



What is a Thousand Years to God?

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4, KJV 1900)

Perhaps more speculation has been imposed onto Revelation 20 than any other single chapter in the entire Bible. Often people read the chapter and then allow their fanciful imagination to govern their thoughts far more than the words of the chapter, difficult as those words are to almost any interpretation. Given the obvious difficulty of the chapter, I offer my thoughts with a "Loose grip," as my sincere reflections on at least some portions of the chapter. The variety of interpretations is nearly endless. Major views include the following:

1. At the end of time as we know it, Jesus shall return visibly and powerfully to set this world right by ruling over it for a thousand years. At the end of that time, eternity shall begin. This view is often referred to as "Historical premillennialism." I do not hold to this view, but I do not consider it as alien to Scripture as many more modern and fanciful ideas. It indeed does claim support from early historical Christian writers. However, it relies on an overly literal interpretation of Revelation 20, a chapter in one of the most symbolic books in the Bible, leaving the idea with less than universal acceptance.
2. Dispensationalism identifies the modern idea popularized in the "Left Behind" novels. It began with J. N. Darby in the early nineteenth century. It is not at all the same as the first idea. Because so many advocates fancifully go in their own direction in this school of thought, it is difficult to describe it beyond rather broad terms. Ask ten people who describe themselves as a dispensationalist to outline their view, and you'll often get ten quite different explanations. The view is generally characterized by a "Secret rapture," second chance salvation for the wicked after death, and a strong slant toward hierarchical rewards based on the merit of participants. It is far more man-centered than most other views. Example; a few years ago I heard a popular advocate of this view boast that he would have his personal pet lion during his secret rapture era.
3. "Amillennialism" is a broad term that also describes a wide variety of views, all of which hold that John's reference to a thousand years

in Revelation 20 identifies a symbolic thousand year period. Folks who hold to any of these views interpret the thousand year period as symbolic, not literal. Beyond this common point, many different views fall under this term.

While it is helpful to know some of the historical explanations, as with any other Scripture, our primary goal should always be to seek the Holy Spirit's inspired intent in the language of the passage.

Is the reference to a thousand years literal?

It seems that this question is central to any view one takes of the passage. In his *Systematic Theology* text, A. H. Strong explores in depth the various historical ideas. In his concluding personal thoughts, Strong makes a logical and worthwhile point. It seems highly unlikely, given that this chapter appears in one of the most symbolic books of the Bible, that the Holy Spirit would intend a literal thousand years by the reference. On this point, I agree with Strong. Throughout Scripture the number "One thousand" often is used to symbolize a large or undetermined number. Examples include the following:

1. *For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof. (Psalm 50:10-12).* What is the point of the passage? That God owns only a thousand hills and the animals that live on those hills? If so, who owns the cattle on Hill Number 1001? The obvious point is that God owns the entire universe. If He experienced hunger or other physical needs, He could freely take what is His for His use. The number symbolizes God's universal ownership and rule over His created universe, not at all a literal reference to a thousand specific "hills."
2. *But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, be not*

ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2 Peter 3:7-8). Here Peter uses the number to refer to time, one day or a thousand years. The comparison itself makes the point. Peter is not at all suggesting that God is subject to time, but in a different temporal ratio than we measure time. His point is that God transcends time. The contextual theme of this passage deals with the Second Coming, specifically that some in Peter's day rejected and ridiculed the idea because, in their myopic view, everything continues as it always has. If nothing ever changes, how can Christians credibly suggest that the Lord has any intent whatever to end this world and redeem His people into eternity with Him? Peter refutes this error by reminding his readers that Scripture records the fact that God created the universe (Neither matter nor this world are eternal), and that God sent a cataclysmic event, the flood, upon this world in righteous judgment against sin in Noah's day. The critic is wrong. Things do not continue as always. God created this world and has on occasion powerfully stepped into it in defense of His people or in righteous judgment against the wicked. So what if cemeteries are growing and the resurrection has not yet occurred. God gave His faithful "Promise" (Notice in the verse following the above quote that Peter refers to God's "promise," not to His many promises. Peter is dealing with one specific promise in this chapter, the Lord's promise of returning and bringing His eternal purpose of redemption to a successful conclusion. In that setting, we have no logical, contextual, or grammatical basis to view the number 1000 as a literal reference. It is symbolic. Peter's point is obvious. The Lord is faithful to His promise of returning and completing His redemptive purpose for His people, as well as His righteous purpose of judgment against the wicked. Whether He returns tomorrow or in a thousand years is irrelevant. He made the promise, and He shall keep it.

My response to the question would be the same as Strong's. The strong symbolism that pervades the Book of Revelation urges a symbolic view of the thousand years of Chapter Twenty. Much of the symbolism in Revelation depicts various ideas by logical symbols.

As a general approach to an interpretation of the Book of Revelation, I offer an additional point that relates to this question. Most contemporary interpretations of Revelation effectively ignore first century Christians in those seven churches to whom John first wrote this book, and offer highly imaginative and more highly speculative ideas about the meaning of the various symbols and passages contained in the Book. A simple rule will

lead us far closer to the right view of Revelation than anyone's imaginative speculation. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not provide wise instruction and comfort to the specific people to whom John first wrote the Book as they faced intense trials and even life-threatening persecution should be patently rejected as false. First, search out a simple and instructive interpretation of the Book that gives godly counsel and encouragement to John's first century readers. Then simply apply that same meaning to us and to other twenty-first century believers. This interpretational approach will take us far closer to the Holy Spirit's intended message for Revelation than our speculation could possibly uncover.

Some student of Revelation has observed a rather insightful thought regarding this book. When Christians live in a peaceful setting, they invest far too much time speculating on what all the symbols and events of Revelation mean, typically accompanied with endless disagreement among them. However, during seasons of intense persecution in which Christians suffer and occasionally die for their faith at the hands of unbelievers, they rush to Revelation for its comfort. In these times, they do not have or take the time to chase highly speculative interpretations. They read the "Big Picture" of Revelation and realize that, whatever the details may mean, the most powerful message of the Book is that Jesus is more powerful than any of the fearful adversaries described in the book, and He always wins in the end. This message is powerful and comforting to suffering Christians. I suggest that perhaps we who do not face immediate persecution for our faith might serve our faith and our Lord well if we followed the theme of the suffering believers and sought Revelation's comforts for suffering believers instead of chasing the latest speculation.

I offer no thoughts regarding the first three verses related to our present study. It deals with a situation in which Satan is bound, in some way restricted or limited for an extended time. While we may not see Satan's limits, divinely imposed, Scripture reminds us that God is infinitely greater than Satan. In Job's trial, Job was not aware of the divine limit placed on Satan, and he would likely have thought the adversary was unbound, but God reveals to us in Scripture that he quite specifically limited what Satan could do to Job.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them. John doesn't specifically identify how many thrones, who sat on them, or what their scope of judgment was. Perhaps it is wise to keep in mind that John reports what he saw; he doesn't always give us an explanation of the meaning of what he saw.

...and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands. In recent

years, these words have increasingly gently walked me through more comforting and sensible truth in this chapter than almost any other part of the chapter. They answer a central question and thereby refute most of the speculative imagination that floods Christian radio and pulpits of our day.

Who are the participants in this unique event?

A simple question and a central point to any right interpretation of the entire chapter. Instead of endlessly speculating on the thousand years, why not study the chapter to identify things that it clearly defines? John may not explain the thousand years to our personal satisfaction, but he leaves no doubt at all regarding the participants in the thousand year event.

...*the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus.* Fascinating that most modern millennial speculators choose to ignore this simple point that might serve to enlighten their thoughts if read and believed. Who are described by these words? Souls, not bodies; them that were beheaded for their faith; the language could not more simply describe Christian martyrs who have died for their faith. This simple definition of the participants in the thousand year event utterly rejects pet lions and all the other human-centered ideas that flood pulpits and Christian writings of the day. Whatever we make of the prolonged event must anchor its meaning and application to martyrs who died for their faith. That identify follows John's words in the simplest and most direct manner possible.

What about children of God who were not martyrs? John's first audience, the seven churches in first century Asia, were suffering persecution. Review those brief letters to the angel of each church in Chapters 2 and 3. Based on our historical knowledge, their persecution would soon intensify, fiercely so. They needed the assurance of victory in the face of martyrdom, but they would soon need it far more. John's point is to comfort them and all subsequent martyrs for the faith. From other Scriptures dealing with the Lord's return in victory and judgment, we learn about the Lord's complete family. (John 5:28-29; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15) John's message to believers facing imminent danger of martyrdom is intended to comfort them. Remember Jesus' words. Your murderers can kill your body, but they can do no more. Despite their torturing and killing you, they cannot further hinder your joy with the Lord. The Savior who suffered unimaginably more than anything you will face shall stand by you and give you His grace in your suffering, and immediately upon your death will take you to glory where you shall reign with Him in heaven till the Second Coming and the resurrection of your body.

In Revelation 6:9-11, John sees the souls of the martyrs. They ask the Lord how long till He judges and punishes their murderers. The Lord answers

by telling them that more time must pass and more saints must suffer martyrdom. In the meantime, he gives them white robes and tells them to rest for a season. I suggest that Chapter 20 picks up this theme and further enlightens that point. During their time of "rest," those who died for their faith consciously and joyful reign with Christ for that prolonged time from their death till the Second Coming. Then the Lord shall return and righteously judge and punish those who murdered and tortured His children. And during the intervening time while the martyrs enjoy their time with the Lord, Satan is indeed bound. He can't touch them or in any way hinder their joy.

For twenty-first century Christians who have no real sense of persecution at all, much less martyrdom for our faith, we can hardly grasp the powerful comfort this message would have been to first century believers in those seven persecuted churches. Lord, give us a sense of what those dear saints suffered for what we callously take for granted. Give us hearts of passion and prayer for Your children today who face persecution for Your name. And "Come quickly" to end the persecutors' wicked assaults. Praise the Lord for the message of victory at last in Revelation 20!

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor