

Revelation 20 The eclipse of evil

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Well we are wading into one of the most difficult passages in the Bible today. Revelation 20 is hotly disputed and many people get hot under the collar about it. And you may well have never read it before and not understand what all the fuss is about. The fuss largely comes from American Christianity. The Anglican Church we are part of is heavily influenced by English Christianity. And hence you may well not have been brought up to think this chapter is quite so crucial in the scheme of things.

Let me try to give you a quick overview of what is debated. The crucial issue is the 1000 year period mentioned in this chapter. When does the 1000 years happen? Here are three answers that have been given across church history.

There's the postmillennialists, the premillennialist and the amillennialist.

The postmillennialists believe that towards the end of the church age, that's the age we live in, where God's people are gathered in the church, towards the end of the church age the world will be largely converted to Christianity and Christians will rule the world for a thousand years and then Jesus will come back.

Post means after.

Jesus comes back after the millennium.

Postmillennialists, I have found in theology text books, but I have never met a real live postmillennialist.

There are two problems with this view.

First, it seems way too optimistic about human history.

To dream of a time when the world is largely converted to Christianity seems a pipe dream.

Second, God's people who are reigning with Christ seem to have died and been resurrected in Revelation 20.

But postmillennialists speak of ordinary Christians ruling the world.

Premillennialists believe that Jesus will come back first and raise God's people who have died back to life, and they will rule the world for 1000 years before judgement day.

Pre means before.

Jesus comes back before the millennium.

Many American Christians are Premillennialists

and some Australian denominations

that are more affected by the American church would contain some Premillennialists.

Many Premillennialists believe

that that ruling the world for 1000 years will be centred on Jerusalem and the nation of Israel.

And hence they place tremendous political importance on the fate of Israel.

If you've ever wondered

why American foreign policy seems fascinated by Israel, far beyond its geo political significance,

it's not just the strength of the American Jewish lobby,

it's also premillennialist Christians

who have a theological commitment to the future of national Israel.

The problem with the premillennialist view

is that it creates a new period of human history.

This thousand year period between Jesus' return and judgement day.

Every other part of the Bible

that refers to Jesus' return and judgement day

makes them sound like they happen at the same time

and no other part of the Bible mentions a time

between Jesus' return and judgement day.

You would think that for something so important,

that God would have told us more clearly than one unclear mention in a highly symbolic book.

The third way of looking at the 1000 years is the amillennial view. Amillennialists believe that the millennium began when Jesus was raised from the dead and it will finish when he returns.

They believe that there is no special extra period of 1000 years. a- means not.

There is no 1000 year period apart from the period between Christ's resurrection and his second coming.

What are the problems with this view?

This is my view, so I believe it stacks up, but other would raise these two objections.

Objection #1.

If Satan is in prison during the millennium, and you say that the millennium is now, then why does it look like Satan is so active in the world right now?

Objection #2

If the millennium last for 1000 years, then why have there been nearly 2000 years between Christ's resurrection and the present?

Let me answer those two objections.

If Satan has been imprisoned since Jesus' resurrection, why does it look like he is so active in the world at present?

In verse 3 it says,

“The angel threw him into the Abyss, and locked it and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended.”

The key word is ‘nations’.

In the Old Testament,

Satan deceived whole nations  
so that they wouldn't acknowledge Israel's God and worship him.  
God's people were confined to just one nationality – the Jews.  
Those other nations worshiped other gods.  
They were deceived as a whole  
from worshiping and glorifying the one true God.  
And they will be condemned on judgement day as whole nations.  
But since the devil has been bound,  
the nations aren't deceived as a whole.  
There are people from every nation  
who have come to worship the one true God,  
and give glory to his Son Jesus Christ.  
The devil is actually severely restricted in his activity right now,  
compared with his activity prior to Jesus' resurrection.

The second objection,  
why have we had nearly 2000 years  
if the millennium was meant to only last for 1000?  
If you've been listening in earlier weeks,  
You can probably guess what I will say about that.  
The numbers in the book of Revelation are symbolic.  
10 is a number representing completeness.  
1000 is 10 times 10 times 10.  
It represents absolute completeness.  
The devil will be bound for the complete time that God wills.  
God's people will reign with the Lord Jesus  
for the complete time that God wills.  
Nothing can cut it short.

Well that's a brief sketch of the views about what this chapter is saying  
– and why I think we should believe that we are in the millennium now.  
That's the issue  
that much of American Christianity gets hot under the collar about.  
And I'm not kidding – seriously hot under the collar.  
People in America choose which church they will go to

based on what view of the millennium it teaches.

I studied at Ridley College

where the millennium might have got a mention  
in two lectures in four years.

In some American seminaries,

you have to sign up to their view of the millennium  
before they will allow you to study there.

That strikes me as quite incredible.

Surely one of the points of study at a theology college

is so you can work out what the Bible teaches about these questions.

Fancy requiring people to sign up to a view of the millennium  
before they can study.

I don't understand it.

But then I'm not an American.

Now if you're sitting there thinking to yourself,

Why do I care about all these different sorts of millennialists?

Why can't they all get on with following Jesus?

I have quite some sympathy for your view.

You are what one theological humorist has dubbed,  
a panmillennialist.

What is a panmillennialist?

Someone who believes that it will all pan out in the end.

I think there is lots that we can learn from the panmillennialist.

You see the question about the millennium is interesting  
from the perspective of someone reading Revelation 20  
and trying to understand what it means.

And it's a great thing to read the Bible  
and try to understand what it means.

But in the end not much hangs on the question of the millennium.

Are you going to live your life as a Christian any differently

if God's people rule with Jesus for 1000 years

before or after Jesus comes back

or if the saints who have died are ruling with him right now?

I can't see how it will make much difference to you.  
You are still going to live obediently to what Jesus commanded,  
to love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself.  
The millennium doesn't actually matter.  
And that's the beauty of being in a church  
influenced by English Christianity rather than American.  
We don't get ourselves all agitated about it.  
None of us do.  
And that's a good thing.

OK next question,  
are there other important things in this chapter,  
that we will miss  
if we spend all our time thinking about the millennium?  
Yes absolutely there are!  
So let's move on before we run out of time.

One of the really puzzling questions in Christianity  
is 'What happens to people between when they die  
and when Jesus comes back?'  
We like to say at funerals,  
'He's gone to be with the Lord Jesus.'  
But Jesus hasn't returned yet,  
and so the general resurrection from the dead hasn't happened yet.  
Jesus said to the thief on the cross next to him,  
"Today you will be with me in paradise."  
But the apostle Paul says,  
1 Cor 15:22-23 "For as in Adam all die,  
so in Christ all will be made alive.  
But each in turn: Christ the firstfruits;  
then when he comes, those who belong to him."  
Sounds like the resurrection occurs at the second coming.  
That's what 'when he comes' means.  
Or further on in the same chapter, 15:52  
" ... at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound,

the dead will be raised imperishable,  
and we will be changed."

So which is it?

Are we with Jesus in paradise as soon as we die?

Or do we have to wait until his return?

Well if you accept the reading of Revelation 20 I have presented today,  
it gives us an answer to this question.

There are actually two resurrections.

There is one resurrection where you come to life spiritually  
and reign with Christ until he returns.

20:5 tells us "This is the first resurrection".

But that resurrection is not an embodied resurrection.

That's why John says 20:4

"I saw the souls of those

who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus  
and because of the word of God."

John saw their souls.

They were spiritually alive in heaven with Jesus.

But he only saw souls, that is they didn't have bodies.

Not sure what that looks like in a vision.

But someone else's vision isn't super easy to imagine.

Now you might respond to me,

"Yes but it seems that the first resurrection is only martyrs.

They are those 'who had been beheaded'.

Well if you were thinking that,

I can see your point.

But in Revelation, John actually only sees one category of Christian.

We are those who are faithful to Jesus unto death.

We are those who have not received the mark of the beast  
or worshiped its image.

I think this is all Christians who have died.

We are just being pictured

by the finest example of a Christian in John's mind.

What the best sort of Christian?

It's one whose head has been chopped off  
because of the testimony about Jesus.

That's John's view.

Personally,

I'm happy to be a second best variety Christian and keep my head.

But if the time comes,

I hope that I would follow Jesus even if it meant the guillotine.

So the upshot is that you can with a clear conscience  
tell your friend who is grieving the death of a loved one,

"Yes they are reigning with Jesus right now."

But we wait until the new creation

before we are given our resurrection bodies.

OK we have time for one more issue raised by this passage.

I'm choosing verse 12.

"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne,  
and books were opened.

Another book was opened, which is the book of life.

The dead were judged according to what they had done  
as recorded in the books."

So you get the picture.

There are lots of books.

They record everything that people have done in their lives.

How would you like to have your book put on loan down at the library?

Remember this is not the curated version of stories you tell your friends.

This is everything you have thought, said or done.

And the things you haven't done that you should have.

All written down.

It's not a nice thought.

But there's another book,

the book of life.

And all the names of those who have put their faith in the Lord Jesus  
are written in that book.

Sometimes people say to me,

"How could it be fair that such and such a person faces judgement?"  
Maybe the person lives in a place  
where they are extremely unlikely to hear about the Lord Jesus.  
Maybe they were just brought up in a family  
that made them unlikely to respond to the gospel,  
even though in their community the gospel was freely proclaimed.  
Maybe they were negatively impacted on  
by the wrong choices of other people.  
There are all manner of things  
that you might think ought to be mitigating circumstances.  
But you see this picture in Revelation makes it clear.  
No one is judged because they didn't hear about Jesus.  
No one is judged because they failed to respond to Jesus.  
People are judged according to what they have done  
as recorded in the books.  
Everyone has the same opportunity.  
We are all given a book.  
We all dictate a record of our lives which is recorded.  
And we are all equally culpable before God.  
What is fair  
is that every single person on the face of the earth faces judgement.  
You've blotted your copy book as have I.  
No one has an excuse because of what they didn't know.  
We all know at least enough that we ought to live by our own standards.  
And we can't even manage that,  
let alone live by God's standards.  
The only thing that is not fair  
is that anyone's name is written in the book of life.  
By rights we are all destined for the lake of fire.  
But God is gracious.  
And he blots out the record of wrongs that are written in their book  
with the blood of Jesus.  
We should never ask the question,  
"How could it be fair that such and such a person face judgement?"  
It's fair that every single one of us face judgement.

The only question is, "How can it be fair that I don't face judgement?"  
And the answer is, "It's not fair.  
I don't want it to be fair.  
I praise God that he is a God of mercy as well as of justice.  
And that he satisfied his justice on the Lord Jesus not on me."

Well where have we come today?  
We started with the millennium.  
It's a contested issue,  
But I've suggested to you that the millennium  
is the time between when Jesus was raised from the dead  
and when he returns.  
And during that time, believers who have died reign with Christ.  
We've also taken note  
that not every issue is worth getting fired up about.  
The millennium is one issue where it's best to live and let live.  
There is an important wisdom for the Christian  
in discerning which issues are crucial and which are peripheral.

One consequence of the millennium being now  
is that it tells us what happens to believers  
between their earthly death and the return of Christ.  
It gives us the answer to the question,  
"Where does my believing loved one go after they die?"

Another consequence of this passage is the basis for God's judgement.  
No one is judged on what they don't know.  
People are judged based on what they have done.  
And yet despite that, in God's kindness,  
some names have been written in the book of life.  
Not because of what we've done,  
but because of what Jesus has done.