

Revelation 20: Toward the End

Oh, People of God.

Revelation 20 might be one of the hardest to understand passages in the New Testament. It's weird, it feels out of place, and there's good reason for it. Today we'll talk about why. I'll share four main ways this passage is understood, and we'll look at a number of questions that come up when we read these 15 verses.

There's a lot. Today might even be a note-taking type day. It'll all be online soon, though. So. Let's Pray:

Prayer:

Left Behind:

At the end of Chapter 19 we read just a quick line. It was John's description of the final end of the Beast and Beast's agent of deception, the False Prophet. They were "thrown into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur."

The Strategy of Revelation:

I suggested that this vision of John's dealt specifically with Rome. we've talked over and over about the ways that the Beast represents Rome, about the ways the False Prophet represents the Imperial Cult, that whole religious system that was tied into politics and the economy and every single part of the Roman World.

And the primary goal of the Imperial Cult was to direct worship to the Emperor & his family--worship that should only be offered to God and the Lamb, Jesus. Using the code-word "Babylon" for Rome, John has done all he can to

tell his churches to resist worshipping the Emperor, to “come out of Babylon,” to hold to Jesus, even if it costs them, because he knows that the judgement that he describes in Revelation 19, this “lake of fire,” it’s coming, and all those who participate in the Imperial Cult, and worship Rome's emperors, are going down with it.

But then today’s passage comes along.

A Shift:

And in the pause between the end of Chapter 19 and the start of Chapter 20, John’s vision shifts from the end of the Beast and the False Prophet, to the end of the power that stands behind them both.

We haven’t talked about the dragon in Revelation much. The focus really has been on the Beast; we could forget that this book isn’t just about Rome, but it’s also about that dragon who has empowered Rome.

If Revelation stopped at chapter 19, it would only be a historical book. If Revelation stopped at chapter 19, it would only be a historical book. It would only be a book about visions John has of God hearing the cries of his persecuted people in the Province of Asia, and rousing himself, and bringing judgment down on their persecutor.

But there would be a major loose end, I mean, a really huge loose end. Because there would still be the dragon.

Remember the Dragon?

Remember the dragon? We first saw him in Revelation 12, in an apocalyptic vision John has about Israel and the

coming of its Messiah, our Messiah, Jesus.

In the vision, the dragon stands against a woman who represents Israel, surprising her just as she's about to give birth to the child Messiah promised to the world. But the Messiah is protected by God. An angelic heavenly war breaks out: the dragon and his ilk on one side, Michael and God's faithful angels on the other, and the dragon is kicked out of heaven, losing all his heavenly power and heavenly influence, and tossed into our realm, earth, where the dragon makes war on God's People, "those who keep God's commands and hold fast [to] their testimony about Jesus" (12:17).

And this enemy is described this way: "The great dragon...that ancient serpent, called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray."

This is the great enemy. The great enemy of God, of God's people, of the Lamb. And of course, for John's churches, what they need to hear is that the Roman Empire will fail, that the Beast and the False Prophet will drink the medicine that they've been forcing down the throats of the Lamb's followers.

But even they would have wondered, I think, what about the devil who used Rome to get at them in the first place? What about the dragon? Isn't God going to deal with the real antagonist, the real enemy? Not just the enemy's puppets? Don't you want to know?

What about the real enemy?

And John, thankfully, is given Revelation 20. A vision of the

end of the dragon, the end of evil, the clearing of everything, so that a new thing can be put in its place.

Regarding the 1000 Years:

In v2 of Chapter 20, in John's vision, a heavenly angel takes his chain and binds up the Devil “for a thousand years.”

“He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”

John goes on:

“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands”

John is piling up here all the admirable, holy, faithful things he’s been calling his readers to do for the entire book--a thing he does in the first few verses of this chapter with their enemies--and we, of course, want to be found among these “good guys,” right? We want to be here, not under rubble in Rome, weeping with traders over what we’ve lost. But John continues, telling us about these faithful examples:

“They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” There’s some commentary: ***“The rest***

of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.”

“This is the first resurrection.” John writes, ***“Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.”***

So. This should sound weird, right? Maybe especially if we've soaked ourselves with New Testament stuff. Because this vision is simply weird. Strange. “First Resurrection?” “Second Death?” And both of these tied to this thousand-year lock-up of the devil, during which Christians act as rulers over the world, with God & Jesus?

What the sam is this all about?

What the Sam? Millennium

Well: There are, traditionally, three main ways that many Christians have talked about this 1000 years and the weird stuff that flows out of it--Second Deaths & First Resurrections and all the rest.

This thousand-year period is usually called the “Millennium” which is Latin for--surprise--1000 years. And these ways of understanding the Millennium fit to greater or lesser degrees with the four main ways that we said--oh so long ago--people usually understand the book of Revelation itself. Remember those interpretive approaches?

Review: Preterist

There's the Preterist approach, which assumes that

Revelation is talking about historical events, but events that have entirely already happened: everything--including the stuff we're talking about today and will talk about next week. It's all taken place already.

Review: Historicist

Then there's the Historicist approach, which chops up the letters John writes at the start of Revelation and associates them with ages in church history. It's been around since the 1300s, and it's what I was taught when I first became a Christian: that we're in the "Age of Laodicea," and the letter to the church of Laodicea was really a description and warning for right now, for North American Evangelicals in 2020. And there's something exciting about this, right?

But if the preterist approach makes Revelation only understandable to its first readers, the historicist approach makes Revelation irrelevant for all John's churches.

Review: Futurist

And eventually, the historicist approach gives way the futurist approach, which says Revelation is talking about right now and only right now: our time, today, or a time just around the corner. The book was useless to every Christian until we ourselves arrived and most of it is describing terrible things to come. A little narcissistic.

Review: Idealist

In contrast to this, which focuses all of Revelation on us, there's the Idealist approach, which just reads Revelation as one big book of timeless truths, a symbolic commentary on life, full of principles, but no connection to anything historical.

Review: What We've Done:

Preterist packs it in, Historicist spreads it out, Futurist look at it's belly-button, and the Idealist drinks tea and goes to sleep.

And I you know by now that I believe the best interpretation leans toward the preterist camp, that much of Revelation is talking about the first century world--Rome and the Imperial Cult and all the rest. But I am also sure that the stuff of Revelation 20, 21, & 22 just hasn't happened yet: New Heaven & New Earth & the final judge of evil--if it's happened, we've all missed it, you know. But of course, as with any biblical book, we can make connections between the first century world and our own, and figure out "ideal" ways to apply this text.

And so I've walked us through Revelation with this way of interpreting the book, because, simply, *I think it is the best way.*

Millennium:

But let's return to the Millennium: There are three main ways to understand this 1000 years. (I'm especially indebted to Craig Keener's concise-but-thorough overview of these for guiding me through this morass; See Keener, 463ff.,):

Premillennialism, Amillennialism, Postmillennialism

Premillennialism: Summary

Generally, premillennialists believe that Jesus will return, and when he does, he will set up for himself an earthly

reign. Premillennialists disagree on whether this reign of the Lord will be exactly 1000 years-long rule, or if the “1000 years” may simply be symbolic for the sort of time it’ll be--an excellent, holy time. But premillennialism focuses on the expectations that Revelation 20 is talking about a real period of time on this earth when Jesus will reign over the world, and resurrected Christians with him.

Premillennialism & Tribulation:

Premillennialism is usually tied to a historicist or futurist reading of Revelation, which would tend to say that most of this book is not about Rome, but about human history--it’s bad stuff that’s either already started (a historicist reading) or will soon (a futurist one).

If you’ve spent anytime around an evangelical church, you’ve heard of “the Tribulation.” And Premillennialists typically believe that chapters 6-19 are really a description of the terrible things that are going to happen in the world before Jesus returns to set up his reign on earth.

Premillennialism & Another Reading:

I’ve talked about these chapters in a different way, though, right? Through the lens of Recapitulation, which says that the terrible things we see are simply a take, then a double-take, than a third take on the same scene of Judgment that’s coming not on the whole world--but on Rome.

And in between these reiterated & increasingly stark and terrible scenes of judgment we see God rousing himself, judgment coming out of God’s heavenly Temple, and finally and fully coming upon “Babylon,” John’s code for Rome.

It's not that the world almost ends three times, and that nearly everyone is dead by the time the devil is dealt with and Jesus' reign established; it's that John's concern for much of Revelation is to encourage his churches to hold to their testimony to Jesus. He just happens to use unfamiliar apocalyptic language, images, and metaphors to persuade them of this.

So you know that I wouldn't interpret these chapters as pointing to "The Tribulation," some period of time on earth that whoever is alive will have to live through, as a historicist or futurist interpreter of Revelation would generally do. I don't believe there is a Tribulation.

But I do think a person can interpret Revelation as talking basically about Rome and still hold a premillennialist position--that Jesus is going to establish an actual reign on earth for some perfect amount of time, 1000 years exactly.

This is because the idea of the 1000 years, which pops up in this Revelation 20 chapter, doesn't seem to me to be theologically dependent upon anything that's happened in Revelation up to this point. Which is why people force some connection. It doesn't make sense to us.

Premillennialism & the Church:

So that's Premillennialism: Jesus is setting up a kingdom on earth for a while, or a thousand years. And premillennialism is so hot right now. Hot Hot Hot. It was also popular with the early church and through it's first couple of hundred years. Famous early Church History heroes you may have heard about--Justin Martyr, Irenaeus--these guys loved it.

Amillennialism: Summary

Another way of understanding the Millennium is called “Amillennialism.” “A” is a prefix that means without, and Amillennialism, at its most basic, is sort of the opposite of premillennialism. Amillennialists don’t expect Jesus to establish a reign on earth. They would generally see this 1000 years as symbolic of life right now, in between the time Jesus left and his return. That right now we can live with the certainty that we will be resurrected, that persecution will give way to royal authority, that we don’t have to fear judgment, but that God protects “the camp of His People,” his Church.

This is something like what Paul does now and then “If you have been raised with Christ, then seek the things that are above, where Christ is.” We haven’t been raised yet, right? But it’s such a certainty that Paul can talk about it as though we have.

Amillennialists might focus on the way this vision works in the narrative of Revelation, what it accomplishes in the heart of the reader. Some would say that the 1000 years stands for a period of peace for the Roman churches after the persecutions they faced there: a sort of “John’s-churches-only tribulation,” and a “John’s-churches-only Millennium,” that both these things are oriented toward John’s churches--and there’s merit in that position. I kinda buy it, actually. The letter was for them, after all.

Amillennialism & the Church:

Amillennialism isn’t all that popular right now, but for most of church history it was the dominant perspective. In the 300s, Eusebius, a guy who *historians* call “the early church

historian” implied that premillennialism was only a “light heresy,” and premillennialists usually would become amillennialists if only they were shown their “error.” An early church council (the Council of Ephesus) condemned premillennialism as superstition. Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and a lot of other leaders all held some form of Amillennialism, which again, generally refers to our period right now, our in-between Jesus’ going and his return that we’re still waiting on.

Postmillennialism: Summary:

The third popular way that the 1000 years are interpreted is called postmillennialism. Generally, postmillennialists believe that before Jesus returns, they’ll—that is, the faithful Christians—will establish rule over the earth, and Jesus will sort of take it over for 1,000 years when he does return. They shared quite a bit with the premillennialists, except for this idea that they have to set up the kingdom that Jesus will take over.

Now: This was probably the most popular perspective among North American Christians in the 1800s, and it was--you might expect this--tightly tied to a desire to evangelize, to go on mission, because in order for Jesus to return, you’ve got to get the kingdom ready for him, right? You can see how this interpretation drives the idea that Christianity should lead the world, should be in charge.

Evangelicalism—that “way of being a Christian” that most of us started in—has its roots in postmillennialism. The “Great Awakening,” which was this period of just an explosion of people converting to Christianity in the 1800s and early 1900s through open-air tent revivals and

crusades and “sinners prayers” was largely driven by postmillennialism, and so were its major players: Jonathan Edwards & Charles Finney. Names you might have heard.

And this drive is still here, even if a conscious sort of reference to the theology that stands behind it isn't. “Convert the world & Jesus will return” is something that still stands behind a large push in missions and evangelism.

It's worth noting that the postmillennialist drive to make heaven on earth really resulted in some good things: social activism, fighting against slavery. This was or is evangelicalism at its most Christlike, maybe.

But there's a big problem here. Let me quote: “This view provided excellent motivation for mission, but eventually shattered against the hard reefs of reality: Christian devotion, no matter how sincere, cannot fully establish God's kingdom without God's direct intervention.” And this could take a darker turn, too, because an ends-justifies-the-means ethic fits really well here, and sometime the “means” ain't so good. In fact, the church has failed miserably at erasing non-western cultures because we believed it would get in the way of setting up Christ's Kingdom so he could return.

Postmillennialism isn't so popular anymore. Those hard reefs got it. Too, it was sort of tied to a North American optimism that's just fizzled out, really, after decades and decades of war and the hyper-secularization of our society.

The Right One?

So. Which one's right, you know? I mean...that's the

question. Which is right? Postmillennialism, Amillennialism, and Premillennialism?

As one author writes, “Most of hold views about the Millennium that we ‘know’ are right because we move in circles that share the same views we do. [We] know many Christians who could not imagine their view being wrong, because every passionate believer they respect in their circles holds that view.” And he makes the point that “committed Christians have held many different views about the end-time, yet retained God’s blessings” (Keener, 473).

There are some postmillennialists around, but not many. Premillennialism and Amillennialism are the most popularly held views today. And it’s been pointed out that generally what camp you end up in depends on how you read the Bible. I’ll quote: Each view make sense on its [own assumptions], but often sounds like special pleading to [a person] who starts with different [assumptions] (Keener, 476-477).

I’m not telling us which is *right*.

Millennium: These are my confessions:

But you do know where I stand on Revelation as a whole, though, right? And you might wonder where I stand on this. I wouldn't share, probably, if we had that church dysfunction where everyone agrees with the Senior Pastor, but we don't--and that's great.

But I do have strong opinions that lead me away from Premillennialism. I don’t think that we should expect a 1000

year—or any length of time—reign of Jesus on earth, simply because we don't see anything like this anywhere else in Scripture. But this reveals that my starting place is to bring Revelation's view of the "end of things" in line with the rest of the Bible's, as best as I'm able, instead of starting with this Revelation passage.

I tend not to think apocalyptic material is necessarily about the end of the world, which some people do, and so I don't try to connect the apocalyptic material I find in the New Testament with what I find in the Old Testament, and create a map of things, which is something that is often done in certain flavors of Premillennialism.

Because I already understand many of John's visions "symbolically," it doesn't make sense for me to understand this one "literally." But again: someone starting with a literal understanding of the rest of Revelation—which I firmly believe is not what we should do—would land in a different place. So would someone who believes Revelation is for us, not John's churches.

And you know, I do like stories. I like prose and poetry and I love a well-crafted argument, and persuasive stuff. I respond emotionally to these sort sort of things. And it seems to me that Revelation 20 is the perfect concluding argument, the perfect capstone, to what John's been communicating over and over and over.

I certainly don't think that by the time we come to this chapter we'd expect to see this 1000 years and the first and second resurrection stuff. It is out of left field. But in terms of the ways John's been pushing us—to keep the

faith, to hold to the Lamb, to reject the devil and all his devices—this passage is a grand slam.

Don't you want to be a part of the first resurrection? Don't you want to reign with Christ? Don't you want to avoid the Abyss and the dragon bound up in it? Don't you want to have your name written in the book of life? Don't you want evil to be finished, completely, utterly?

We want to be on the side of the good, right? And for John's first churches, it was clear how to be on that side. But for us, it's not as clear. Our world is far removed from John's. But for me, the rhetorical punch of this passage is like a crown on the top of the rest of John's rhetoric. And it is easy, for me, to allow it to be that, to allow the real power of this passage not be in the fact that it points to a literal reign of Christ, but the fact that it's a grand slam push in my own life to avoid the devil while I've got a chance to do it, and to lean on in this present life, when things are hard, the sure promises of God: That I will survive judgment, that I will be resurrected with authority, that persecution in this world--not that I deal with all that much of it--is temporary.

Millennium: "In All Things"

And at least one basic way I have tried to avoid the devil is to not demand that others agree with my perspective on Revelation 20.

I really do fall in the Amillennialist camp, you know? I just do. I've formed that conviction over a number of years. But the early Brethren held a common motto: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." It doesn't seem to me that understanding the mechanics of

the end of the world and the final judgment of evil is an essential thing.

The thing itself is essential, right? The end of the world, I mean. What is very clear from scripture, wherever you start is that Jesus is coming back. The living and the dead will be judged. Those who have held tightly to the Lord will have nothing to fear in that judgment. And evil will be finished. These are things that are essential, because otherwise there really is a sort of futility to all our efforts in the world.

But how this is going to work? How this is going to look? Understanding the mechanics of Jesus' return is not essential; believing that it will happen is.

How that looks makes for great debate; but it's "good" debate only if it steers clear of suspicion, of labeling, of disrespect, and a lack of loving kindness. We have freedom to disagree about the Millennium. We have "liberty" in this non-essential. But with that freedom comes the responsibility to act with charity—with love that is not self-interested—when we discuss this not-easy-to-discuss topic.

Conclusion:

I have skipped so much that we could talk about. Just so much. (Cf. Keener, 465-470.) I'll pin a tiny bit to the end of the message.

Some messages are easy to draw application from, right? We all leave reminded not to be a jerk, or to give money to the poor, or to trust God not our credit scores.

Sometimes a message is just meant to "kindle our minds,"

to give rise to a new way of thinking about something. That's today. I know that I have shared a lot of information this morning, but my hope is that we can attend to it, think about it, come to some biblical and church-informed opinions about this passage in Scripture that is so debated, and really so public.

You know my hand: at the end of the day, as an Amillennialist, it is an encouragement for me to know, that—I'll quote—"believers in the present have been raised with Christ, share a role in Christ's kingdom in the world, and will be spared from the horror of a final judgment without Christ" (Keener, 480). I think this passage draws our attention to what is most true about us as followers of the Lamb: that our destiny is good, and our present filled with responsibility.

In some ways the application is the same no matter where we fall: persevere. Persevere, persevere, persevere. Hold to the Lamb, and resist evil. Do whatever it takes because the stakes are high, and judgment is real, and we should be found on the Lord's side, not the enemy's.

Next week we'll talk about rewards. New Heaven and New Earth and hope that beats in every person because it is the destiny we were made for. Until then, though; think about this passage. Discuss it and reflect prayerfully on it. Where does your interpretation start? Here or other places? What feels right & why? Amillennialism? Premillennialism? Postmillennialism? What are the implications of the place you land, how can you own what you believe well, so you can share it with others, and how can you live with charity toward those who disagree? Because if that's the hardest

ask of us, we don't have it so bad.

Prayer:

Discussion:

Today's passage is one of the most intriguing--and confusing--passages in the New Testament. We won't be able to address every question raised by Revelation 20 during our discussion today, but will focus instead on the 1000 year period mentioned in today's passage--usually called "the Millennium."

There are three main ways that the Church has historically understood this 1000 year period of Revelation:

Premillennialism, which promotes a "literal" reading of the passage, and expects that Jesus will establish an earthly kingdom (of 1000 years, or simply of a period of time).

Amillennialism, which promotes a "symbolic" reading of this passage, and (in the most popular form) suggests that John is talking about life right now--the period of time in between Jesus' leaving & his coming return.

Postmillennialism, which like premillennialism expects an earthly reign of Jesus, but believes Christians must first set up God's Kingdom on earth, and then Jesus will come to take it over as his own.

Premillennialism & Amillennialism are the two positions with the most popular support in Evangelicalism today. However, Postmillennialism was the position held by early Evangelicals, and contributed to the strong push for evangelism that still characterizes this movement.

Questions:

Which of these three positions have you had the most

exposure to?

How might the way you read the Bible influence your reading of Revelation 20? More particularly, if you start with other New Testament passages, then introduce Revelation 20 into your "end of the world" framework, how would the result be different if you started with Revelation 20 and then brought other New Testament passages to bear on it?

How might your understanding of what's going on in Revelation influence your understanding of today's passage?

How does the motto "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity" relate to a discussion on the Millennium?

Do you have strong convictions about what "position" you take? How would you modify the generalized definitions above?

Why might it be important for a "follower of the Lamb" to think about these things?

Extras:

Let me quote again: "In general, if one starts with Revelation 20, one will be Premillennial...if one starts with most New Testament passages about the end time, one will probably be Amillennial and then need to determine what to do with Revelation 20. Each view make sense on its [assumptions], but often sounds like special pleading to [a person] who starts with different [assumptions] (Keener, 476-477).

How you read the Old Testament; how you understand Apocalyptic material and prophecy; how easy or difficult you think it is to take things “literally” or “symbolically,”—and when you choose to do one or the other; how influenced you are by church history; whether you’re oriented toward the continuity between Israel and the Church or oriented toward the differences between the two: all these things affect how we read this passage and where we fall. The same author I just mentioned points out that “any system of thought looks consistent from within the system,” and we could add, looks weird from the outside.

More:

We could, if we had time, talk about “Gog and Magog,” about how these terms were used by Jewish writers to symbolize Israel’s enemies, the way they’re drawn from the apocalyptic book Ezekiel, about the Abyss and where this imagery comes from. We could talk about the way the dead are raised to life: the faithful to reward, the unfaithful to judgment, and how this isn’t an uncommon biblical theme. We could talk about the “lake of fire,” and “eternal torment” and all the different New Testament views on the afterlife of those who reject the Lord (a thing we’ll do someday). We could talk about how so many of these things of John are influenced by Daniel and Jewish works that don’t show up in our Bibles: The “book of life,” as a place where the names of faithful people are recorded, the abyss as a prison for the demonic.

If you want more information on this stuff, I’ve got things you can read. A helpful resource--without which I couldn’t have preached today’s message--is Craig Keener’s NIV Application Commentary on Revelation. At the end of the

day, he and I disagree about how to read Revelation and the Millennium: but it's a good work & I recommend it.