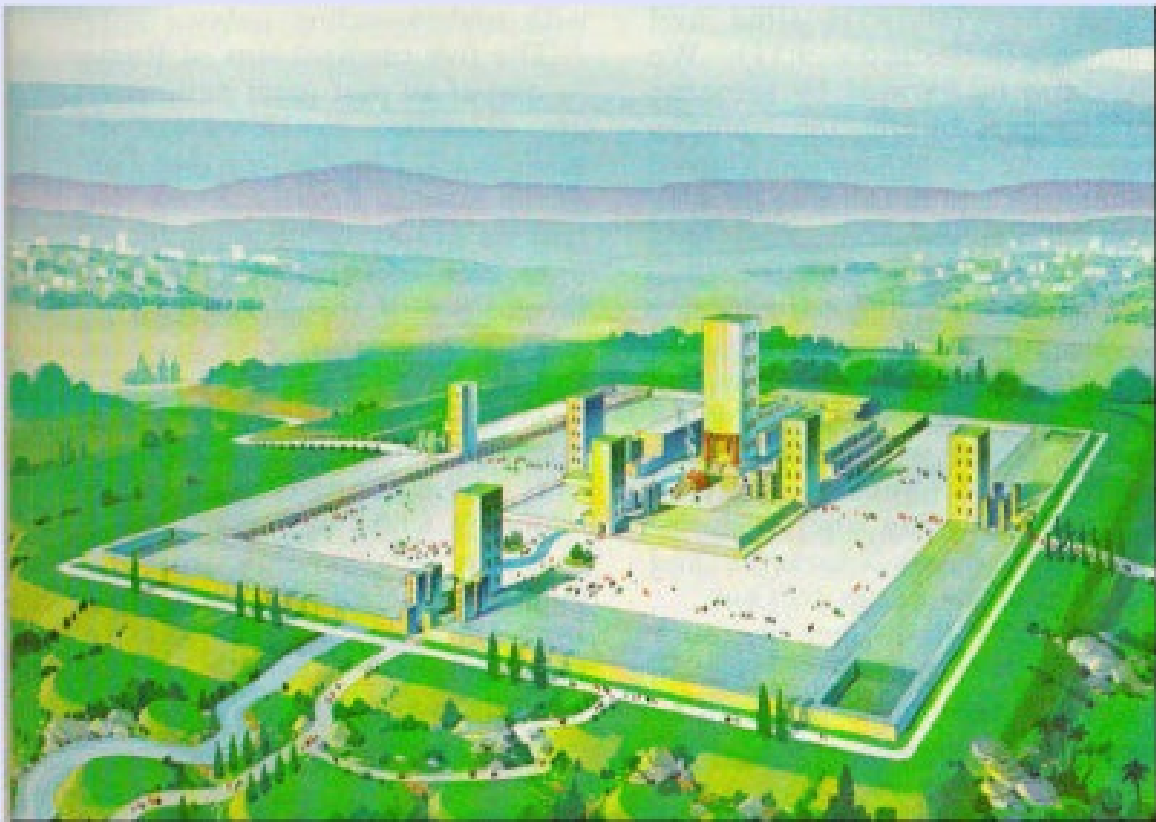


What Does the Bible Say About Prophecy and the Millennium?



By Michael D. Morrison



GRACE COMMUNION
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Living and Sharing the Gospel

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With additional articles by others

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How to Interpret Prophecy

There are many difficulties involved in interpreting prophecy, but if we take the Bible seriously, we need to study prophecy, because prophecy is a large part of the literature God has inspired to be written and preserved in the Christian canon. And since prophecy encourages us to know God and do his will, it is important for us to study it, even if it is difficult.

Prophecy has a spiritual message, and readers need the help of the Holy Spirit to be able to understand it. But even people who have the Holy Spirit can make errors, and people with the Holy Spirit may disagree. All sorts of erroneous interpretations have been taught by people claiming to have God's Spirit and claiming to have the inspired interpretation.

As a practical matter, we cannot convince people of *our* interpretation if we are using special insight they don't have access to. If we did that, we would be asking them to have faith in us. What we need to do is to base our understanding, our arguments, and our teaching on what the scriptures say and on what people can see for themselves, in the translations that are commonly available. We have to use an understandable method of interpretation, one that makes sense historically, linguistically and theologically. We need to examine the words, the grammar, the paragraph flow, the type of literature we are dealing with, and with the overall message of the Bible.

Prophecy was not inspired to satisfy our curiosity about the future – it has always had a theological purpose. It tells us something about what God is doing with humanity, and it is given to help motivate people to do something in the present. Prophecy is not an end in itself — it supports a more important goal. God's primary purpose in dealing with humanity is to reconcile us to him, to give us salvation through Christ – and prophecy serves that larger

purpose. It tells us something about what God is doing, and it may also tell us something about what we should be doing. Prophecy should lead us toward God, so that we know him, have faith in him, and seek him through Jesus Christ.

Poetic language

It is especially important to understand the type of literature we are dealing with, and this is where many of the difficulties come in. Prophecy is not always written in the same way as history is. Prophecy is often poetic, and ancient poetry, like modern poetry, uses words in a metaphorical or symbolic sense more often than prose does. Psalm 23 is a familiar example of poetic metaphors, with pastoral imagery. The Lord is my shepherd; he leads me beside still waters; my cup runs over. These are metaphors drawn from different aspects of life.

Psalm 18 is another interesting illustration, even though it isn't prophecy. In fact, it is a good illustration precisely because it is *not* a prophecy. We know what really happened. It tells us in verse 1 that it is about "when the Lord delivered David from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." Saul tried to kill David, but David kept escaping.

The psalm begins in a familiar way:

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.

David uses a variety of images to describe God as a place of safety – a defensive and passive role. He adds even more images when he writes,

The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my

voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. (verses 4-6)

From images of the underworld, David now turns to images of heaven, and he puts the matter in cosmic terminology:

The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him — the dark rain clouds of the sky. (verses 7-11)

David is using some of the same language that Canaanite myths use. He is speaking of earthquakes and thunderstorms. Is this literally the way that God rescued David from Saul? No, that is not in the history – David is speaking in imaginative, poetic terms.

We see more as we go on:

Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning. The Lord thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies, great bolts of lightning and routed them. (verses 12-14)

So far, we have mostly thunderstorm imagery. But then David adds something that was surely not involved in his escapes from Saul:

The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils. He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me. (verses 15-18)

In this psalm, we can see how poetic language can be applied to a historical event. It would be a mistake for us to take this literally – and we must be equally cautious about taking the language of prophecy literally. Some dramatic figures of speech may be involved. Poetic language about the valleys of the sea should not be taken literally, mountains may not be meant literally, heavenly signs may not be meant literally.

Hosea 12:10 says some of the prophecies were given as parables, that is, in figurative language: “I spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions and told parables through them.”

Literally?

There is one school of interpretation that stresses the literal interpretation of prophecies. Prophecies *are* sometimes meant literally, but to begin with an advance assumption about prophecy runs contrary to the biblical evidence. We can't assume in advance that it is literal; nor can we assume in advance that it isn't. The literal approach has produced a lot of failed prophecies, and a lot of disappointment. Other schools of interpretation have their problems, too, all of which emphasizes our need to be cautious in our approach.

Amos' prophecy of blessings (Amos 9:13) illustrates some problems of literal interpretation:

The days are coming...when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.

Will the reaper really be overtaken by the plowman? Why wouldn't the plowman simply stop and help the reaper? How can the grape-treader, who works in a wine press, overtake the planter, who works in a field? If streams of wine flow from the hills (other verses might make us wonder whether there will be any hills), why would anyone need a grape-treader? Obviously, this is not meant literally. But how much of it is figurative? Will there be

plowmen and grape-treaders at all? The verse itself cannot answer that question.

When we read that “mountains and hills will burst into song, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12), we usually interpret it symbolically, because a literal fulfillment isn’t possible – that is, not possible without a miracle. But when we read that “the lion will eat straw like the ox” (Isaiah 11:7), we find something equally impossible without a miracle. Maybe it isn’t meant literally, either.

When we read that everyone will sit under his vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4), we need not insist that everyone will have a vine and fig tree. We need to look at the picture before we look at the details. The details are simply artistic license used to support the picture of peace and prosperity, which is the context of verses 3-4. The details are like those in a photo of happy people. The photo can be representative of happiness, but we don’t expect every detail to be representative. Sitting at home may illustrate peace and abundance, but those details are not required for peace and abundance.

As another example, Isaiah 40:3-4 says that the mountains will be brought low and uneven ground will be made level. Literally, this would mean that there will be no hills. However, Luke 3:4-6 implies that this prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist. Luke understood it figuratively, in a very non-literal way. He was not talking about mountains and roads at all.

Due to the way New Testament writers present Messianic prophecies, some readers may think there has been a “literal” fulfillment. But a comparison of Old Testament context and New Testament fulfillment sometimes shows a major shift in meaning. In fact, it may be that the original verse in the Old Testament wasn’t a prophecy at all – it was just fulfilled, or given greater meaning, in the life and ministry of Christ.

Joel 2:28-29 predicted God’s Spirit on “all flesh” and dreams and visions,

but Peter said that this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when there was no mention of dreams and visions (Acts 2:16-17). Nevertheless, Peter said that Pentecost was a fulfillment of the prophecy. He did not press the details very far, and neither should we. Their understanding of fulfillment is different from the concept many people today have.

Let's look at an example from the book of Revelation: Does Christ have a literal sword in his mouth (Revelation 19:15), or does it metaphorically mean words of war? Similarly in the Old Testament, when we read that men will "beat swords into plowshares," do we restrict the meaning to swords and plows, or do we update it technologically to include all instruments of warfare and productivity? In this case, the specific item (a sword) seems to refer to a general subject (violence); the same may be true with other details of prophecy. Each word may stand for something else.

What about people? Malachi 4:5-6 predicted an Elijah. But it wasn't literally Elijah; Jesus said that John the Baptist fulfilled that role. And when Elijah comes again, will it be a resurrected Elijah, or someone in his role? What about the prophecies of a future David? In many cases, "David" may be a reference to his son and successor, Christ. And if Christ fulfills the prediction, it isn't necessary that David himself will also.

When we read that Christ will sit on the throne of David, should we expect the same physical throne, or is it a figure of speech depicting rulership of Israel? Will we all sit on the one throne of God (Revelation 3:21) while the apostles sit on other thrones (Matthew 19:28)?

Humility needed

We should interpret the Bible by asking, What did the writer mean? He may have *intended* a figurative meaning. Of course, to understand the figure of speech or the metaphor, we must first understand what the words mean literally. But we cannot arbitrarily reject all other possibilities. Unfortunately,

there is no simple formula to tell us which words are literal and which are symbolic, and even if we know the word is symbolic, there is no formula to tell us what the symbol means. That is why Bible prophecy is interpreted in many different ways.

Although we'd like to have an answer for every Bible question, we should say "We don't know" more often. "Some of us think this way, and some of us think that way. I understand how you got your view, and I might happen to disagree with it, but I cannot prove that my view is the only way of looking at it." This is the approach we need on several issues.

Because of the ambiguities that are inherent in prophecy (probably by God's design), differences of opinion will exist, even among converted Christians. On such matters, we should not be dogmatic, and none of us should insist that the church teach our particular view. On many debatable issues, the church need not teach any view; it is not essential to Christian discipleship or to our commission.

There are sections of the Bible we do not understand (even Paul didn't know everything), and we need to admit it. We cannot be dogmatic about many specific interpretations — and we cannot categorically reject everyone else's.

A brief word about dates, perhaps one of the most often misused aspects of prophecy: Bible prophecies are often purposely ambiguous about chronology. That isn't so we will study harder and make lots of guesses — it is because the chronology is relatively unimportant. The more important thing is our spiritual response, and that is more important even if we *did* know the chronology.

Prophecy is given not so much that we will know the future, but that we will know that God controls the future. *It is far more important for us to know God, than it is for us to know the future.* Any revelation of the future is

given primarily so that we will do something *now* to be on the side of the One who wins in the end, the one who declares the end from ancient times, the one who will be sure to bring it all to pass just as he has purposed.

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A Balanced Approach to Bible Prophecy

Bible prophecy reveals God and his will and purpose for humanity. In Bible prophecy, God declares that human sinfulness is forgiven through repentance and faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Prophecy proclaims God as Sovereign Creator and Judge of all, assures humanity of his love, mercy, and faithfulness, and motivates the believer to live a godly life in Jesus Christ.

Many Christians need an overview of prophecy, to put prophecy into perspective. That is because many Christians overemphasize prophecy and make claims about prophecy that cannot be substantiated. For some, prophecy is the most important doctrine. That is what occupies most of their Bible study, and that is the subject they want to hear about the most. Armageddon fiction sells well. Many Christians would do well to notice the real purpose of prophecy.

Our introductory paragraph has three sentences. The first one says that prophecy is part of God's revelation to us, and it tells us something about who he is, what he is like, what he wants and what he is doing.

The second sentence says that Bible prophecy announces salvation through Jesus Christ. It does not say that all prophecy is concerned with forgiveness and faith in Christ. Nor does it say that prophecy is the *only* place that God reveals these things about salvation. We could say that *some* Bible prophecy concerns salvation through Christ, or that prophecy is one of the *many* ways in which God reveals forgiveness through Christ.

Since God's plan centers on Jesus Christ, and prophecy is part of God's revelation of his will, it is inevitable that prophecy relates, either directly or indirectly, to what he is doing in and through Jesus Christ. But we are not trying to pinpoint every prophecy here — we are giving an overview.

We want to give a sound perspective on why prophecy exists. We deny that most of prophecy concerns the future, or that it focuses on certain nations. The most important thing about prophecy is not about nations, and not about the future, but it is about repentance, and faith, salvation, and life right now.

If we took a survey in most denominations, I doubt that many people would say that prophecy is about forgiveness and faith. They think it is focused on other things. But prophecy is about salvation through Christ, as well as a number of other things. When millions are looking to Bible prophecy to discern the end of the world, when millions always associate prophecy with events still future, it is helpful to remind people that one purpose of prophecy is to reveal that human sinfulness can be forgiven through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness

Let me observe a few other things. First, human sinfulness can be forgiven. We are talking about the fundamental condition of humanity, not just the individual results of our sinfulness. It is true that individual sins are forgiven through faith in Christ, but it is even more important that our flawed nature, which is the root of the problem, is also forgiven. We will never have the time nor the wisdom to repent of every sin. Forgiveness does not depend on our ability to itemize them all. Rather, what Christ makes possible for us is that all of them, and our sinful nature at its core, can all be forgiven in one fell swoop.

Next, we note that our sinfulness is forgiven through faith and repentance. We have a positive assurance that our sins are forgiven, and they are forgiven on the basis of what Christ has done. The coming of Jesus to rescue us from our sinfulness was prophesied in the Old Testament; this is something that prophecy is about. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. They

come practically at the same time, although faith comes first in logic.

Theologically, people can be forgiven simply through faith in Christ, without having any precise beliefs about how Christ is able to do that for us. There is no particular theory about Christ's atoning death that is required. There are no special beliefs about his role as mediator that is required for salvation. However, it is clear in the New Testament that our salvation is made possible through the death of Christ on the cross, and that he is our High Priest interceding for us. When we believe that what Jesus does is effective for our salvation, then we experience forgiveness. We acknowledge and worship him as Savior and Lord. We realize that he accepts us in his love and grace and we accept his wonderful gift of salvation.

Prophecy is concerned with our salvation. We find evidence for that in Luke 24. There, the resurrected Jesus is explaining things to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Verses 25 and 27: "Jesus said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with *Moses* and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Jesus did not say that the Scriptures spoke *only* of him, or that every single prophecy was about him. He didn't have time to cover the entire Old Testament. Some prophecies were about him, and some were about him only indirectly. Jesus explained the prophecies that were most directly about him. The disciples believed some of what the prophets had written, but they were slow of heart to believe it *all*. They were missing part of the story, and Jesus filled them in and explained it to them. Even though some prophecies were about Edom, Moab, Assyria, or Egypt, and some about Israel, other prophecies were about the suffering and death of the Messiah, and his resurrection to glory. Jesus explained those.

Notice also that Jesus began with the books of Moses. They have some messianic prophecies in them, but most of the Pentateuch is about Jesus Christ in a different way — in terms of typology, in the rituals of sacrifice and priesthood that prefigured the work of the Messiah. Jesus explained these concepts, too.

Verses 44 to 48 tell us more: “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in *the Law of Moses*, the Prophets and the Psalms.’” Again, he did not say that every single detail was about him. What he said is that the parts that were about him had to be fulfilled. I think we could add that not everything had to be fulfilled in his first coming. Some prophecies seem to point to the future, to his return, but like he said, they must be fulfilled. Not just prophecy pointed to him — the Law also pointed to him, and the Psalms pointed to him and the work he would do for our salvation.

Verses 45-48: “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’” Here Jesus explains some prophecies concerning himself. Prophecy was pointing not only to the Messiah’s suffering, death, and resurrection — prophecy also pointed to the *message* of repentance and forgiveness, a message that would be preached to all nations.

Prophecy touches on many different things, but the *main* thing it is about, the most important thing it reveals, is that we can be forgiven through the death of the Messiah. Jesus highlighted this purpose of prophecy on the road to Emmaus. If we are interested in prophecy, we should be sure not to miss this part of the message. If we don’t get this part of the message, it won’t do us any good to get anything else.

It is interesting to read Revelation 19:10 with that in mind: “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The message about Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. That is what it’s all about. The essence of prophecy is Jesus Christ.

Three more purposes

Our third sentence adds several more details: “Prophecy proclaims God as Sovereign Creator and Judge of all, assures humanity of his love, mercy, and faithfulness, and motivates the believer to live a godly life in Jesus Christ.” Here are three more purposes of prophecy. First, that it tells us that God is Sovereign Judge of all. Second, it tells us that God is loving, merciful and faithful. And third, prophecy motivates us to live right. Let’s look at each of these three.

Bible prophecy tells us that God is sovereign, that he has authority and power over all things. Isaiah 46:9-11 supports this point:

Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, [I make known] what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

In this passage, God is saying that he can tell us how everything ends up, even when it is only starting. It doesn’t take much to distinguish the end from the beginning after it has all transpired, but only God can make the end known even when he is in the beginning. Even in ancient times, he was able to make predictions about what would happen in the future.

Some people say that God can do this because he sees the future. It’s true that God can see the future, but that isn’t Isaiah’s point here. What Isaiah is

bringing out is not so much that God sees or knows in advance, but that God will intervene in history to make *sure* that it happens. He will bring it about, even though he may call upon a man from the east, in this case, to do the work.

God makes his plan known in advance, and that revelation is what we call prophecy — something said in advance about what is going to happen. So prophecy is part of God's revelation of his will and purpose. And then, because it is God's will, his plan, his desire, he makes sure that it happens. He will do everything he pleases, everything he wants to do, because he has the power to do that. He is sovereign over all nations.

Daniel 4:17 tells us the same thing. This is just after Daniel announces that King Nebuchadnezzar will be insane for seven years, and then he gives this reason: "The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men."

This prophecy was given and carried out so that people would know that God is sovereign over all nations. He has the power to set someone up as ruler, even the most unlikely of people. God can give it to whomever he wants, because he is sovereign. That is one message conveyed to us by Bible prophecy. It shows that he has all power.

Prophecy tells us that God is Judge. We can see that in many of the Old Testament prophecies, particular prophecies of punishment. God is bringing unpleasant things because the people have done bad things. God is acting as a judge, with the power to reward and the power to punish, and the power to make sure that it is done.

Jude 14-15 says, "Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: 'See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy

ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

Here we find the New Testament quoting a prophecy that is not in the Old Testament. This prophecy is in the apocryphal book of *I Enoch*, and it has been taken into the Bible, and it has become part of the inspired record as to what prophecy reveals. It reveals that the Lord is coming — that is still future — and that he is a judge of every nation.

Love, mercy, faithfulness

Bible prophecy reveals something about what God plans and what he does, and it is therefore inevitable that it reveals to us something about his character. His purposes and plans will inevitably reveal that he is loving, merciful, and faithful.

I think here of Jeremiah 26:13 — “Reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you.” If the people change, then God will relent. He is not anxious to punish; he is willing to wipe the slate clean. He does not keep grudges – he is merciful and willing to forgive.

As an example of his faithfulness, we might look at the prophecy in Leviticus 26:44. The passage is a warning to Israel that if they broke the covenant, they would be conquered and taken into captivity. But then this assurance is added: “Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely.” This prophecy is highlighting God’s faithfulness, his mercy, and his love, even without using those specific words.

Hosea 11 is another example of God’s faithful love. Even after describing how unfaithful Israel has been, verses 8-9 say, “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor

will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.” This prophecy is showing God’s persistent love for his people.

New Testament prophecies also assure us that God is loving, merciful and faithful. He will resurrect us and reward us. We will live with him and enjoy his love forever. Bible prophecy assures us that God intends to do this, and previous fulfillments of prophecy assure us that he has the power to carry it out, to do exactly as he has purposed to do.

Motivates godly life

Last, the statement says that Bible prophecy motivates believers to live a godly life in Jesus Christ. How does it do this? For one, it gives us a motive to turn to God, because we are assured that he wants the best for us, and we will receive good forever if we accept what he offers, and we will ultimately receive bad if we don’t.

In this connection, we cite 2 Peter 3:14. We can start in verses 10-12:

The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

We are to look forward to the day of the Lord, rather than fearing it, and we are to live godly lives. Presumably something good will happen to us if we do, and something less desirable will happen to us if we don’t. Prophecy encourages us to live godly lives, because it reveals to us that God will reward those who faithfully seek him. Verses 12-15:

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since

you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.

This scripture is telling us that Bible prophecy encourages us to make every effort, to have right behavior and right thoughts, to live godly lives and be at peace with God. The only way to do this, of course, is through Jesus Christ. But in this particular scripture passage, prophecy is telling us that God is patient, faithful and merciful.

Jesus' ongoing role is essential here. Peace with God is possible only because Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us as our High Priest. The Law of Moses foreshadowed and prophesied this aspect of Jesus' saving work; it is through him that we are strengthened to live godly lives, to make every effort, and to be cleansed of the spots that we incur. It is through faith in him as our High Priest that we can be confident that our sins are forgiven and we are assured of salvation and eternal life. Prophecy assures us of God's mercy and the way that we can be saved through Jesus Christ.

Prophecy is not the only thing that motivates us to live godly lives. Our future reward or punishment is not the only reason to live right. We can find motivations for good behavior in the past, the present, and the future. In the past, because God has been good to us, and in gratitude for what he has already done, we are willing to do what he says. Our present motivation for living right is our love for God; the Holy Spirit in us causes us to want to please him in what we do. And the future helps motivate our behavior, too—God warns us about punishment presumably because he wants that warning to motivate us to change our behavior. He promises rewards, too, knowing that they also help motivate us. We want to receive the rewards he will give.

Behavior has always been a reason for prophecy. Prophecy is not just

foretelling, it is also forth telling: setting *forth* God's instructions. That is the reason many prophecies were conditional — God warned of punishment, and he *hoped* for repentance so that the punishment would not have to come. Prophecies were not given as trivia about the future — they had a purpose for the present.

Zechariah summarized the message of the prophets as a call to change: “The earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the Lord Almighty says, Turn from your evil ways.... Return to me, and I will return to you” (Zechariah 1:3-4). Prophecy tells us that God is a merciful judge, and because of what Jesus Christ does for us, we can be saved if we trust him.

Some prophecies were longer-range, and did not depend on whether people did either good or bad. Not all prophecies were designed for that purpose. In fact, prophecies come in such a wide variety that it is difficult to say, except in a general sense, what all prophecies are for. Some are for this, some are for that, and there are some we aren't sure what they are for.

When we try to make a statement about something as diverse as prophecy, we will make a general statement, because that is accurate: Bible prophecy is one of the ways God tells us what he is doing, and the overall message of prophecy therefore tells us about the most important thing that God is doing: leading us to salvation through Jesus Christ. Prophecy warns us of judgment to come, assures us of mercy, and therefore encourages us to repent and get with the program of what God is doing.

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What About Biblical Prophecy?

The church sees prophecy in the following contexts. First, there is a past aspect to the gospel, in which Christ was foretold to be the Messiah. That is “prophecy,” prophecy fulfilled, and it points to the redemptive work of Jesus (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47 and John 5:39-47). Two examples of such prophecies are Deuteronomy 18:15 and Isaiah 53.

There is also a present aspect to the gospel. This tells us we are forgiven of our sins, we are justified and sanctified, and we live in grace as Christ lives in us. Those realities were also “prophesied” or foretold in Scripture. The teaching about salvation, in that sense, can be called a “prophetic message.”

There is also a future “prophetic” aspect to the gospel — that Christ will return and restore God’s rule to the whole world. The dead in Christ will be resurrected and receive their inheritance to eternal life.

Some people focus on only part of the future aspect, sometimes to the detriment of the basic message of salvation. Much of the teaching is of a speculative nature that eventually proves to be wrong. Many have taught that there will be a “Great Tribulation” on America and Britain before Jesus returns. Some claim that the “beast power” originating in Europe will attack the United States and persecute Christians. Herbert Armstrong speculated that these events would occur in the 1930s. When they didn’t, a new time frame of 1972-1975 was eventually given as the years when these events would occur. Other prophecy teachers have set dates of 1988, or 2012. People are trying to use certain portions of Scripture, such as Revelation, as a blueprint or guide to the meaning of current events.

We now hold to a broader view of prophecy. Preaching the gospel is different from trying to discover in what year or age “the end” may arrive or what specifically might happen in the world at a given time. That is not the

purpose of biblical prophecy, as all the failed predictions during the last 2,000 years have shown.

Admittedly, speculative prophecy can be more exciting than the gospel. People listen to the “warning” and hope to escape the “Great Tribulation.” The church will supposedly escape this time of trial by being taken to a place of safety. This is considered “inside knowledge” that no one knows except the favored “elect.”

Actually, speculative use of prophecy parallels an old covenant message that was a *national* warning to Israel to repent as God’s people and nation. The Old Testament includes numerous messages that are classic prophecy. Ezekiel had a “watchman” function for the nation of Israel. However, that message of national repentance and restoration to a physical land no longer applies in a literal sense, since God is calling *individuals* from all nations and ethnic groups to spiritual salvation.

The gospel is not about the modern identity of nations. Christ’s sacrifice is the central plank and fulcrum of God’s plan. Acts 4:12 is one of the pivotal Scriptures of the Bible: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

Jesus Christ is not the property of a few nations or church fellowships. He belongs, in a manner of speaking, to the whole world. In that context, the identity of a nation is insignificant, since God is no longer dealing with a single nation. Rather, his salvation is given to people of all nations. In light of the New Testament and the centrality of Christ in God’s plan of salvation, the identity of nations is of no consequence. In Galatians 3:28 we read, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

As human beings we remain Americans, Chinese, Egyptians, English,

Germans, Greeks, Indians, Sudanese or members of some other national group, even after conversion. Yet, in this life we are offered the opportunity to participate in God's nature and become a part of the "Israel of God," his church (Galatians 6:16). Today, the church is composed of Spirit-filled Christians from all nations, and is the true Israel.

The new covenant message goes to the whole world. It is a message of hope that salvation in Jesus is given to everyone who accepts him as Savior and is willing to live in faith. While this message may not have the drama that "watchman" prophecy preaching did, it is the most important message that could be preached. After all, this message affects our eternity.

Any attempt to pinpoint the exact years when the "end time" will occur is fundamentally flawed. (In fact, the biblical writers see the "end of the age" as beginning with the redemptive work of Christ.) We do not need to discern when "the end" might come – we need to leave the future in God's hands (Acts 1:6-7; Matthew 24:36, 42, 44). As Christians, our job is to "watch" our own spiritual attitudes to be sure we are in a relationship of faithful love with our Creator. We have no need to watch world events in that sense. God is sovereign and will take care of his own. In the resurrection of the dead to eternal life, all God's people share the ultimate victory that was won by Jesus Christ.

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What About the Millennium?

Will there be a literal millennium or thousand-year earthly reign of the saints with Christ after his return?

The idea of a thousand-year reign of Christ — a millennium — is found in two verses in the Bible — Revelation 20, verses 4 and 6. These verses speak of the martyrs or saints reigning for a thousand years. This number has produced the term “millennium,” which is derived from the Latin *mille* (thousand) and *annus* (year).

Jewish apocalyptic writings speculated about the length of the Messiah’s reign. Some speculated 40 years, some as many as 7,000 years. The author of the apocryphal book *4 Ezra* thought the Messiah’s “millennium” would last 400 years (7:28). The original audience of Revelation probably would have been familiar with the idea of a limited reign of the Messiah, at least from the popular apocalyptic writings then in circulation.

However, the Old Testament says nothing about the Messiah’s rule as being a thousand years in length, or as being of any limited duration. The prophets seem to speak of the kingdom of God on earth as being eternal, or at least open-ended, once it begins. Even the kingdom of the “new heavens and new earth” in Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22-24 seems to be simply an extension of the earthly and seemingly eternal reign of the Messiah.

Neither does the New Testament directly speak of Christ’s kingdom as being limited in time. The only verses that might indicate a time-limited kingdom existing between Christ’s coming and what is called the consummation are found in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24. Paul here seems to speak of “the end” of all things as being in some way distinct from Christ’s coming.

The only mention of a “thousand years” comes in the book of Revelation. Since Revelation sometimes uses number in a symbolic way, we should ask

whether this period of time is to be taken literally as a thousand years. To answer this question, we must rely on the context, for no other Bible verse clearly discusses such a period of time.

Some commentators have taken the figure to represent a literal thousand years. Others feel that while it may be a real period of substantial length, its actual time is undetermined. That is, in the same way that “one hour” means a very short time, a thousand years would simply mean a very long time.

One thousand is the cube of ten — ten times ten times ten. Ten is another number of completeness — as in the ten commandments. John uses the number several times in Revelation. The ten horns is one example. Perhaps what Revelation means to say is that God’s kingdom will last for whatever complete time God has determined it should last.

Those who feel the number “thousand” refers to an indefinite though long time cite examples of similar usage from the Old Testament. In Psalm 50:10 God speaks of himself as owner of all that exists. He says, “Every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.” Obviously, the expression is not to be taken as exactly 1,000 hills.

Job 9:3 speaks of man’s inability to box God in with arguments by saying, “Though one wished to dispute with him [God], he could not answer him one time out of a thousand.”

In the New Testament, Peter says that with God one day might just as well be a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8). That is, what we think of as a long time, to God is but a very short time. Again, it is a metaphorical way of expressing this idea.

The “millennium,” as a time of seemingly limited duration, is mentioned only in Revelation, a highly symbolic book. Because of the uncertainties of symbolic numbers in this book, we do not want to build a theological doctrine on such an idea. From a New Testament context, the millennium is a

doctrine the Bible does not speak about with a clear and loud voice.

But don't the Old Testament prophets speak of a physical kingdom on earth and can't we bring those pictures of a universal Promised Land into the concept of a millennium? Many people do shape their understanding of the millennium by the Old Testament Scriptures.

The New Testament doesn't describe the characteristics of the kingdom of God. When the kingdom is mentioned, the emphasis is on the church age, on the return of Jesus, and/or the judgment, as in Matthew 25:31-46. The book of Revelation, which spends much time describing the time immediately before Jesus' return and the establishment of God's kingdom in glory, gives only a brief description of events that come after his return. In what little detail it offers regarding the kingdom of God to come, it concentrates on the judgment.

How are we to understand the Old Testament prophecies of God's kingdom? One way is to see that the kingdom was described in terms old covenant Israel could understand.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the focus of the salvation God gave was on the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt and the nation's entrance into the Promised Land. It was a physical deliverance, and that is what Israel expected for the future — another physical deliverance, and a restoration within the Promised Land. Thus, the prophecies of the kingdom used physical terms, too — as restoring people into a perfect land of beauty and physical plenty where God's law reigned supreme.

These descriptions of God's kingdom can be seen as "shadows" in the same way that the sacrificial system, the priesthood, the temple with its holy of holies, physical circumcision, the annual festivals and the weekly Sabbath were shadows of the salvation we have in Jesus Christ. The Christians' Garden of Eden, Paradise of God and Promised Land would represent the joy

of eternal life in the presence of God.

The book of Revelation treats the physical events and situations described in the Hebrew Scriptures in precisely this way — as symbols of salvation. Revelation is a good example of a work that takes Old Testament physical typologies and gives them a spiritual twist or meaning.

For example, the seven churches are told they will have a right to eat from the tree of life in the paradise or garden of God. They are also told that they will be part of the temple of God in a new Jerusalem and sit on the Father's throne. In Revelation 22, readers are told they will have access to the river of the water of life, and the leaves from the trees on either side will heal the nations. The river of life metaphor is taken from Ezekiel's description of a new temple.

These physical types are to be taken symbolically, as the eternal life we will have in the presence of the Father. When we have imperishable life, we do not need to look for leaves and waters, for we have the reality that those things only pictured. The Old Testament details need not be taken in a physical or literal sense. They can refer to spiritual realities. Today, that is how we may see the physical descriptions of God's kingdom in the Old Testament prophecies.

Perhaps there will be a future kingdom of God on earth with human beings and human society under the loving government of a returned Christ. But the Scriptures are not that clear as to the specifics of such a future kingdom of God. Some people take too literal a view of such things — and often carry the Scriptures beyond meanings they can support. We should be more cautious, particularly in view of the fact that the New Testament interprets Old Testament realities like the kingdom of God as metaphors of salvation.

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We Are Living in “The Last Days”

Do we see “the signs of the times”?

“Mark this,” Paul wrote. “There will be terrible times in the last days” (2 Timothy 3:1). And what do we see now? Nations at war. Shootings in schools. Disasters in the weather. Is it all coming to a climax? Will World War III soon be upon us?

We are living in the last days! — and we have been for almost 2,000 years. The last days, said Peter, were already here in the first century (Acts 2:16-17). “In these last days,” we are told in Hebrews 1:2, “God has spoken to us by his Son.” “The last days” began with Jesus Christ! When Paul told Timothy about the last days, he was not so much predicting the future as describing his own day. He was telling Timothy what kind of world he lived in.

Wars and rumors of wars

Wars have always been with us. Natural disasters have plagued humanity for millennia. Societies have been breaking down, and violence has been erupting, for centuries.

“You will hear of wars and rumors of wars,” Jesus said, “but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (Matthew 24:6). There will be famines and disasters, but those are only the beginning of problems. There will be persecutions, and there will be predictions. People will say, It is just around the corner, but do not believe it. Do not be alarmed. Just persevere. Just do the job set before you.

Someday, the end will indeed come. But rumors about the end have been greatly exaggerated. The world has had many disasters since the last days began nearly 2000 years ago, and I am sure that there will be many more. God can end the world whenever he wants to, and I will be happy for the

great day to come, but I do not see any biblical proof that it will be very soon.

Frankly, we need faith and hope whether or not there is a war, whether or not the end is near. We need faith and zeal no matter how evil the days are, no matter how many disasters strike near us. Our responsibility before God does not change with the times: Our job is to preach the gospel, to preach repentance and forgiveness, to teach those who believe, and to worship God.

When we survey the world scene, we may see disasters in Africa, Asia, Europe, and America. Or, if we look with slightly different eyes, we may see fields white and ready for harvest. There is work to be done, as long as it is day. There is work to be done, and we must do the best we can with what we have. Where are we now in prophecy? We are now in the time in which the church should preach the gospel.

What should we do?

Jesus calls us to perseverance, to running with patience the race set before us. Paul likewise speaks of the end, when the children of God will be revealed, when all creation will be liberated from bondage (Romans 8:19-21). How then do we live? “We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for...the redemption of our bodies” (verse 23). We are eager for the travails of this world to be over, but we are also patient (verse 25).

Peter gives the same outlook. He also waited for the day of the Lord, when the elements will be destroyed (2 Peter 3:10). What advice does he give us? “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God” (verses 11-12). That is our responsibility day in and day out. We are called to live holy lives, not to make predictions the Bible does not authorize us to make. We are to be faithful in our daily lives.

Nevertheless, in the last days there will be people with a veneer of godliness but denying the power of Jesus Christ. There will be people who deceive and are deceived, people who proclaim the end is near. Do not be

alarmed; do not be deceived. Simply do what God has been telling his church to do for nearly 2,000 years: worship, teach and preach.

God will take care of the timetable — our job is to be found faithfully working, whenever the end happens to come. Correct predictions don't count for anything on the day of judgment — only faithfulness will be rewarded.

National and physical blessings

Nevertheless, some people seem anxious for the end to come. They would do well to heed the words of Isaiah:

Woe to those...who say, "Let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it. Let it approach, let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come, so we may know it."... Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight. (Isaiah 5:18-21)

It is interesting that the prophecy speculators often mix nationalism in with their prophecies. They are interested in the welfare of America specifically, as if Americans are in greater need of repentance than the Chinese are. They want national repentance so that God will "heal *this* land" and they can live in peace and safety. Many of them assume that if America obeys God, then we will reap the blessings God promised to ancient Israel.

Repentance is a good thing, of course. It is good to have peace and safety, and I would enjoy such blessings just as much as anybody else. But I wonder about the propriety of wanting other people to repent so that we can enjoy physical blessings. Does not repentance begin at home, beginning with our personal self-centeredness? Shouldn't spiritual blessings for others be a greater incentive for us to want them to turn to God? Didn't Jesus tell us to be concerned about all nations, not just our own?

In this fallen world, God allows natural disasters, sins and evils. He also causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good as well as the bad. As both Job and Jesus show, he also allows evil to fall upon the righteous. This

is the way God allows the world to function.

For the ancient nation of Israel, under a special covenant, God promised that if the nation was obedient, he would prevent the natural disasters that normally fall upon both the wicked and the righteous. He did not give that guarantee to other nations, nor did he say that other nations could elect themselves to a position of most-favored nation in his sight. Modern nations cannot claim as promises the blessings God offered specifically to Israel in a special covenant that is now obsolete.

The Bible makes no guarantees that even if all of America repents, that we will no longer have any troubles. The new covenant, the better covenant, offers spiritual life rather than guaranteeing physical blessings. By faith, we are to focus on the spiritual, not the physical.

Physical things are not wrong, of course, and God often does intervene in physical affairs to help us. But the new covenant does not make guarantees as to when and where he will do it. The new covenant calls us to faith despite the circumstances, to faithfulness despite persecution, to patience despite an eager longing for the better world that Jesus will bring.

Here is one more thought that may put prophecy into better perspective: Prophecy's greatest purpose is not to get us to focus on dates — it is so that we will “know the Lord.” Prophecy is to point us to Jesus, the best of all possible blessings. Once we have arrived at our destination, we no longer need to focus on the path that brought us to him.

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Three Views of the Millennium

For many Christians, the millennium is a very important doctrine. For us, it was an *extremely* important doctrine. It was “the wonderful world tomorrow.” We had an upbeat message about good news for the entire world — a new and far better world would come after Christ returned to put an end to this evil world. The millennium would be a thousand years of righteous rule, when people would obey God, when there would be peace worldwide, when even animals would be at peace with one another.

This was the focus of our understanding of the kingdom of God, and it was often the focus of our gospel, too. Our broadcast was named “The World Tomorrow” because this was a major part of our message. This was a message of *good* things, a message we liked to talk about.

Today, however, we do not stress the millennium.

Why not? Why have we neglected this wonderfully optimistic message about the future? Many people cherish our old view of the millennium and are disappointed that we no longer teach it. So why did we change?

Can we prove it?

The simple answer is, Scripture. We want to be honest in our use of Scripture. No matter how good particular teachings might make us feel, we do not want to be saying things we cannot prove from Scripture.

For example, how long will the millennium last? We used to say that it would be exactly one thousand years. After all, Revelation 20 calls it a thousand years. The word “millennium” itself *means* one thousand years. So why would anybody doubt it?

For one thing, the book of Revelation is filled with symbols. There are beasts and horns and colors and numbers that are meant figuratively, not literally. We also see in Scripture that the number one thousand is often used

as a round number, not an exact count. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, it says, without meaning an exact number. He keeps his covenant for a thousand generations, without meaning exactly 40,000 years. In scriptures like this, “a thousand” just means lots and lots.

So, in Revelation 20, the question arises, is the “thousand years” meant exactly and literally, or is it figurative? In this book of symbols that often aren’t meant literally, is the round number thousand meant to be exact?

From Scripture, we cannot prove that the thousand years are meant exactly. We don’t have any other passage that gives us a chronology for this phase of God’s kingdom. We cannot prove that it *isn’t* figurative, meaning a very long time. That is a plausible interpretive choice.

So, if we don’t want to say things we can’t prove, and we can’t prove that the “thousand” in Revelation 20 has to be literal, then we shouldn’t say that the millennium is exactly one thousand years. But we can say that “the millennium is the time span described in the book of Revelation.” That is defensible no matter how anyone interprets the thousand years. That statement is biblical, and it is true.

More questions

We can also say that the millennium is “the time span during which Christian martyrs reign with Jesus Christ.” Revelation tells us that those who are beheaded for Christ reign with him, and it tells us that they will reign with Christ for a thousand years.

When do these saints begin to reign? With this question, we get into some hotly disputed questions about the millennium. There are basically two, three, or four views about the millennium. Some believe that the millennium begins before Christ returns; others believe it begins when he returns.

Of those who believe it begins before he returns, some believe that there will be a special golden age of peace and godliness before Christ returns;

others believe that things will continue much the way they are now until Christ returns. Of those who believe that the millennium will come after Christ returns, some believe in a special role for Israel, and others do not.

Some of these views are more literal in their approach to Scripture, and some are more figurative. But none are rejecting what the Bible says — they are just interpreting it in different ways. All of them claim to base their view on Scripture. It is largely a matter of interpretation.

Let me describe three basic views of the millennium, along with their strengths and weaknesses, and I will then return to what we can say about the millennium with greatest confidence.

The three views are named by where they put the return of Christ in relation to the millennium.

- In the premillennial view, Christ comes *before* the millennium.
- In the postmillennial view, Christ comes *after* the millennium.
- In the amillennial view, Christ also comes after the millennium, but it is called amillennial or nonmillennial because it says that there *is no special millennium* different from what we are already in. This view says that we are *already* in the time span Revelation 20 is describing. That might seem preposterous if you believe the millennial reign is a time of peace that is possible only after Christ returns. It may seem like “those people just don’t believe the Bible” — but they *claim* to believe the Bible. In the interest of Christian charity, we ought to try to understand *why* they think the Bible says this.

The premillennial view

Let’s start with a basic sketch of the premillennial position, the position we used to hold, and the view we know the most about.

Old Testament: First, we see many prophecies in the Old Testament that predict a golden age in which people obey God. “The lion and the lamb will

live together, and a little child will lead them. They will not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

Sometimes it seems as if this future world will be drastically different from the present world; other times it seems more similar. Sometimes it seems perfect, and sometimes it is mixed with sin. In a passage like Isaiah 2, for example, many people will say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. He will teach us his ways.... The word of the Lord will go out from Jerusalem.”

Nevertheless, there will be nations that need to be rebuked. There will be nations that refuse to obey. People will need plowshares, because they need to eat, because they are mortal. There are ideal elements, and there are normal elements. There will be young children, there will be marriage, and there will be death.

Daniel tells us that the Messiah will establish a kingdom that will fill the entire earth, replacing all previous empires. There are dozens of these prophecies in the Old Testament, but we don't need to go through them right now, because they are not decisive for our particular question.

Jesus: The Jews understood these prophecies to refer to a future age on earth. They expected the Messiah to come and reign and bring these blessings. Jewish literature before and after Jesus expects a kingdom of God on earth. Jesus' own disciples seem to have expected the same thing.

So, when Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, we cannot pretend that the Old Testament prophecies did not exist. He was preaching to a people who expected a golden age ruled by a Messiah. When he said “kingdom of God,” this is what they would have been thinking.

The disciples

Jesus announced that it was near. Then he left and said he'd be back. It would not be difficult for his followers to conclude that Jesus would bring the

golden age when he came back. The disciples asked Jesus when he would restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). They used a similar Greek word to talk about the time of the restoration of all things when Christ returns — Acts 3:21: “Jesus must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”

The disciples expected Old Testament prophecies to be fulfilled in a future age after Christ returned. The disciples didn't preach much about this future golden age, because their Jewish audiences were already familiar with the concept. They didn't need to be told about the golden age — they needed to know who the Messiah is, so that was the focus of the apostolic message. Many of the non-Jewish believers had attended synagogues before, so they would have known, too. The others would learn from the Old Testament after they came to believe in Christ.

Since the apostolic message focused on the *new* thing God had done in the Messiah, since it focused on how salvation is possible through Jesus the Messiah, it did not say much about the future kingdom of God, and it is difficult for us to know exactly what they believed about it or how much they knew about it. However, we do see a glimpse of what the apostles believed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is detailing his belief in the resurrection, and in that context he says something about the kingdom of God that many Christians believe refers to a millennial kingdom after Christ returns: “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (verses 22-23).

Paul is explaining that the resurrection comes in a sequence: First Christ, then later, all the believers. Paul uses the word “then” in verse 23 to refer to a time delay of 2,000 or so years. He uses that same word “then” in verse 24 to

indicate another step in the sequence: “*Then* the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father *after* he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (verses 24-26).

Christ must reign *until* he has put all enemies under his feet. This is not a one-time event: Christ reigns for a span of time in which he destroys all enemies, even the enemy of death. And after all that, comes the end. Even though Paul is not sketching these steps in a particular chronology, his use of the word “then” shows various steps in the plan. First, the resurrection of Christ. The second step is the resurrection of believers. And then, after a reign of Christ, the third step will be to hand everything over to God the Father.

Paul did not say how long the second phase would last. Some Jewish speculation in the first century B.C. said 400 years. When Peter wrote that a day with the Lord is like a thousand years, he may have been referring to a similar tradition, or simply alluding to Psalm 90. His point could have been made with 500 years or 10,000 years just as well. It was a round number, but God can work in round numbers. God can choose to use a symbolic number of years — the fact that a number has symbolic meaning doesn’t mean that it won’t also happen in exactly that number of years. Symbolic numbers can be exact in addition to being symbolic — it is a possibility, but not a proof.

Revelation 20

The Old Testament predicts a golden age of peace and prosperity under God’s rule, and Paul says that God’s plan proceeds in steps. But the real foundation of the premillennial view is the book of Revelation. This is the book that many believe *reveals* how all this comes together. We have to spend some time in chapter 20 to see what it says.

We can begin by noting that Christ's return is described in Revelation 19. It talks about the marriage supper of the Lamb, and the bride has made herself ready. There was a white horse, and the rider is named the Word of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He leads armies from heaven, and he rules the nations with a rod of iron. He gets rid of the beast and the false prophet and all his enemies. This chapter is describing the return of Christ.

Then we come to Revelation 20:1: "I saw an angel coming down out of heaven..." In the literary flow of the book of Revelation, this is something that happens after the return of Christ. What did this angel do? "...having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." The chain is not literal — it represents something that can restrain a spirit being. But it is literally the devil who is restrained, and he does literally have restraints placed on him.

Would the original readers of Revelation, who were being persecuted by Jews and Romans, think that Satan had already been bound? Probably not. We were told in chapter 12 that the devil deceives the whole world and wars against the church. This does not sound like he is restrained. He is not restrained until *after* the beast and false prophet are defeated.

Verse 3: "The angel threw Satan 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 is seeing the devil restrained for a span of time. In chapter 12, the devil was the one who deceives the whole world. Here, he is prevented from deceiving the world for a thousand years. He is not just chained — he is locked up and sealed. The picture given to us is one of total restraint, total inability, of no influence.

What happens during that thousand years? John explains this in verse 4:

“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge.” This is a judgment that takes place after the return of Christ. It doesn’t matter for our discussion *who* is sitting. What is of greater interest is what comes next in verse 4:

And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for 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. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Here John sees some martyrs who reign with Christ. Who are they? The verse says it is those who were beheaded, but it probably isn’t intended to single out this particular form of martyrdom, as if Christians who were killed by lions didn’t get the same reward. Rather, “those who were beheaded” seems to be a figure of speech to stand for all who gave their lives for Christ. That could even mean all Christians. Elsewhere in Revelation we are told that all who believe in Christ will reign with him. For our purpose here, it doesn’t matter who this is. What matters is that some people reign with Christ for a thousand years, at a time when Satan is bound and is not deceiving the nations anymore.

Verse 5 then inserts a parenthetical thought: “(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.)” So there will be a resurrection at the end of the millennium.

Jews before the time of Christ believed in only one resurrection. They believed in only one appearance of the Messiah. The New Testament tells us that things are more complex than that. The Messiah actually comes at different times for different purposes. The plan proceeds in certain steps.

Most of the New Testament describes only one resurrection at the end of the age. But the book of Revelation reveals that this comes in steps, too. Just as there is more than one “Day of the Lord,” there is also more than one

resurrection. The scroll is being unrolled to reveal more details of how God's plan will come to its conclusion.

At the end of this parenthetical comment about the rest of the dead, verses 5-6 return to the millennial period: "This is the first resurrection. 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." The vision indicates that there will be more than one resurrection — one at the beginning of the millennium, and another at the end. The people will be priests and rulers in Christ's kingdom, when the nations are no longer being deceived by Satan.

Verses 7-10 describe something at the end of the millennium: Satan will be released, he will deceive the nations again, they will attack God's people, and the enemies will again be defeated and thrown in the lake of fire.

That is the sketch of the premillennial view. Satan is currently deceiving the nations and persecuting the church. But the good news is that the church's persecutors will be defeated, Satan's influence will be terminated, and the saints will resurrected and will rule with Christ for a thousand years. After that, Satan will be released a short while, will again deceive many, will again be defeated, and this time thrown into the lake of fire. Then there will be a resurrection of the non-Christians.

Now, another point in favor of the premillennial view: this seems to be what most of the earliest Christians believed, especially those in Asia Minor. If the book of Revelation was intended to convey any other view, it apparently failed to make much of an impression on the earliest readers. And if this book simply described in dramatic language the capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then it was nearly irrelevant to the original readers in Asia.

It is possible that the earliest readers got it wrong, but we can't just ignore what they thought. And in case of the millennium, they apparently believed

that a thousand-year rule of Christ would come after his return.

The problems of premillennialism, and the case for amillennialism

If premillennialism is so obvious, why do many Bible-believing Christians believe in something else? They are not facing persecution or ridicule on this issue. They have no obvious external pressures to believe in anything else, and yet they do. They claim to believe the Bible, but they claim that the biblical millennium ends, rather than begins, at Christ's return.

As Proverbs says, the one who speaks first sounds right, until the second one speaks. We can't answer the matter before we hear both sides, or in this case, all three sides.

The time of Revelation 20

For the amillennial view, let's start with this question: What if Revelation 20 isn't fulfilled chronologically after chapter 19? Of course, John *saw* the vision of chapter 20 after he saw the vision of chapter 19, but what if the visions did not come in the sequence that they will be fulfilled in? What if Revelation 20 takes us to a different point in time than when chapter 19 ended? What if the vision moves to another area of history without proceeding chronologically?

In chapter 12, we can see a clear example of this freedom to move forward or backward in time. Chapter 11 ends with the seventh trumpet; chapter 12 then takes us back to a woman giving birth to a male child, and the woman being protected for 1,260 days. This is usually understood to be the birth of Jesus Christ and the persecution of the church. And yet in the literary flow, this comes *after* the seventh trumpet. John's vision has taken him back in time to sketch another part of the story.

So the question is, Is this happening in Revelation 20? Is it taking us back in time? And more specifically, is there evidence in the Bible that this is a

better interpretation of what God is revealing?

Yes indeed, says the amillennial view. There is evidence in Scripture that the kingdom of God has already begun, that Satan has already been bound, that there will be only one resurrection, that Christ's return will bring the new heavens and new earth, without any temporary kingdom in between. It is therefore a hermeneutical mistake to make the book of Revelation, with all its symbolism and all its interpretive difficulties, *contradict* what the rest of Scripture says. We need to use the plain scriptures to interpret the obscure ones, rather than the other way around. In this case, the book of Revelation is the obscure and the controversial material, and the other New Testament verses are clear on the matter.

Prophecies are figurative

For example, Luke 3:3-6 tell us how we are to understand Old Testament prophecies:

John the Baptist went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"

In other words, when Isaiah wrote about mountains and valleys, roads and deserts, he was speaking in highly figurative language. Old Testament prophecies were given in figurative language to depict the events of salvation through Christ.

As Jesus said on the road to Emmaus, the Old Testament prophets were pointing to him. If we see their major focus as some future time span, we are not seeing these prophecies in the light of Jesus Christ. *He* changes the way

we read all the prophecies. He is the focus. He is the true temple, he is the true David, he is the true Israel, his kingdom is the true kingdom.

We see the same thing in Acts. Peter said a prophecy of Joel was being fulfilled in his own day. Notice what Acts 2:16-21 says:

This [the speaking in tongues] is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

When the Old Testament prophets wrote about the last days, they were writing about the age of the church, the age we are in right now. And if there is a thousand-year age yet to come, then *these* are not the last days. There cannot be *two* sets of last days. When the prophets spoke of wonders in heaven above and strange signs in the sun and moon, such prophecies can be fulfilled in figurative ways, unexpected ways — as unexpected as the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on God's people and speaking in tongues.

We should not automatically reject highly figurative interpretations of Old Testament prophecies, because that is exactly how the New Testament shows us we can understand the Old Testament prophecies.

Old Testament prophecies can be fulfilled either in the church age, through figurative fulfillments, or fulfilled in an even better way in the new heavens and new earth after Christ returns. Everything that the prophets promised, we have better in Jesus Christ, either now or in the new heavens and new earth. The Old Testament prophets described a kingdom that would

never end, an everlasting kingdom, an everlasting age. They were not talking about a limited “golden age” after which the entire earth would be destroyed and rebuilt.

The New Testament does not give us a commentary on every Old Testament prophecy. It just gives us a sample of fulfillment that shows the original writings were in figurative language. They were intended to be figurative. That does not prove the amillennial view, but it removes one obstacle. When we want proof, we need to look at the New Testament, and there we will find the evidence that causes many Christians to believe the amillennial view.

Daniel

On the way to the New Testament, we might look briefly at Daniel 2, one of the favorite passages of premillennialists. However, it does *not* support premillennialism, despite the assumptions that people bring to the text.

Daniel 2:44: “In the time of those kings [the kings represented by the toes of iron and clay], the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”

Daniel is describing the kingdom of God, which will eliminate human kingdoms and last forever. There is no hint in this verse that God’s kingdom will come in phases of a church age that is almost destroyed by a great tribulation, and then a millennial age that is almost destroyed by the release of Satan, then finally a new Jerusalem. No, it is simply that the kingdom will be set up and defeat all enemies and last forever. There is no need for defeating all enemies twice, or establishing the kingdom three times.

The premillennial view is not in this passage, and yet premillennialists often cite it. Premillennialism has a tendency to read preconceived ideas into the Bible, rather than allowing the Bible to speak for itself.

Jesus

Now let's see what the New Testament says. The Olivet prophecy is the most detailed prophecy that Jesus gave. If the millennium is important to him, we should find some hint of it here. But we do not. Instead, we find Jesus describing his own return immediately followed by a judgment of reward and punishment. Matthew 25 describes not just the righteous who are raised to judgment — it is also the wicked who are consciously interacting with the judge and being sent to anguish and outer darkness. There is no evidence here for a thousand-year interval between the sheep and the goats.

Jesus gave another indication of his understanding of prophecy in Matthew 19:28: “I tell you the truth, *at the renewal of all things*, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Is this referring to a millennial period? Only if we read that into the verse. What it actually says is “the renewal of *all* things.” Jesus is not talking about a thousand-year span in which sin still exists, and in which Satan is only temporarily bound. It seems reasonable to believe that when he says the renewal of all things, he means the renewal of all things — the new heavens and new earth. He means the complete elimination of sin. He says nothing about a 1000-year period in the middle of things. This concept, to say the least, was not important to Jesus.

Peter

The same thing happens in the early church. In Acts 3:21, Peter said that Christ “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore *everything*, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” Peter is saying that Christ will restore everything when he returns, and that this is the proper interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies. Christ is not leaving sin around to cause an enormous crisis a thousand years later. He is getting

everything settled at once — restored heavens and restored earth, all at once, all at the return of Christ.

Notice what he wrote in 2 Peter 3:10: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” The lake of fire consumes the whole earth at the return of Christ. He says nothing about a thousand-year period. Verses 12-14 say,

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

Peter is saying that we are looking forward not to a millennium, but to new heavens and new earth. If we are going to talk about the good news of the wonderful world tomorrow, then *this* is what we ought to be focusing on, not a temporary period in which sin and death still exists. We have better news than that to focus on: we should look forward to the restoration of *all* things in the new heavens and new earth. Peter is saying that all this will happen on the day of the Lord, when Christ returns.

Paul

Paul presents much the same view in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen *when* the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” This says that God will punish the first-century persecutors when Jesus comes back. This means a resurrection of the evil, not just Christians, at Christ’s return. That means one resurrection, without any time span in between.

He says it again in verses 8-10:

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

This describes one resurrection, everyone at the same time, on the *day* when Christ returns. If the book of Revelation is talking about *two* resurrections, then it contradicts what Paul wrote. Paul says that both the good and the bad are to be resurrected on the *same* day.

Paul is repeating what Jesus said in John 5:28-29: “A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” Jesus is talking about a resurrection of the good and the evil at the same time — and if anyone knew the best way to describe the future, it was Jesus. If we read Revelation in such a way as to contradict what Jesus said, then we are misreading the revelation.

Next, let’s look at Romans, Paul’s most thorough sketch of doctrinal matters. He describes our future glory in Romans 8:18-23:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Why is creation waiting for the children of God to be given their glory? Because the creation itself will also be liberated from its bondage —

presumably at the same time. When the children of God are revealed in glory, the creation will no longer be waiting. Creation will be renewed — a new heavens and a new earth when Christ returns.

Paul gives the same view in 1 Corinthians 15. He says in verse 23 that those who belong to Christ will be resurrected when Christ comes. Verse 24 then tells us, “Then the end will come...” That is when the end will come. When Christ comes to resurrect his people, he will also destroy all his enemies, restore everything and hand the kingdom over to the Father.

There is no need to postulate a 1,000-year period between verses 23 and 24. At the least, we could say that if there is a time period involved here, it is not very important to Paul. He doesn't even mention it. In fact, it seems that such a time period would contradict what he wrote in other places, and contradict what Jesus himself said.

Romans 11, to use another passage sometimes cited by premillennialists, says nothing about a kingdom after Christ's return. What it says *could* fit into such a time span, but there is nothing in Romans 11 itself that would cause us to think of such a time period.

Revelation

Now we must look at the most difficult passage, the strange and symbol-filled vision of John, which causes all the controversy. In the sometimes bizarre beasts and heavenly symbols, is John revealing things other apostles did not, or is he simply restating in several different ways the same prophetic framework?

Let's start in Revelation 20:1 — a messenger comes from heaven to bind Satan. Someone who knew the teachings of Jesus would likely think, This has already happened. In Matthew 12, Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the prince of demons. And Jesus said, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” And we are

convinced that Jesus did drive out demons by the Spirit of God, and we are convinced that the kingdom of God has already come upon this age.

And then Jesus adds, in verse 29, “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.” The parable is clear: Jesus is able to order demons around because he has already entered Satan’s world and *tied him up*. It’s the same Greek word as in Revelation 20. Satan has already been bound. He has already been defeated. Here is more evidence:

- In John 12:31, Jesus said, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.” Satan was being expelled during Jesus’ ministry.
- Colossians 2:15 tells us that Jesus has already disarmed his enemies, “triumphing over them by the cross.”
- Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that Jesus destroyed — that’s a very strong word — the devil by his death on the cross: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil.”
- 1 John 3:8: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”
- Last, Jude 6 tells us, “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home — these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.” Satan has already been bound in chains. His power has already been curtailed. These scriptures are consistent.

So when we read in Revelation 20 that John saw Satan being bound, then we can conclude that this is a vision of the past, something that has already happened. We are being taken back in time to see a part of the picture that other visions had not shown us. We see that Satan, despite his lingering

influence, is a defeated enemy. He can no longer keep the nations under complete deception. The veil is being lifted, and people of all nations are already hearing the gospel and coming to Christ.

Then we are taken behind the scenes to see that the martyrs are already with Christ. Although they were beheaded, or killed in other ways, they came to life and lived with Christ. They are now alive in heaven, says the amillennial view, and this is the first resurrection, their first coming to life again. The second resurrection will be a resurrection of the body; the first is simply coming to live with Christ in the meantime. All who participate in this resurrection are blessed and holy.

It is clear in Revelation 20 that the first death is not like the second. Because of that, it is unrealistic to *assume* that the first resurrection is like the second. They are different in kind. Just like the enemies of God die twice, so also the saved people are said to live twice. So in this vision the martyrs are already with Christ, living and reigning with him, and it lasts a very long time, symbolized by the phrase “thousand years.”

When this long time is over, Satan will be released, there will be a great tribulation, and Satan and his forces will be defeated for all time. There will be a judgment, a lake of fire and then a new heavens and new earth. An interesting support of this is seen in the Greek of verse 8: Satan gathers the nations not just for battle, but for *the* battle. John has already talked about *the* battle — in Revelation 16:14 and in 19:19. All three verses are describing the same great climactic battle at the return of Christ.

If we had nothing but the book of Revelation, we would probably accept the literal view — that Satan will be bound with a chain for 1,000 years, there will be more than one resurrection, there will be at least three phases in God’s kingdom, and there will be at least two climactic battles and more than one set of “last days.”

But Revelation is *not* all that we have. We have many other scriptures that clearly teach *one* resurrection, and teach that the end comes *when* Christ returns. So in this apocalyptic book, when we come across something that seems to contradict the rest of the New Testament, we do not have to accept the strange just because it comes last. Rather, we consider its context and type of literature in a book of visions and symbols, and we can see how its symbols can be interpreted in such a way that it does not contradict the rest of the Bible.

We cannot base a complicated system of theology on the most obscure book of the Bible. That would just invite trouble and focus attention away from what the New Testament really is. The biblical message is not centered on a temporary kingdom after Christ returns. Rather, it is centered on what Christ did when he came the first time, what he is doing right now in the church, and as a grand climax, the way it all ends in eternity after his return.

Responses to amillennialism

As shown above, the amillennial view is not lacking in biblical support. Perhaps you are convinced that it may have some merit. At least, it cannot be dismissed without some further study. Let me mention some books that can help you get started in a study about the millennium.

- *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert Clouse, published by InterVarsity in 1977.
- *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*, by Steve Gregg, published by Nelson in 1997.
- *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*, by Stanley Grenz, published by InterVarsity in 1992.
- *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, edited by Darrell Bock, published by Zondervan in 1999.

Millard Erickson has a book about the millennium, too, and he has a good

chapter in his *Christian Theology*. Wayne Grudem also has a good chapter on the millennium in his *Systematic Theology*. Both of them survey the options before explaining why they choose the one they do.

All these books attempt to sketch the strengths and weaknesses of each concept of the millennium. In some, authors critique the other views. All the books show that the issues are complex, and the analysis of particular verses can get quite detailed. That is one reason that the debate continues.

It is also worth noting that the views themselves are changing. Modern dispensationalists do not argue for the millennium in quite the same way as dispensationalists did 50 years ago. Postmillennialism, which I will get to below, is considerably different than it was 100 years ago. It used to be characterized as liberal; today it is held by some extremely conservative Calvinists. Even amillennialism, which has the most stable tradition, has changed somewhat over the years, such as in its explanation of the martyrs who live again.

In other words, all this discussion is making some progress. People are admitting their mistakes and willing to modify their views. In *Three Views of the Millennium*, one author actually wrote that he was convinced by his brother's argument on one point. Even experts who have studied the issues for a long time are willing to learn something new.

Premillennial response

How might a premillennialist respond to the amillennial view? The response could include these points.

First, the Book of Revelation is part of the Bible, and we can't ignore its teachings just because it is difficult to interpret or because it is apocalyptic literature. We have to accept it as Scripture even if it changes the way we view other passages. We have to allow it to reveal something new, not just repeat things we've already been told. We cannot assume in advance that it

reveals nothing new or different.

Second, further revelation is not a contradiction of earlier revelation. Jesus spoke of one resurrection, true, but it is not a contradiction to realize that *Jesus* could be resurrected ahead of everyone else. So we already have *two* resurrections, without contradicting Christ, and it is therefore not a contradiction to suggest that the one resurrection is divided into three or more periods. The point is that each person is resurrected only once.

Third, the matter of extra phases of God's kingdom. The Jews expected the Messiah to bring the golden age right away, but he did not. There was a huge time lag in the fulfillment of the prophecies. This is explained by later revelation. In other words, inserting never-before-revealed time spans is not a contradiction — it is a clarification. Fulfillment can be, and has already been, in stages, with unannounced gaps. 1 Corinthians 15 shows stages, and Revelation in its most natural meaning also does. We have to allow the possibility that things *develop* after Christ returns.

Fourth, the amillennial view does not seem to deal adequately with the language of Revelation 20:1-3. Not only is Satan bound, but he is also locked up and sealed. The picture is one of zero influence, not a partial influence. True, Jesus did speak of binding Satan, and true, he did defeat Satan on the cross. However, Jesus Christ's victory over Satan has not yet been fully implemented. Satan is still active, still deceiving huge numbers of people. The original readers, who were being persecuted by a beastly empire, would not so readily assume that Satan has already been bound where he can deceive the nations no longer. The readers knew well that the vast majority of the Roman Empire was in a state of deception.

Briefly, the amillennialist might say in reply: True, we can allow God to reveal new things, but we cannot assume in advance that every unusual thing in the book of Revelation is in fact a new thing. Rather, it may be an old idea

in new clothing. The idea that one resurrection *could* be separated by a time gap does not mean that it actually is. And our imagination of what the original readers *felt* about Satan should not control our exegesis of what the apocalyptic symbolism really means. We cannot build an elaborate scheme out of a subjective impression of a book written in figurative language.

Postmillennial view

Now let us add to this mixture the *postmillennial* view, which says that a thousand years or a long golden age will come *before* Christ returns. To a premillennialist, this may seem completely backwards, and yet this view is held by some Christians who are the staunchest supporters of biblical inerrancy. They firmly believe that the Bible teaches a golden age before Christ's return.

Expect success

How do they get that idea? Where are the scriptures that support it? First, Isaiah 55:11 — God will do all that he purposes to do. His word will not return to him empty. It will accomplish what he wants. And what does he want? He wants his gospel to be preached and for all people to believe. He will get what he wants. Scripture is always optimistic of what God is doing and will do. He will accomplish what he wants.

But he does this gradually, not by sudden force. Jesus' parable of the growing seed and the parable of the leaven show a gradual growth of the kingdom until it fills the entire lump of dough. As Daniel said, the kingdom of God will fill the entire earth.

As mentioned above in the amillennial view, Christ has already defeated Satan. He has already defeated all contrary dominions and powers. We are already in the last days. We are in the kingdom of God, and we should expect success for what God is doing. In John 12:31-32, Jesus said that Satan is defeated and that Jesus would draw *all* people to himself. We should expect

him to do it. He has paid for all people, and we should expect him to claim his rightful property. Matthew 28:18 says he has all authority. He is already reigning as King of kings.

1 Corinthians 15:25 tells us that Christ will reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. He has already begun to reign, and we should expect progress toward his goal of putting all things under his feet. This passage also says Christians will be resurrected when Christ returns, and that this is “the end,” when everything has been brought under Christ’s rule. (In this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15, the postmillennialist agrees with the amillennialist in seeing the “then” of verse 24 as the same time as verse 23b, rather than implying a gap in time, which is the premillennial view. The postmillennialist simply stresses that this means that all enemies have been subdued before Christ returns.)

Already reigning with Christ

The book of Revelation was written in highly figurative, symbolic language. Satan has already been bound, and through the gradual growth of God’s kingdom — the way Jesus said it would grow — Satan’s influence will eventually be reduced to practically nothing. The nations will enjoy a span of time in which almost everyone believes in the gospel and allows Christ to rule in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

In the first resurrection are the people who pass from death to life by responding to the gospel. 1 John 3:14 says, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.” We are already in the category of those who live again. Even though we were dead in trespasses and sins, Ephesians 2:1-6 tells us, God has made us alive in Christ, and we are even now seated in heavenly realms.

If Paul can picture us as already seated with Christ, living and reigning with him, it is no small thing for the book of Revelation to give us a similar

image in its picturesque language. Colossians 2:13 says, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.” We are already living again, reigning with Christ, and that is what Revelation 20 is picturing.

So, postmillennialism shares some interpretive similarities with amillennialism, and postmillennialists used to call themselves amillennialists. It is only in the past 50 years that the terminology has distinguished between the views.

Some postmillennialists believe that we are already in the millennial situation; others believe that there will be a distinct period in the future characterized by worldwide godliness. The chief distinguishing characteristic of postmillennialism is its optimism: It expects God’s kingdom to subdue the world in this age.

Responses to postmillennialism

What do premillennialists and amillennialists say to this?

First, they agree on many points. We all agree that God does whatever he wants, that he will accomplish his purpose just as he has planned to, that Satan has already been defeated and that Christ already has all power and authority.

The problem is, we cannot assume that God wants what *we* want. We cannot assume that he wants everyone to respond to the gospel in this age. For 2,000 years he has apparently wanted only a minority to respond. That is consistent with his purpose. He will accomplish everything he wants, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that we will have a golden age in this age. To see what God wants to do in this age, we have to see what the Scriptures say, not assume that God’s definition of success has to be the same as ours. All the victory that Scripture promises may come at or after Christ’s return, rather than in this age. We expect God to be successful, but we need to allow him to

define what that is and when it will be.

Christ already has all power, and he is already reigning in some sense. But we cannot consider his reign to be a failure even though he has not yet accomplished what we want. The evidence for the gradual expansion of Christianity is debatable. Just because *some* of Christ's parables show gradual growth, we cannot make those parables dictate everything else in Scripture. Other parables show dramatic and miraculous intervention by Christ. The parable of the tares shows that a significant portion of people will remain unconverted even until Christ returns. There is no textual support for a golden age before Christ's return.

The postmillennial view is built more on theological conclusions than on exegesis of Scripture. In both the *Four Views* book (Clouse) and the *Three Views* book (Bock), the postmillennial authors are criticized for neglecting Revelation 20. That chapter is not a key component of their position, even though the very idea of a millennium springs from it.

Revelation 20 clearly says that the people in the first resurrection are martyrs. This is not referring to spiritual rebirth — this is referring to people who have physically died, who have been killed for the faith. Martyrdom can happen even when Christ has all authority and power and is able to do all that he purposes, and martyrdom can continue until he returns. All the scriptures about being made alive with Christ are true, but it's just not the same picture as Revelation 20 is giving us.

(Some postmillennialists have a radically different interpretation of the book of Revelation, saying that most of it was fulfilled in A.D. 70. This can affect the way they view chapter 20. However, not all postmillennialists approach Revelation in the same way. See Steve Gregg's book for further information, or *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, edited by C. Marvin Pate [Zondervan, 1998].)

The amillennialist says that we are already in the last days and that it is wrong to expect another major phase of God's kingdom either before or after Christ's return. There is only one "last days," not two.

The premillennialist says that everything will be restored *after* Christ's return, not before. Satan is not gradually bound and restricted — the picture in Revelation is a sudden and complete containment.

The postmillennialist responds with the belief that God has promised victory for the gospel, and it is right to be wildly optimistic about what God will do even in this age.

Conclusion

Now that we have seen the three major views of the millennium and have seen a little interaction on their views, what can we say?

We can safely say that "the Millennium is the time span described in the book of Revelation during which Christian martyrs reign with Jesus Christ." That is what the Bible says. We do not need to say whether they are in heaven or on earth, whether they are reigning right now or in the future. We can leave those interpretive options open.

We can also say, "after the millennium, when all enemies have been put under Christ's feet, and all things made subject to him, Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father, and heaven and earth will be made new." This repeats ideas from 1 Corinthians 15 — and this statement is acceptable to all views.

We can also safely acknowledge that there are various views — that "some Christian traditions interpret the Millennium as a literal 1,000 years to precede or follow the return of Jesus, while others believe that the scriptural evidence points to a figurative interpretation: an indeterminate time span commencing with Jesus' resurrection and concluding with his return." In saying this, we accept others as Christian without any need to say what view

we hold. We may prefer a view that is different, but we do not have to make it an obstacle between us.

On this matter, we can state a view that almost all Christians can agree on. The millennium is not a defining doctrine of who is a true Christian and who is not. We do not want to divide Christians by their interpretive choices on this matter. We recognize that equally sincere, equally educated and equally faithful Christians can come to different conclusions on this doctrine. Some members of our denomination are premillennial, some are amillennial, and some are postmillennial. But we have much to agree on:

- God has all power and will do all that he purposes and will fulfill all his prophecies.
- Jesus Christ has all power and authority, and he has brought us into his kingdom even in this age.
- Christ has given us life when we were dead in trespasses and sins, we go to be with him when we die, and we will be resurrected.
- Jesus has defeated Satan and Satan still exercises some influence in this world.
- Satan's influence will be completely and permanently stopped in the future.
- All humans will be resurrected and judged by our merciful and loving and righteous God.
- Christ will return, and will triumph over all enemies, and will lead us all into an eternity with God.
- There will be a new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells, and this wonderful world tomorrow will last forever.
- Eternity will be better than the millennium (no matter how we define the millennium).
- We have much to agree on; we do not need to get upset about

differences in the *sequence* in which God will do his will.

Last, I want to point out that the chronology of the last days is not part of our commission. The gospel is how we can *enter* the kingdom, not about the chronology of when things happen. Jesus did not stress the chronology; he did not emphasize a kingdom that would last for a finite period of time. Paul did not preach about a temporary kingdom. Peter did not write about this time span. The book of Revelation has something about it, but John gave it less space than he did the new heavens and new earth. He gave the worship of Jesus more space than he did the millennium. Out of the 260 chapters in the New Testament, only part of one is about the millennium. This shows its relative importance.

The millennium *is* part of Scripture, and we should study it, just as we do any other chapter in Scripture. But we do not make the interpretation of Revelation 20 an article of faith. We have more important things to preach, and we have better news to preach. We preach that through Jesus Christ, we can live with God not just in this age, not just for 1,000 years, but forever and ever in joy and peace and prosperity that never ends.

Perspective on the Millennium

1. Christians have had, and now have, various beliefs about the millennium. Proponents of each theory believe that the Bible supports their view.
2. Proponents of each view agree that Christ will return and that there will be a judgment. For the faithful, there will be an eternity of perfection and glory with God.
3. The eternal age is much more glorious than the millennial age, no matter how the millennium is understood. At best, the millennium is second-best.
4. When Jesus Christ returns, everyone will rejoice. Premillennialists will

rejoice even if a millennial reign is *not* set up. Amillennialists will rejoice even if one *is*. Postmillennialism will rejoice even if a golden age did *not* precede his return. No one will be disappointed, and everyone will have better things to do than to gloat about getting the chronological details right.

5. Christians who have an equally high view of the authority of Scripture may nevertheless have different opinions about the millennium. Christians who hold one view about the millennium should acknowledge that other Christians sincerely believe that the Bible teaches something else.
6. Millennialism is not a doctrinal point on which we *must* seek conformity. Christian authenticity does not depend, for example, on the belief that Christ will set up a temporary kingdom after he returns. We should not condemn or ridicule people who hold different views.
7. People can be saved without any particular belief about the millennium. The gospel is about how to *enter* the kingdom, not the chronological or physical details of particular phases of that kingdom. Since the New Testament books do not emphasize the nature of the millennium, we conclude that it is not a central plank in the church's message. Millennial positions should not dominate our messages. Rather, we should focus on the bigger picture that we all hold in common. See points 2 and 3.
8. In any study of the millennium, one should be aware of how others view the scriptures and how they come to differing conclusions. The following books may help:
 - Darrell Bock, editor. *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*. Zondervan, 1999.
 - Robert Clouse, editor. *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four*

Views. InterVarsity, 1977.

- Millard Erickson. *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium*. Second edition, Baker, 1999.
- Stanley Grenz. *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*. InterVarsity, 1992.

	premillennialism	amillennialism	postmillennialism
Old Testament prophecies	tendency toward literal interpretation	mostly figurative, based on NT use of OT prophecies such as Luke 3:3-6; Acts 2:16-21; 15:15-18	
return of Christ	before the millennium	yes — after the millennium	
1 Cor. 15:22-24	“Then” of verse 24 indicates a time delay, as it does in verse 23	“Then” does not need to indicate a time delay, and that would not be supported by what Paul wrote elsewhere	<i>All</i> enemies will have been subdued when Christ returns; the gospel will be successful worldwide
Rev. 20	Follows Rev. 19	Takes us back in time	
Rev. 20:1-3	Satan will be bound after Christ returns, sealed away completely	Satan was bound at Christ’s first coming, is now unable to stop the gospel. We are already in the millennium.	Satan will be bound 1,000 years or a long time before Christ’s return; he may already be considered bound
Rev. 20:4-6	saints will be immortal, reigning with Christ over mortals on earth	<u>the</u> saints “live again” in heaven — the first resurrection is not like the second, just as the first death is not like the second. Some see “live again” as a reference to regeneration in this age.	

resurrection(s) and judgment(s)	two or three	one	
advocates	Justin, Irenaeus, Darby and dispensationalists, Ladd, Erickson, Grudem, et al.	Augustine, Luther, Calvin, most mainline churches	A.H. Strong, G. Bahnsen, K. Gentry, some Calvinists
scriptures emphasized	OT prophecies; Rom. 11:26; 1 Cor. 15; Rev. 2:26-27; 20:1-10	Matt. 12:28-29; 19:28; John 5:28-29; 2 Th. 1:6-10; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; Jude 6	Isaiah 55:11; Matt. 13:31-33; 28:18-20; John 12:31-32

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Chapters 3 and 4 (“What About...”) were written by Paul Kroll, formerly an employee of Grace Communion International. He is the author of a series of e-book commentaries on the book of Acts, commentaries on the book of Revelation, and numerous articles on the gci.org website.

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Print:

Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews. (print only)

Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing (available in print and as an e-book)

E-books (available in the same place as you obtained this e-book):

Discipleship 101: Basic Christian Teachings

Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture

The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ

What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?

What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?

What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?

What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?

What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?

The Bible: A Guided Tour (co-author)

Exploring the Word of God: Acts of the Apostles (co-author of volumes 1 and 4)

Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Galatians

The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women (co-author)

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Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshiping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

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