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Revelation #34

The Millennium, the Final Battle, and the Final Judgment

Revelation 20:1-15

In February of 2015, 20 Egyptian Christians were lined up on a beach in Libya, wearing orange jumpsuits. After refusing to renounce their faith in Christ, they were forced to kneel down. One by one, they were each savagely beheaded. It wasn't until three years later, in 2018, that their bodies were returned to Egypt to be properly buried. Although their physical bodies suffered great indignity, their souls immediately entered into the presence of their Lord Jesus Christ where, as priests of God, they joined with him in ruling and reigning over the affairs of heaven and earth. And when Christ returns to this earth at the end of human history, they will accompany him and be among the first to receive their glorified and resurrected bodies.

On what basis do I say this, you ask? The answer is found in the second half of Revelation 20:4 where we read: "Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4b).

In other words, I believe what John is describing in Revelation 20:1-6 is the blessed experience of all who have died believing in Jesus as they enter into what is known as the intermediate state. The intermediate state is the experience of all believers, but especially martyrs, who die physically and yet spiritually continue to live in the presence of Christ. It is there, in that intermediate state, that they share with Christ, for one thousand years, his reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.

As you probably know, Revelation 20 is the single most debated chapter in the entire book. The debate swirls around the meaning of the "first resurrection" and the 1,000 years during which believers share Christ's kingly rule.

I can't begin to present all the many interpretations of this passage. So I will simply describe for you what I believe this passage is saying. Many of you will disagree, but that's ok. So let me walk you through the various details of what John says.

Amillennialism

When I make known my beliefs about the so-called millennium, after getting over their initial shock and incredulity, it's not uncommon for my friends to say: "But Sam, how can you say you embrace a 'millennial' option when you don't even believe in a millennium?" As you'll soon come to see, *I most assuredly do believe in the reality of a literal millennial kingdom*. The reason for this misunderstanding is the label most commonly used to describe the view I'm prepared to defend: *amillennialism*.

You've no doubt heard someone described as being "apolitical" or perhaps "amoral" and you know what is meant. Similarly, to say that I am "*amillennial*" (where the alpha privative "a" seemingly negates the word "millennial") exposes me and others to the charge that we deny the existence of what is clearly taught in Revelation 20. As you will soon see, the "millennium" that I believe John describes in Revelation 20 is concurrent or simultaneous with the church age in which we live and consists of the co-regency with Christ of those believers who have died and entered into the glory of the intermediate state.

Therefore, contrary to what the name (*amillennialism*) implies, amillennialists *do* believe in a millennium. The millennium, however, is *now*: the present age of the church between the first and second comings of Christ in its entirety *is* the millennium. Therefore, while the amillennialist does *deny* the premillennial belief in a personal, literal reign of Christ upon the earth for 1,000 years *following* his second coming, I *affirm* that there is a millennium and that Christ rules. However, this messianic reign is not precisely 1,000 years in length and it is wholly spiritual (in the sense that it is non-earthly, non-visible, non-physical, but no less literal) in nature. "This millennial reign is not something to be looked for in the future;" writes Hoekema, "it is going on now, and will be until Christ returns. . . [Thus we must remember] that the millennium in question is not an earthly but a heavenly reign" (Hoekema, 235).

I believe that the millennium is restricted to the blessings of the *intermediate state*; that is to say, the millennium as described in Revelation 20:4-6 refers to *the present reign of the souls of deceased believers with Christ in heaven*.

According to the amillennialist, there will be a parallel and contemporaneous development of good and evil in the world which will continue until the second coming of Christ. History will witness a progressively worsening situation in which the Church of Jesus Christ will experience an increasingly widespread and oppressive time of suffering and persecution.

Make no mistake: amillennialists such as myself most certainly believe that the people of God will rule on the earth in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the OT. But it will be on the new earth, as described in Revelation 21-22, that we will live and reign with Christ forever and ever.

Therefore, Revelation 20:1 is *not* to be thought of as following Revelation 19 in chronological order (which describes the second coming of Christ). Rather, it takes us back once again to the *beginning* of the NT era and *recapitulates* the entire present age (that is to say, it describes the same period in different but complementary terms). By doing this the amillennialist is able to interpret *the binding of Satan* in Revelation 20:1-3 as having already occurred during our Lord's earthly ministry, and *the 1,000-year reign* (i.e., the millennium) of Revelation 20:4-6 as describing in symbolic language the entire inter-advent age in which we now live. Therefore, the thousand-year period is not a chronologically literal piece of history; it is a symbolic number coextensive with the history of the church on earth between the resurrection of Christ and his return.

One of the primary reasons I don't believe Revelation 20 follows chronologically the events of Revelation 19 is because of what happens at the time of Christ's second coming. We saw in Revelation 19:11-21 that all the unbelieving nations and peoples of the earth were destroyed by the Lord Jesus Christ at the time of his return. We saw in Revelation 19 that when Christ returns he will utterly defeat and destroy "kings" and "captains" and "mighty men" and "all men, both free and slave, both small and great" (v. 18). Later in v. 21 we read the "rest" of mankind were also slain by the sword of Jesus Christ. In other words, to put it simply, why would Satan need to be bound in Revelation 20 lest he deceive the nations when the nations have all been utterly destroyed by Christ in Revelation 19? My point is that ***Revelation 20 takes us back to the beginning of the present church age and describes the course of church history up to the end when Christ returns.***

The Binding of Satan (vv. 1-3)

Premillennialists insist that Satan's imprisonment in 20:1-3 is not compatible with the dimensions of his present activity as portrayed in the New Testament epistles (as, for example, in 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 4:3-4; Eph. 6:10-20; 1 Thess. 2:18; Js. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9; 1 John 4:4; 5:19).

However, the question must be asked: "In regard to what is Satan bound? Is the binding of Satan designed to immobilize him from any and all activities?" The premillennialist thinks so. But that is not what John says. The premillennial interpretation errs in that it has attempted to universalize what John explicitly restricts.

Two statements in Revelation 20 tell us the purpose of Satan's imprisonment. First, in v. 3, John says that Satan was bound ***"so that he should not deceive the nations any longer."*** Then second, in v. 8, John tells us that upon his release from the abyss Satan will come out ***"to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war."*** Note well what John does and does not say. He does ***not*** say that Satan was bound so that he should no longer persecute Christians, or so that he should no longer prowl about "like a roaring lion" (1 Pet. 5:8) devouring believing men and women. He does ***not*** say that Satan was bound so that he should no longer concoct schemes to disrupt church unity (2 Cor. 2:11), or so that he should no longer disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). He does ***not*** say that Satan was bound so that he should no longer hurl his flaming missiles at Christians (Eph. 6:16), or so that he should be kept from thwarting the plans of the apostle Paul (1 Thess. 2:18) or other church planters.

Rather, John says that Satan was bound ***so that he should no longer deceive the nations*** (v. 3), the purpose behind which is to mobilize them in an international rebellion against the people of God (v. 8). And the language John employs in 20:1-3 makes it clear that there is no possible way for Satan to do so during the thousand years. The restriction on this particular aspect of his sinister ministry is absolute and invincible. ***The intent of the devil is to incite a premature eschatological conflict, to provoke Armageddon before its, that is to say, before God's time. But the exalted Christ, through the agency of an angelic being, has temporarily stripped Satan of his ability to orchestrate the nations of the earth for the final battle.***

The final assault against the Lamb and his elect shall come only when the restriction placed on *this* element of Satan's work is lifted. For the duration of the present Christian era Satan's hand is stayed. Upon release from his imprisonment, just before the Second Coming of Jesus, he will dispatch his demonic hordes "which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty" (Rev. 16:14).

Although Satan may and will do much in this present age (as the epistles clearly indicate), there is one thing of which John assures us: ***Satan will never be permitted to incite and organize the unbelieving nations of the world in a final, catastrophic assault against the church, until such time as God in his providence so determines.*** That event, which the Lord will immediately terminate with the fiery breath of his mouth (Rev. 20:9), will come only at the end of this age.

John does not say Satan's activity is altogether eliminated, but that it has been effectively curtailed ***in one particular domain.*** The binding is absolute and, at least for the duration of a "millennium," unbreakable. It is designed solely for one purpose, to prohibit and prevent a satanic plot to deceive the nations into a war which, in view of the prophetic plan and power of God, is both premature and futile.

Yet another form of deception that Satan perpetrated prior to Christ's first advent pertains to the gospel. There is a sense in which prior to Christ's first coming all "nations," with the exception of Israel, were "deceived" by Satan and thus prevented from embracing the truth (with certain notable exceptions, of course). The universal expansion and embrace of the gospel (Matt. 28:19) subsequent to Christ's first coming is the direct result of Satan's being bound.

Especially relevant in this regard is Paul's statement in Acts 26:16-18 concerning the mission given him by the exalted Christ:

"But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you *to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God*, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

The Gentiles ("nations") are portrayed as being in darkness with respect to the gospel, having been blinded ("deceived") while under the dominion of Satan. However, as a result of Christ's first coming, such deception no longer obtains. The nations or Gentiles may now receive the forgiveness of sins and the divine inheritance. Thus the binding of Satan means that throughout this present Gospel Age, which begins with Christ's first coming and extends nearly to the second coming, the devil's influence on earth is curtailed so that he is unable to prevent the extension of the church among the nations by means of an active missionary program. During this entire period he is prevented from causing the nations of the world to destroy the church. "By means of the preaching of the Word as applied by the Holy Spirit, the elect, from all parts of

the world, are brought from darkness to light. In that sense the church conquers the nations, and the nations do not conquer the church” (Hendrickson, 226-27).

Though Satan still blinds the minds of the unbelieving (2 Cor. 4:4), he is providentially restricted from hindering the pervasive expansion of the gospel throughout the world. Satan may win an occasional battle, but the war belongs to Christ!

So, to sum up thus far, I believe Revelation 20:1-6 is telling us that during the course of this present church age Satan is prevented from orchestrating a global assault against the Church. It is during this time that all who die having believed in Jesus join with him in heaven, in the intermediate state, where they share his reign and rule over the affairs of earth. Just before the return of Christ, the restriction placed on Satan will be lifted and he will once again deceive the unbelieving nations into launching a war against the Church. We know this war to be what Revelation calls Armageddon. At that time, Christ returns from heaven with his saints and defeats them all, Satan is judged and cast into the lake of fire, the unbelieving dead are all raised to stand judgment, and are in turn cast into the lake of fire to suffer the second death.

In this way John encourages all believers who are facing martyrdom to remember that although they may *die physically* at the hands of the beast they will *live spiritually* in the presence of the Lamb. This, I believe, is what John means by the “first resurrection.”

Especially relevant in this regard is the letter to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2 and its emphasis on the blessedness of Christian death. To the believers in Smyrna Jesus speaks these words of encouragement and comfort:

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev. 2:10-11).

There are several other things to note in this passage, each of which draws our attention to the obvious parallel in Revelation 20. First, it speaks of *martyrdom* as the result of steadfast faith (“be faithful unto death”; Rev. 2:10). Second, the faithful are promised “the crown of *life*” (Rev. 2:10). And third, the faithful martyrs are exempt from the *second death* (“he who overcomes

shall not be hurt by the second death”; Rev. 2:11). This is precisely what we find in Revelation 20:1-6!

Consider also the promise to the overcomer in Revelation 3:21 that he will be *enthroned with Christ*. When a Christian dies he/she does not fall into a state of unconsciousness. Rather the believer enters into life in the intermediate state where he/she is enthroned with Christ and rules with Christ. Since John (and Jesus) in Revelation 2-3 conceived of the intermediate state as “souls” living beyond death (hence a *resurrection*), and as an experience characterized by enthronement with Christ (hence *reigning* with him), we should not be surprised that in Revelation 20 he likewise describes the intermediate state as *souls living and reigning with Christ*!

One Thousand Years: Literal or Figurative?

Many insist that the words “one thousand years” must mean literal years, which is to say, arithmetically and chronologically precise years. But as we have seen repeatedly in our study of Revelation, in virtually every instance where a number is mentioned it is symbolic of some theological truth.

In other texts “one thousand” rarely if ever is meant to be taken with arithmetical precision. This is true whether the context is *non-temporal* (Ps. 50:10; Song of Solomon 4:4; Josh. 23:10; Isa. 60:22; Deut. 1:11; Job 9:3; Eccles. 7:28), in which case the usage is always figurative, indeed hyperbolic, or *temporal* (Deut. 7:9; 1 Chron. 16:15; Pss. 84:10; 90:4; 105:8; 2 Pet. 3:8). What is the significance of the number 1,000 here? We are told in Psalm 50:10 that God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills.” Obviously this does not mean that the cattle on the 1,001st hill belong to someone else. His point is that there are countless cattle on countless hills and he owns them all! So why the number 1,000? The sacred number seven is combined with the equally sacred number three, pointing to the number of holy perfection, ten. Ten is then cubed to equal 1,000 to remind us of absolute completeness. The saints live and reign with Christ for an exalted and perfect period of time.

The Amillennialist's Millennial Kingdom

That John is talking about *the intermediate state* in Revelation 20:4-6 seems obvious once the parallel with Revelation 6:9-11 is noted. A careful examination of these two passages will reveal

that they are describing the same experience of believers who die and enter into the life of the intermediate state.

Revelation 6:9

“And . . . I saw”

“the souls of those who had
been slain”

“because of the word of God”

“and because of the testimony
which they had maintained”

Revelation 20:4

“And I saw

“the souls of those who had
been beheaded”

“because of the word of God”

“because of the testimony of Jesus

That John is describing the same scene, namely, that of the blessedness of the intermediate state, seems beyond reasonable doubt. The key is that John, in both instances, is describing the experience of disembodied “souls” who had been martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ.

John could hardly have been more explicit concerning the location, and therefore the nature, of the millennial rule of the saints when he said that he saw “thrones” (*thronous*). Where are these thrones upon which the saints sit, which is also to ask, what is the nature of their millennial rule? The word “thrones” occurs 47 times in Revelation. Twice (2:13; 13:2) it refers to Satan’s throne (being synonymous with his authority or power) and once to the throne of the beast (16:10). On four occasions it refers to God’s throne on the *new* earth in consequence of its having come down from heaven (21:3, 5; 22:1, 3). In every other instance (40x) the word refers to a throne in *heaven*, either that of God the Father, of Christ, of the 24 elders, etc.

Let me briefly sum up what I believe Revelation 20:1-10 is saying. John has a vision of the binding of Satan that is designed to prevent our ancient enemy from leading the unsaved nations into a premature provocation of the final battle, Armageddon. In addition, so long as Satan is restrained in this way the gospel may spread beyond the borders of Israel to bring salvation to the Gentile world. John also sees the martyred saints: those who had refused to worship the beast but

instead remained faithful to Jesus Christ. In spite of having lost their physical lives, they are raised to life together with Christ in the intermediate state (as disembodied souls) where they rule and reign with the Lord for the duration of the present church age (cf. 2 Cor. 5:6-1-; Phil. 1:19-24; Rev. 6:9-11). This is the first resurrection.

These faithful servants are truly blessed and holy, as they will never suffer the second death. Indeed, they reign as priests of God and of Christ (cf. Rev. 3:21). Near the close of the current church age, as the “1,000” years approaches its end, Satan will be released from the abyss and all restraints will be lifted. He will deceive the unbelieving nations into thinking that an assault against Christ and his Church will succeed, only to suffer sudden and decisive defeat when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven with those believers who have until now shared his dominion and rule (Rev. 20:7-10).

The Final Battle (vv. 7-10)

When the millennial reign reaches its climax just before the second coming of Christ, Satan will be released from his prison. That is to say, the restraint that God has placed on Satan during this present church age will be removed. Satan will immediately take steps to gather the unbelieving nations of the earth to make war on the people of God. This war is identical with the war of Armageddon that we read about earlier in Revelation 16 and again in Revelation 19. These are simply different descriptions of the same final battle between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of Christ.

There is an important theological lesson for us here. This scenario reminds us that the tendencies of the human heart do not improve or evolve upwardly over time. No sooner does God release Satan to once again deceive the nations than the nations quickly fall in line and follow his wicked deception. Satan’s success in leading all the nations of the earth into rebellion “makes it plain that the ultimate root of sin is not poverty or inadequate social conditions or an unfortunate environment; it is the rebelliousness of the human heart” (Ladd, 269).

These unbelieving nations are symbolically referred to as “Gog and Magog” and “their number is like the sand of the sea,” a standard way of describing an innumerable multitude. In other words, from a strictly human point of view this final assault against the Church will appear to be an easy win for the forces of Satan and evil. The number of those who gather to destroy the Church is beyond calculation. But such is no problem for the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Even though the enemies of Christ’s kingdom surround “the camp of the saints and the beloved city,” they have no hope of defeating the King of kings and Lord of lords.

And contrary to what many of you have been taught, there is no biblical basis whatsoever for trying to identify Gog and Magog with Russia or Iran or any other single nation in the earth. Notice that Gog and Magog are constituted by “the nations that are at the four corners of the earth” (v. 8). In other words, Gog and Magog are all the nations of the earth aligned in opposition to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Here the Church is portrayed in terms taken from the OT. Just like ancient Israel, “the church on earth is a wilderness community, camping but not at home in the earth” (D. Johnson, 295). We, the Church, are a pilgrim people passing through life on this earth toward the promised land of the new earth yet to come. In spite of the fact that the church is an alien community in a world that is not their home, our identity is clear: we are “the beloved city.” Remember, all through Revelation the people of God are portrayed as the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12; 11:2).

Satan’s defeat and the destruction of the unbelieving nations is swift and final. We don’t know if this “fire” that comes down from heaven is literal, like unto what consumed the people in Sodom and Gomorrah, but it is in any case a consummate victory for God’s people and a total defeat for Satan and his forces. Paul spoke of this in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 and said that when Jesus returns he will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

Satan and the Beast and the False Prophet will all be cast into the lake of fire. Now remember, Satan is a spiritual being. Literal fire cannot harm him. And the Beast and False Prophet in Revelation are primarily symbolic images of corporate or institutional opposition to Christ, be it political, religious, educational, or military. So the “lake of fire and sulfur” is designed to evoke an image of pain and suffering, even if it is not physical in nature. It is a vivid and graphic way of portraying the endless suffering of all who stand in unrepentant opposition to God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Final Judgment (vv. 11-15)

What we have in vv. 11-15 is a more detailed and graphic portrayal of the judgment that was first mentioned back in Revelation 11:18 – “The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” Simply put, the time of God’s patience and longsuffering and mercy are over. The time for judgment has

come. Paul warned the philosophers of Athens in Acts 17, declaring unequivocally that God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

You’ve probably heard people speak of the final judgment as *the Great White Throne judgment*. That language comes from v. 11. We earlier saw in Revelation 4-5 John’s description of the throne of God and the majesty and beauty that surrounds it. But the throne is also the place from which God will bring judgment upon an unbelieving world. The whiteness of the throne symbolizes God’s own purity and the righteousness with which he judges.

God’s presence on the throne of judgment is so overwhelmingly powerful that “earth and sky fled away.” This is simply another way of describing the *cosmic upheaval* of God’s judgments and the trauma brought to bear on the material or created realm. Remember the many times in Revelation that John spoke of great earthquakes and mountains and islands being ripped out of place and cast aside, the darkening of sun and moon and stars falling to the earth. The point of all this is that the first creation, the creation that was subjected to a curse because of man’s sin, is now fleeing away never to be seen again, and soon to be replaced by the second and final creation, the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21-22).

John then speaks of seeing “the dead, great and small” (v. 12). This undoubtedly is a reference to all of mankind from every age, both unbelievers and believers. The fact that they are “standing before the throne” indicates that a universal resurrection has taken place: all are now standing before God in their resurrected bodies. This is confirmed in v. 13 (see also John 5:28).

That both believers and unbelievers are standing before the throne of judgment is evident also from the fact that two sets of books are opened: “the books” and “the book of life.”

The “books” that are opened contain the record of everything that every unbeliever has ever done or said. God will bring justice to bear upon them in perfect harmony with the deeds they have committed. But those who are by faith in Christ will not be judged based on their works but solely on whether or not their names are written in the book of life. This “book” appeared earlier in Revelation in Revelation 3:5; 13:8; and 17:8. There we were told that the names in it were written down “from the foundation of the world”. This is the Lamb’s book of life. “It is the registry of those from every nation whom he ‘purchased for God’ with his blood (5:9), and it is the one book in all the universe that spells the difference between eternal life and unending death” (Johnson, 299).

Only those whose names were written down in the Lamb's book of life before the foundation of the world will escape the judgment of the lake of fire (v. 15).

Of course, we know that all who are believers in Jesus Christ will be judged, but it is a judgment not to determine who enters God's kingdom and who is excluded, but a judgment to determine the rewards that God will bestow on all of us for the works we have performed for the glory of Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:8-10).

Here, though, the focus is on the judgment of all the unbelieving from every age of human history. And you can rest assured that no one will be exonerated or found innocent. The evil, selfish, sensual, godless, lifestyle of unbelieving mankind will stand as witnesses against them. The only hope for acquittal is the blood of Jesus Christ which they have spurned and rejected throughout their lives on earth.

How do I know that believers in Jesus Christ will not be judged based on their evil and sinful deeds? I know it because God has declared that he will not "remember" our sins ever again (Heb. 8:12). He has "cast" all our sins "behind his back" (Isa. 38:17). And as David declared in Psalm 103, "he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (v. 10), but rather "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (v. 12).

John also speaks of Death and Hades being cast into the lake of fire. This is again a symbolic way of describing the defeat of death. Paul spoke of this in 1 Corinthians 15:26 where he said, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Don't press the language of Revelation as if John is to be interpreted in some literal or wooden way. Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire just as the Beast and False Prophet are. This is John's way of describing the final defeat of God's enemies and his eternal victory over every force or person that has opposed him. God wins!

John describes this final judgment as the "second death." The first death is physical death. The "second death" is spiritual death, eternal and everlasting separation from the presence of God. We need never fear facing the "second death" for Jesus himself said in Revelation 2:11, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." This echoes what John said in Revelation 20:6, namely, that "the second death has no power" over believers who experience the first resurrection.

Conclusion

There is only one conclusion: God wins!