this second resurrection must be the wicked.

3. “The rest of the dead” (verse 5) refers to the wicked. Verse 4 has been describing the saved who live in heaven with Jesus for a thousand years. Then verse 5 follows, saying, “The rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.” So “the rest of the dead” are the wicked, and they are raised to life at the end of the millennium in the resurrection of condemnation Jesus spoke of.

Let’s summarize what we have learned from these verses in light of when the millennium begins and ends.

1. The millennium begins at the Second Coming when the righteous dead are raised to life and taken to heaven along with the righteous living. All the saved live and reign with Christ in heaven during the millennium.

2. At the Second Coming, the living wicked are destroyed by the brightness of Christ’s coming (2 Thessalonians 2:8). The wicked who have died before Jesus returns remain unconscious in the grave. So during the millennium, all the wicked are dead on the earth. They (“the rest of the dead”) are raised to life in the resurrection of condemnation at the close of the millennium.

3. During the millennium, Satan and his angels are confined to this earth—desolate and uninhabited by human beings.

Thus, the millennium begins with the resurrection of the righteous at the Second Coming of Jesus and ends a thousand years later with the resurrection of the wicked.

The Final Battle

John writes,

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 (Revelation 20:7-10).

Satan is released from his prison at the end of the thousand years, because the wicked are raised to life. For a thousand years, he has had no one to tempt or deceive. He and his angels have been alone to reflect on where their rebellion against God has taken them. Now, however, Satan has a vast army of followers. Their number is like the sands of the sea (verse 8). All the wicked who have ever lived are now alive once more on the earth.

Notwithstanding that Satan has suffered defeat after defeat in the great controversy, he is not yet ready to end his rebellion. He goes out to deceive “the nations”—all that huge throng of the lost. There are great generals in that multitude; there are masterminds of evil. There are talented, energetic persons with great qualities of leadership. While living, they used those energies and talents to oppose God. Now, they are no more willing to submit to Him than they ever were. Satan inspires them to make one last great effort to overthrow God and set up their own kingdom.

They surround “the camp of the saints and the beloved city” (verse 9). Why are the saints and the New Jerusalem—the beloved city—on earth? Isn’t the earth broken down and desolate and uninhabited? Aren’t the saints in heaven, living and reigning with Christ?

At the close of the millennium, not only are all the wicked raised to life, but the Holy City, New Jerusalem, descends to earth from heaven! John says, “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). The saints have been living and reigning with Christ in the New Jerusalem for the millennium. Now, at the end of the thousand years, the city descends to earth along with

God, Jesus, the angels, and all the redeemed. Everyone is present for the final battle of the great controversy. Sin is about to be eradicated once and for all!

The “Great White Throne” Judgment

John continues:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heavens fled away. And there was no place found for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one, according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

Satan and his vast army of the wicked surround the Holy City. They intend to fight one final battle for the supremacy—win or lose. The last chapter in the great controversy is coming to its conclusion. Just as the army of the wicked is preparing to storm the Holy City, they are stopped in their tracks by the sight of a great, white throne on which God sits.

This is the picture of the judgment that we often have in mind when we think of Judgment Day. But, as we have seen previously in the books of Daniel and Revelation, judgment has been going on in heaven since 1844, determining who has accepted God’s offer of salvation and who has refused. This “great white throne” judgment is not designed to determine who is saved and who is lost. That has already been decided. This judgment is designed to end sin once and for all. This judgment is designed to establish in the mind of every individual in the universe that God is just and fair. Each lost person in that vast army of Satan is shown exactly the charges for which he or she is condemned. They see their life choices in all their reality. They are convinced that God’s judgment is just and that they have made themselves unfit to live in heaven. “As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue confess to God” (Romans 14:11).

Each individual in that multitude of the lost will kneel and acknowledge that God has dealt with him or her fairly. Even Satan and his angels have to confess that God's judgments are just.

The Great Controversy Ended

Then fire comes down from God and devours them—everyone not written in the Lamb's Book of life (Revelation 20:9, 15). This is "the second death" (verse 14). This death is final; it is eternal. This death is what the apostle Paul was referring to when he wrote, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Satan and his angels are destroyed in the lake of fire (verse 10). Sin is finally eradicated from the universe, never to arise again (Nahum 1:9). Death itself and Hades (the grave) are destroyed in the final fire (Revelation 20:13). The great controversy is ended!

The fire that devours the wicked, along with Satan and his angels, also purifies the earth. The apostle Peter speaks of "the day of the Lord" in which "the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" and even "the elements will melt with fervent heat" (2 Peter 3:10). Out of the ashes of that inferno, God will create a new heavens and a new earth where only righteousness will exist (2 Peter 3:13). That new earth and the New Jerusalem are the subjects of the last two chapters of Revelation.