

Eschatology: Revelation 20-22

Outline of Revelation

1. The Vision of Jesus (Revelation 1)
2. Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)
3. Jesus Takes the Scroll (Revelation 4-5)
4. Seven Seals (Revelation 6:1-8:5) – expansion and persecution
5. Seven Trumpets (Revelation 8:6-11:19) – warning judgments
6. The Times of the Trumpets (Revelation 12-14)
7. Seven Bowls (Revelation 15-16) – final judgments
8. The Times of the Bowls (Revelation 17-19)

The Millennium

The defining feature of Revelation 20 is the “thousand years,” mentioned six times in the chapter (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). Theologians have labeled this thousand year period as the “Millennium” (*mille* = 1000; *anne* = year).

The church has had difficulty assimilating the Millennium as described in Revelation 20 with what the rest of Scripture says about eschatology. Historically, most Reformed churches have concluded that the Millennium is roughly equivalent to the church age. The Millennium starts with the first coming of Christ and ends with the second coming of Christ. Thus, the Millennium spans the gap between the two comings of Jesus Christ.

The Length of the Millennium

This means that the Millennium is now almost two thousand years long (and counting). Some have been troubled by this, expecting the Millennium to be exactly one thousand years long. While this is certainly a plausible expectation, Scripture often uses large numbers in a generic or symbolic sense.

Revelation 5:11

The word for “ten thousand” is *myriad*. A *myriad* can refer to the exact quantity of ten thousand, but it is also used to refer to an inexact large number, so much so that lexicons include “countless thousands” as a frequent translation.

The word for “thousand” is *chilias*, from which we get kilo, as in a kilogram. Likewise, the word *chilias* can refer to exactly one thousand, but it is also used to refer to an inexact large number. We see this use of “a thousand” in the Scriptures.

Psalms 50:10

God is not limiting his possession of cattle to exactly one thousand hills, but using a thousand in a generically large sense. God owns the cattle on every hill, which would actually be a much larger number than one thousand hills, probably in the millions.

Psalms 84:10

David is not making an mathematical equation to say that one day with God is better than exactly one thousand days without God. David is saying that one day with God is better than any number of days without God.

Psalms 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8

When Peter alludes to Psalm 90, he is not employing a precise, algebraic formula. He is simply illustrating that God is not bounded by time.

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Summary

We ought to bear these examples in mind when we come to Revelation 20, because John is not writing about a period of "one" thousand years. The word "one" is not in the Greek text. John writes about "a" thousand years. Such intentional imprecision indicates that this "thousand years" is probably a generically large number, just like "the cattle on a thousand hills" or "a thousand days outside."

This squares with the rest of the Scriptures. If the Millennium was exactly one thousand years long, then we could know exactly when it was coming to an end. On the other hand, if the Millennium is a generically large length of time, then we do not know exactly when it ends. This is true of the second coming of Christ. We do not know when Christ will return, which is how we are supposed to live.

Revelation 20

Revelation 20:1-3

This is the binding of Satan. Notice that all of the language here is metaphorical. Satan is a spirit-being without a physical body. Chains, pits, seals, and keys would have no effect on Satan. These are metaphorical descriptions of how God limits Satan during the church age. He is prevented from "deceiving the nations," which is precisely what is described in the book of Acts. The gospel spreads to the nations, the Gentiles.

Thus, the Millennium begins with the binding of Satan, which was accomplished in the first coming of Christ in his death and resurrection. During the church age, Satan is still active, but he is prevented by God from deceiving the nations as a whole.

Revelation 20:4-6

Those who were martyred reign in heaven with Christ during the church age. Although unmentioned here, all Christians participate in this heavenly reign upon their death (cf. 14:13). The "first death" refers to the fall and the impact of original sin. The "second death" is the punishment of sin (cf. 20:14). The "first resurrection" is salvation, the new birth. The second resurrection would be the final resurrection of our bodies.

Revelation 20:7-10

Between the end of the Millennium and return of Christ, Satan will be released and allowed to deceive the nations one last time. God will crush this rebellion once and for all. No time frame is given for how long this rebellion lasts.

Revelation 20:11-15

This is the final resurrection and the final judgment. The wicked are cast into the lake of fire.

Revelation 21

Revelation 21:1

The first heaven and the first earth is the old covenant, the old creation. When Christ came, he ushered in a new heaven and a new earth, which is the church. In the church age, there is no more sea, that is, no more Gentiles. The Jew/Gentile distinction of the old covenant has been destroyed by Christ. Remember that the sea was the temporary boundary between heaven and earth set up on the second day of creation (cf. Gen 1:6-8)

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Revelation 21:2

John sees the New Jerusalem descending from heaven. What is the New Jerusalem? Compare this language that John uses with that of Hebrews 12:22-23. The author of Hebrews emphatically describes the church as "Mount Zion," "the city of the living God," and "the heavenly Jerusalem." Thus, when John describes the "New Jerusalem" as a bride adorned for her husband, we should not hesitate to understand that the New Jerusalem is the church (cf. 20:9ff).

In history, the New Jerusalem is in the process of descending from heaven. The church spreads and the kingdom of God comes to earth. At the end of history, the New Jerusalem comes decisively when Christ unites heaven and earth.

Revelation 21:3-8

Believers will be comforted by God and given the water of life. Unbelievers are sent to the lake of fire, the second death.

Revelation 21:9-10

John sees the bride, the Lamb's wife, and she is described as "the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God."

Revelation 21:11-21

This is a metaphorical description of the beauty of the church at the second coming of Christ. Much of this parallels the temple-city that Ezekiel wrote about in Ezekiel 40-48.

Revelation 21:22-27

This seems to be a description of eternity. There is no need for the sun or moon because Christ will be our light. Only the saved nations and the undefiled are present. This description continues in the next chapter.

Revelation 22

Revelation 22:1-5

With the mention of the tree of life, this takes us back to creation and the garden. God's purposes for creation are finally fulfilled. And we shall reign forever and ever.

Revelation 22:6-7

We are reminded why the book of Revelation was written. The early church was facing persecution, and it was only going to get worse. These things were going to happen "shortly." Yet, Christ was also going to come "quickly." He gave the early church a picture of how he was going to deal with their enemies to encourage them to stand strong for the gospel. All the judgments that Revelation 6-19 describes came to pass. God vindicated his people and his Son in his judgment upon Jerusalem.

God also gave the church a picture of her glorious future. The beautiful language of Revelation 21-22 describes Christ building his church. When Christ returns, the bride will not have a spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but be holy and blameless. This is our future hope.