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Words for children: resurrection (64), judgment (53), second coming (16),

December 16, 2018
FBC Sermon #977
Text: John 5:28-29

The Gospel of John (34); The Third Discourse of Jesus (4)

Introduction:

Last Lord's Day we gave attention to the event that the Lord Jesus foretold in John 5:28 and 29. After declaring that He had the authority to impart spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead in sin (5:26, 27), He spoke of the time and occasion when He would cause the entire human race to be physically resurrected from death and brought before Him in judgment. Here are His Words:

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

A simple reading of these words conveys the truth that God has appointed a day in which Jesus Christ will summon the entire human race to rise from the dead and then to be brought before His tribunal to be judged. On that great day He will judge all human beings as to whether their lives were characterized by “doing good” or “doing evil.” Of course He was not advocating salvation by the merit of works, for that would conflict with the teaching of Scripture everywhere. But the judgment of works that the Lord Jesus will execute will both validate those who claim to be Christian and convict all others as having lived and died in sin. The outcome of this great judgment will be either eternal life or eternal damnation for all.

And yet, this very clear assertion of our Lord is not understood in this way by most evangelicals. They have been taught, for the most part, that the judgment of Christians and the judgment of the unsaved takes place on a number of different occasions in the future, through intervals of time of at least 1,000 years, and in most cases, 1,007 years. And so, these verses necessitate that we address issues of eschatology, or the biblical doctrine of last things, of events that will transpire at the end of the history of this world. We began to do so last Lord's Day, and we will continue this matter today.

Now I know that the position that I am espousing is a minority view in today's evangelical world (even though it has been the predominant view of Protestants in the past). I recognize, therefore, that the burden of proof lies upon my shoulders to set forth the case biblically and to attempt to persuade folks to accept the understanding we are advocating. And do not think that I would resent or hold it against anyone, if after having considered the biblical evidence, he continues to hold the popular views of these matters. But on the other hand, it is incumbent upon you to listen prayerfully and consider carefully if what we are saying is true to the Holy Scriptures. May we be as the Bereans when they heard what they must have perceived to be “strange things” from the apostle Paul. We read of them, “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). May the Lord help all of us to be teachable, have a healthy skepticism of our own abilities and perceptions, and submit to the authority of the Word of God.

Last Lord's Day we addressed what the Word of God identifies as “good works” and how they are distinguished from “evil works.” I read a sermon recently of an 18th century Puritan preacher, **Samuel Davies** (1723-1761), who addressed this matter in this way:

Methinks you cannot enjoy one moment's ease or security while this is undetermined. And is it an *answerable* inquiry? Can we now know what are the present distinguishing characters of those who shall then receive so different a doom? Yes, my text determines the point:

"Those who have done *good*—unto the resurrection of life;

and those who have done *evil*—unto the resurrection of damnation."

These are the grounds of the distinction that shall then be made in the final states of men: doing good—and doing evil. And certainly this distinction is perceivable now; to do good and to do evil are not so much alike as that it should be impossible to distinguish between them. Let us then see what is implied in these characters, and to which of us they respectively belong.

1. What is it to do GOOD? This implies:

(1.) An honest endeavor to keep all God's commandments. I say, *ALL* his commandments, with regard to God, our neighbor, and ourselves; whether easy—or difficult; whether fashionable—or not; whether agreeable to our natural constitution—or not; whether enjoining the performance of duty—or forbidding the commission of sin; whether regarding the heart—or the outward practice.

I say, an uniform, impartial regard to all God's commandments, of whatever kind, in all circumstances, and at all times—is implied in doing good. For if we do *anything* because God commands it, we will endeavor to do *everything* that he commands, because where the *reason* of our conduct is the same, our *conduct* itself will be the same.

I do not mean that godly men, in the present state, perfectly keep the commandments of God in everything, or indeed in anything; but I mean that *universal obedience* is their *honest endeavor*. Their character is in some measure uniform and all of a piece; that is, they do not place all their religion in obedience to some commands which may be *agreeable* to them, as though that would make atonement for their neglect of others; but, like David, they *have a respect to all God's commandments*, Psalm 119:6. My brethren, try yourselves by this test.

(2) To do good in an acceptable manner pre-supposes a change of nature and a new principle. Our nature is so corrupted that nothing really and formally good can be performed by us until it is renewed. To confirm this I shall only refer you to Ephesians 2:10, and Ezekiel 36:26, 27, where being created in Christ Jesus unto good works, and receiving a new heart of flesh, are mentioned as prerequisites to our walking in God's statutes.

As for the *principle* of obedience, it is the *love of God*: 1 John 5:3. That is, we must obey God—because we love him; we must do good—because we delight to do good. Otherwise it is all hypocrisy, constraint, or selfishness, and cannot be acceptable to God. Here, again, my brethren, look into your hearts, and examine what is the *principle* of your obedience, and whether ever you have been made new creatures.

(3) I must add, especially as we live under the gospel, that your dependence for life must not be (based) upon the good which you do—but entirely upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ. After you have done all—you must acknowledge you are but unprofitable servants; and *renounce* all your works in point of *merit*—while you *abound* in them in point of practice; Phil. 3:7, 8. This is an essential characteristic of evangelical obedience, and without it you cannot expect to have a resurrection to eternal life and blessedness.

I might enlarge upon this head, but time will not permit; and I hope these three characters may suffice to show you what is implied in *doing good*. Let us now proceed to the opposite character.

2. What is it to do EVIL?

This implies such things as these: the habitual neglect of well-doing; or the performance of duties in a languid, formal manner, or without a right principle; and the willful indulgence of any one sin; the secret love of sin, even though it is not allowed to break forth into the outward practice. Here it is evident at first sight that profane sinners, drunkards, swearers, defrauders, avowed neglecters of religion (Christianity), etc., have this *dismal brand* upon them, that they are such as do evil. Nay, all

such who are in their natural state, without regeneration, whatever their *outside* be—must be ranked in this class; “for that which is born of the flesh—is flesh,” John 3:6; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God, nor be rightly subject to his law. Romans 8:7, 8.

In order to show the historic doctrine held by Protestants of a general resurrection and judgment of all mankind, we may consider our own Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

I. The statement of our Confession of Faith about these matters

The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 has an article on the Last Judgment. It is quite consistent with the confessions of all the Protestant denominations until the rise to predominance of dispensational premillennialism at the beginning of the 20th century. Here is the statement of our confession, **Article 32: Of the Last Judgment**. I have highlighted certain statements and verse references which are particularly pertinent to our subject.

1. *God hath appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in righteousness, by Jesus Christ; to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father; in which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon the earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds, and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.* (Acts 17:31; John 5:22, 27; 1 Cor. 6:3; **Jude 6**; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Ecc. 12:14; **Matt. 12:36**; Rom. 14:10, 12; **Matt. 25:32-46**)

2. The end of God’s appointing this day, is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of his justice, in the eternal damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient; for then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and glory with everlasting rewards, in the presence of the Lord; but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast aside into everlasting torments, and punished with everlasting destruction, from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. (Rom. 9:22, 23; **Matt. 25:21, 34**; 2 Tim. 4:8; **Matt. 25:46**; Mark 9:48; **2 Thess. 1:7-10**)

3. As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin, and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity, so will he have the day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come, and may ever be prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus; come quickly. Amen. (2 Cor. 5:10, 11; 2 Thess. 1:5-7; Mark 13:35-37; Rev. 22:20)

II. How do dispensational premillennialists interpret John 5:28 and 29?

We explained last Lord’s Day the very different understanding of most evangelicals in today’s churches. This position, which was new to Christendom at the end of the 19th and beginning of the early 20th century, emerged to become the predominant position and has remained so to this day. It does not teach a general resurrection and general judgment of the entire human race. Rather, this most popular position--**dispensational premillennialism**--teaches that all Christians of this church age will be raptured, or caught up to meet Christ in the air and return to heaven with Him. This is said to be the first stage of two stages of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Upon their rapture, these New Testament Christians will stand at the judgement seat (Greek, *bema*) of Christ in which they will only be judged in order to receive rewards for their stewardship. (A judgment in which salvation is determined for them is not believed to occur ever.) And then, after a seven year tribulation period on earth, Jesus will return with His Church at the second stage of the second coming of Christ. At that time, it is taught that King Jesus will judge all the Gentiles who survived the tribulation. He will judge them based on how they regarded and treated the Jewish people through the tribulation. Those Gentiles who are proved to have been favorable to the Jews will be allowed to

continue into the 1,000 year millennial kingdom on earth, in which Jesus Christ will reign sitting on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Also at this judgment at the end of the tribulation, all Old Testament (primarily Jewish) believers will be resurrected and allowed to live on earth through the 1,000 year millennium. Since there will be people born and raised during the millennium, it is taught that there will be those who live and die in faith and those who live and die in unbelief. Those who die in faith during the millennium will be immediately raised from the dead, judged for their rewards, and given their resurrection bodies. But all unbelievers will not be raised from the dead until after the 1,000 years. King Jesus will then cause them to come forth from their graves and be brought before the Great White Throne Judgment, in which they will all be judged according to their works and then they will all be cast into the eternal lake of fire. After this final judgment, God will create the new heavens and the new earth, beginning the onset of the eternal state.

How, then, do dispensationalists understand the verses of John 5:28 and 29, which we argue speak of the future general resurrection and judgment of all mankind? They teach that Jesus was not speaking of a single event, a single “hour” when a general resurrection and general judgment take place. Rather, Jesus was just speaking of the resurrection *generally* because it would be on different occasions in the future that He would eventually raise all humanity and judge them. Here are the comments of **John MacArthur** on John 5:28f: “In the light of other Scripture, it is clear that Jesus speaks generally about resurrection, not about one, general resurrection.”¹ No doubt he thinks so, but the language of Jesus in these verses clearly implies a single, future event at which the Lord will raise all the dead from their graves and they will come before Him in judgment. Jesus said, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming...”

III. What is the biblical evidence for a future, general resurrection and judgment of all mankind?

Let us consider other Scripture which affirms that the Lord will raise all the dead at the end of time in a general resurrection to be brought before Him in a general judgment.

A. Consider what our Lord taught later in this Fourth Gospel.

What of other references in the Gospel of John? Did Jesus teach that the resurrection of the dead would take place on a specific, fixed day?

John 6:39f. “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at *the last day*.⁴⁰ And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at *the last day*.”

John 6:44. “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at *the last day*.”

John 6:54. “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at *the last day*.”

These verses speak of the redeemed of Christ being raised on *the last day*. Dispensationalists argue this will occur as a secret rapture of the Church. But then we read our Lord’s words regarding the unsaved:

John 12:48. “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him-- the word that I have spoken will judge him *in the last day*.”

Are we to understand this “last day” of the unbeliever’s judgment to be 1,007 years after the “last day” of the believers’ resurrection and judgment before a seven year tribulation and 1,000 year millennium? Are

¹ Ibid, p. 1588.

we to understand there is a *first* “last day and a *last* “last day”? That is what we would have to assert in order to espouse and defend the dispensational premillennial return of Jesus Christ.

Jesus made repeated references to the *last day*. On this last day the elect would be raised from the dead. Also on *this last day* the unsaved will be raised and judged. It is one general resurrection and one general judgment of all mankind that will take place on “the last day.”²

B. Consider other passages which are consistent with the general resurrection and judgment of all mankind at the end of the age when Jesus returns.

(1) Daniel 12:2, 3

In the Old Testament we read of a general resurrection of the just and the unjust in **Daniel 12:2 and 3:**

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, *some to everlasting life*, and *some to shame and everlasting contempt*. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

But dispensationalists must insert at least 1,000 years between two events, for they reject the idea of a single bodily resurrection and general judgment.

(2) Matthew 25:14-30

We read of the general resurrection and judgment of all mankind in our Lord’s teaching respecting **the parable of talents** (Matt. 25:14-30). It reads this way:

¹⁴“For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. ¹⁵And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. ¹⁶Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. ¹⁷And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. ¹⁸But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money. ¹⁹After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

²⁰“So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ ²¹His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ ²²He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ ²³His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

²⁴“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.’

²⁶“But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. ²⁷So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

² I find it interesting that John MacArthur did not comment on any of these verses in his study Bible that referenced “the last day.” It does not fit into his dispensational premillennial understanding of the end times. Interestingly, there are no notes on the expression, “the last day”, in John 6:39f, 44, 54, and 12:48, in the Study Bibles of John MacArthur, Charles Ryrie, and C. I. Scofield. Scofield does attempt in his note on Acts 2:17 to distinguish between several days that are each called “the last day.” To Scofield there are many last days taught in the Bible.

²⁹For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰***And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***

The Lord Jesus indicated through this parable that He would be “like a man traveling to a far country.” Jesus taught His disciples that this age would be prolonged in duration. But when He returned, He would assess and distinguish between His faithful and unfaithful servants. The reward of His faithful servants will be great, for they will then enter “the joy of the Lord”, in other words, the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ. They clearly represent true Christians. But the punishment of the wicked and unfaithful servant is severe. He represents a nominal Christian, whose life bears no fruit of true faith. He will say to that one, “And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30). Clearly that is an emblem for hell. But there is no place in the understanding of dispensationalism for a judgment of this kind, of a judgment in which true and false Christians are separated from one another and their eternal destinies are pronounced. However, this parable is perfectly consistent with a single endtime resurrection and judgment of humanity.

(3) Matthew 25:31-46

We read of the general resurrection and judgment of all mankind in our Lord’s *parable of the sheep and goats* in **Matthew 25:31-46**. Here is the passage:

³¹“***When the Son of Man comes in His glory***, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³²***All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.*** ³³And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴***Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:’*** ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

³⁷“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?’ ³⁸When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You?’ ³⁹Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

⁴¹“***Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:’*** ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

⁴⁴“Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶***And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.***”

Here the Lord Jesus very clearly set before His disciples that at His second coming there would be a general resurrection of the dead and a general judgment of “the nations”, in other words all mankind. The outcome of this judgment is either eternal life or eternal damnation. But this is not the understanding of dispensationalists. How, then, do the dispensationalists address this passage?

Charles Ryrie, who is a defender of dispensational premillennialism, argues that this is the judgment of Gentiles who survive the future 7 year tribulation. In his Study Bible, Ryrie stated of this parable:

This is a judgment of those Gentiles who survive the Tribulation and whose heart-relation to God is evidenced by their treatment of the Jews (Christ's brethren, v. 40), especially during that time. Surviving Jews will also be judged at this time.³

After Ryrie declared that this judgment is only for those Gentiles surviving the tribulation, he wrote that "Surviving Jews will also be judged at this time." I wonder where he got the evidence for this last statement? It is not in the passage, if we assume his interpretation. There is no mention of Jews if we accept their position that this only speaks of Gentiles who survive the tribulation.

John MacArthur agrees with Ryrie. His note on Matthew 25:31 reads:

"This speaks of the earthly reign of Christ described in Revelation 20:4-6. The judgment described here in vv. 32-46 is different from the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20:11-15. This judgment precedes Christ's millennial reign, and the subjects seem to be only those who are alive at His coming."⁴

If what these men say is true, then these words of Jesus given to His disciples in Matthew 25 would have had no meaning or application to them, for Jesus' words would apply only for Gentiles in a future 7 year tribulation that would not take place until after the rapture of the church. The disciples certainly did not have the complex beliefs of dispensationalists in their minds as they heard Jesus' words. They would have drawn conclusions that we are espousing. One day Jesus is returning and He will judge the human race. The outcome of this judgment is either eternal life or eternal damnation for everyone. (By the way, there is also no place for a doctrine of purgatory in Jesus' words.)

(4) **Romans 2:6-11**

The apostle Paul described the principles of the final general judgment of all mankind in **Romans 2:6-11**.

⁵But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in *the day of wrath* and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶who "will render to each one according to his deeds": ⁷*eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality*; ⁸but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—*indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil*, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; ¹⁰but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹For there is no partiality with God.

Paul speaks of this Day of Judgment as "the day of wrath." But the dispensational premillennialist must separate this one event into separate events. Actually, they advocate that there will be at least four future judgments, which are to be distinguished from one another. These include (1) the resurrection the Church in the rapture, (2) the resurrection of Old Testament Jews at the end of the tribulation and the beginning of the 1,000 year millennium, (3) the immediate resurrection(s) of believers when they die during the 1,000 year millennium, and (4) the resurrection of all unbelievers at the end of the 1,000 years, who will then be brought before the Great White Throne Judgment after the 1,000 years.

(5) **Acts 17:30-31**

Lastly, we will consider that the apostle Paul declared this truth of a general resurrection and general judgment when he stood on Mars Hill in Athens and proclaimed the gospel to the unbelievers. He declared to them respecting their idolatry:

³ Charles Ryrie, **Ryrie Study Bible** (Moody Press, 1986, 1984), p. 1508.

⁴ John MacArthur, **The MacArthur Study Bible** (Thomas Nelson, 1997), pp. 1422.

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because *He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world* in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)

Paul was not speaking of many days over the course of 1,007 years, but of a single day when Jesus Christ would judge the world.

As we have stated many times, views of eschatology should not be elevated to the standard that they are tests of fellowship. That is, we should not separate from brethren due to differences of understanding in these matters. We are to be humble, teachable, and willing to consider the possibility that we may currently understand these things wrongly, and that we need correction and instruction. May our Lord enable this spirit to characterize us.

III. The understanding of Revelation 20 and the millennium (Rev. 20:1-10)

The heart of the debate in the matter of the millennium is Revelation 20. Let us read the first ten verses.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. ²He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³and 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 till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

⁴And I saw thrones, and they 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 had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed 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.

⁷Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸and 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. ⁹They 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. ¹⁰The 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.

Again, what is a definition of the Millennium? It is the belief that the Bible teaches that there will be a 1,000 year period of peace on earth when Jesus Christ will reign as King over the nations.⁵

⁵ The concept of a coming millennium is a part of our Western cultural thinking that has been shaped by our biblical heritage. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was written during the civil war with millennial ideas of a northern victory. But even non-Christians think and speak in terms of a millennium. Adolph Hitler’s concept of the Third Reich was to be a Germany that would last for a 1,000 years. There was millennial language in his speech. His of course was a conception of world domination by Germany. Communism has envisioned a world in which a classless society would exist. But many other leaders have had millennial hopes for a time of peace, freedom, and prosperity for the world. Woodrow Wilson’s encouragement for the U.S. to enter WWI to “make the world safe for democracy” also suggested millennial overtones. There was a kind of millennial hope that has historically stirred people both social and political action. But again, it would seem the whole idea of a future 1,000 year period of peace and prosperity stems from our biblical heritage.

Where else in the Bible is a Kingdom taught as being 1,000 years in duration? Take note, although the Bible in numerous places speaks of a future existence for God's people in the kingdom of God that will be characterized by joy, peace, righteousness, it is only here in Revelation 20 that a period of 1,000 years is specifically set forward. *Revelation 20:1-10 is the only place in the Bible where a millennium is identified directly.* This is not to say that there are not many biblical passages that various Bible interpreters assign to a future 1,000 year millennium, but this is the only biblical passage that speaks of a period of history on earth as being 1,000 years in duration. I think that this is an important point, as we will later point out.

C. What are the historical Christian views of the millennium?

1. Premillennialism

This is the belief that the millennium will begin immediately *after* Jesus Christ's Second Coming. Upon His return Jesus Christ will reign over the world for 1,000 years in a kingdom characterized by peace and righteousness. A cursory reading of this chapter as it follows the description of the Second Coming of Christ in chapter 19 seems to lead readily to the logical conclusion that the millennium is a literal period of time and will immediately follow Christ's Coming.

Premillennialism has existed throughout the Christian era. Proponents of this understanding may be found in the early church fathers. It appears to have been the dominant position of Christians from the second to the 5th centuries AD. And yet, not all Christians in history have been pre-millennial.

2. Postmillennialism

This is the belief that the millennium will occur *before* the Second Coming of Christ. The proponents of this view teach that the world will be transformed by the working of God in history that there will be a millennium on earth before the Second Coming of Christ. It will be 1,000 years in duration. At the conclusion of this millennial age, Christ will return to judge the world.

3. Amillennialism

This position holds that there is no literal 1,000-year kingdom on earth taught in the Scriptures. The "1,000 years" of Revelation 20 is a symbolic number signifying the duration of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ during this current Gospel age. The Second Coming of Christ will occur at the end of this age. The word "amillennial" means "no (literal) millennium."

Here is a description from Thomas Schreiner:

Amillennialism literally means "no millennium," but such a label is not the best descriptor of the position. Realized millennialism is better. The thousand years in this view stand for a long period of time and do not designate a literal thousand-year reign. Amillennialists argue that the millennium began with the resurrection of Jesus and will last until the second coming.⁶

D. Our consideration of the Revelation 20

Revelation 20 is one of the most difficult and debated passages of all Scripture. Care and caution should be exercised in working through it. Care and caution should be held about being dogmatic in one's conclusions. This passage is a "problem" in one way or another with each position, as we shall see.

1. The binding of the dragon (20:1-3)

⁶ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/what-is-the-millennium-revelation-20/>

(1) The premillennial understanding

Again, this is the belief that the millennium will begin immediately *after* Jesus Christ's Second Coming. Upon His return Jesus Christ will reign over the world from his throne in Jerusalem for 1,000 years in a kingdom characterized by peace and righteousness. They view the book of Revelation to be a prophecy of future events that unfold chronologically, including chapters 19 and 20. Since chapter 19 describes the Second Coming of Christ and chapter 20 describes the millennium, then the 1,000 year millennium follows immediately after the Second Coming. They would argue, "Just take it literally and accept what it says at face value."

The problem is that what they see as being quite clear, is not that clear on closer inspection. For example, if one takes a pre-millennial view, particularly if one is dispensational and holds to two second comings of Christ, then problems arise. How many physical resurrections will occur in the future? How many judgments will transpire in the future? Premillennialists view Christians as being resurrected at the beginning of the millennium but non-Christians not until after the 1,000 years is over. How can this be squared with the "plain" teaching elsewhere of a general resurrection of the dead both saved and unsaved (cf. John 5:28f).

Premillennialists would argue against the amillennial position as ludicrous in the light of what verses 1-3 says about satan being bound. They would argue, "How could any Christian logically say in any way that satan is not present in this age? Open your eyes and look at our world. The influence of the presence and work of satan is everywhere!"

(2) The postmillennial understanding

How do they deal with this passage? They deny that Revelation 19 speaks of the Second Coming of Christ. They say that it tells of the advance of the Gospel in this age. The Second coming of Christ is not mentioned until 20:7. And so you see, the second coming of Christ follows the millennium.

(3) The amillennial understanding

Amillennialists see the binding of satan described in verses 1 through 3 to be limited in scope. They would say that the passage does not say that satan's presence or power will be removed from history. Rather, it declares that during the kingdom age (this church age) there is a limitation placed upon satan's power. Until the cross, satan had blinded the nations to the message of God's salvation. Salvation was limited to the Jewish nation. The Gentiles were blinded by satan and held in bondage by him. But because Christ conquered and subjected satan to His authority through His death and resurrection, this power of satan was broken. Jesus entered the world as if he were entering a strong man's house. Through His death on the cross and resurrection, He bound the devil in order to spoil his house, the world. The Gospel could now go forth to the nations (cf. Luke 10:17f; Matt. 12:22-29).

2. The 1,000 year reign of Christ (20:4-6)

We wish to read again verses 4 through 6.

⁴And I saw thrones, and they 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 had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed 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.

These verses speak of ones who reign with Christ for a thousand years. They are ones who had undergone “the first resurrection.” Although there is no mention of “the second resurrection”, it is assumed that this will occur at the end of the millennium.

(1) The premillennial understanding

They would argue that the text clearly states that the kingdom will be 1,000 years in duration. “Does it not say that Christians will reign “1,000 years? How can anyone (i.e. the amillennialist) dismiss this and not take it literally.” They teach that during the 1,000 year millennium two kinds of people will exist on the earth. Christians will have been resurrected at the Second Coming of Christ and they will be in their glorified bodies. They will reign with Christ for 1,000 years over a world filled with mortals who survived the tribulation, who continue living into the millennium in their physical bodies, subject to sin and death. The resurrected Christians will reign with Christ over the world that will be populated by people who are for the most part Christian, but not all. They argue that “the first resurrection” is the physical resurrection of Christians. The second resurrection is the physical resurrection of unbelievers at the end of the millennium who are then brought before the Great White Throne Judgment.

Here are the comments of **John MacArthur** from his Study Bible on the wording of Revelation 20:5:

20:5 the rest of the dead. The bodies of unbelievers will not be resurrected until the Great White Throne Judgment (vv. 12, 13). **First resurrection.** Scripture teaches two kinds of resurrections: the “resurrection of life” and “the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:29; cf. Dan. 12:2; Acts 24:15). The first kind of resurrection is described as “the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14), the resurrection of “those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Cor. 15:23), and the “better resurrection” (Heb. 11:35). It includes only the redeemed of the Church age (1 Thess. 4:13-18), the OT (Dan. 12:2), and the Tribulation (v. 4). They will enter the kingdom in resurrection bodies along with believers who survived the Tribulation. The second kind of resurrection, then, will be the resurrection of the unconverted who will receive their final bodies suited for torment in hell.⁷

(2) The postmillennial understanding

They would argue that God limits satan’s authority through the gospel so as to secure its advancement in history. This is the same view as the amillennialist.

(3) The amillennial understanding

The 1,000 years here in Revelation 20 is an apocalyptic way to convey that this kingdom age, the Church age, will be of long duration. Why then did God say “1,000 years”? This is because He does not want anyone to know precisely when He would return.

Amillennialists are of two opinions regarding those who experience “the first resurrection.” Some amillennialists argue that this speaks of the souls of believers who die during the church age. Upon their death, their souls go to be with the Lord and reign with Him in this church age. They believe this is the “first resurrection.” In my opinion the much better understanding is that the **first resurrection** is regeneration, or **spiritual** resurrection (John 5:26, 27, Eph. 2:1ff). Only believers have experienced the blessedness of this resurrection: “Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection” (Rev. 20:6). The **second resurrection** of which all the human race undergoes is the **general resurrection** of the dead at the end of the kingdom age (this Church age), in which two destinies are then determined at the Great White Throne Judgment. Salvation and eternal life for those who had done good and everlasting damnation for those who had done evil (John 5:28f).

3. Satan is released again at the end of the 1,000 years (20:7-10)

⁷ John MacArthur, **The MacArthur Study Bible** (Thomas Nelson, 1997), pp. 2021.

(1) The premillennial understanding

They see a final end-time battle when satan is loosed at the end of the 1,000 years. There will be a world-wide rebellion and uprising against King Jesus who is ruling on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Although they do not overtly say so, they actually advocate two battles of Armageddon, one at the end of this age at the second coming of Christ and another at the end of the 1,000 millennium just before the Great White Throne Judgment.

(2) The postmillennial understanding

They would see a final oppression of Christians by the satanic world system shortly before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

(3) The amillennial understanding

Some see this as an end of the church age blinding of the Gentiles respecting the gospel so that the Jews in mass may come to a saving knowledge of Christ at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 11:25f).

Conclusion:

This is a difficult subject. Eschatology should not be a test of fellowship. What this means is that Christians should not separate from one another based on disagreements about end-time events. Good and godly people hold different views of the end times. As long as there is a belief in a literal physical Second Coming of Jesus Christ when He will judge the world in righteousness, we should be able to abide with one another.

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,
so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many.
To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time,
apart from sin, for salvation. (Heb. 9:27f)
