

A Thousand Years

Lane Casteix
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Introduction

Revelation 20:1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.

² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a **thousand years**, ³ and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the **thousand years** were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

⁴ Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a **thousand years**. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the **thousand years** were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a **thousand years**. ⁷ And when the **thousand years** are ended, Satan will be released from his prison (*emphasis mine*)

The term “thousand years” appears in these seven verses six times. I have never considered before that this might not mean a literal thousand-year period. My understanding hasn't changed; I still believe the term should be taken literally. However, not everyone agrees with that view, which leads to confusion about the meaning of a “thousand years,” and this confusion is just the “tip of the iceberg” of major differences in Christian theology and eschatology among various denominations.

I was aware of this, but I never truly appreciated how significant and deep these differences are. This new understanding came from this series of “difficult passages” in the Bible that are often misinterpreted. Before starting the series, I asked my good friend and retired pastor, Dave

McPherson, to suggest some passages for the study. One that made his list was the one above, especially the meaning of the term “thousand years.” I had never considered that term as very controversial. As Barry Haindel says, “The best way to learn the Bible is to teach it.” He's right. Over the past few weeks, I have been back in the “classroom” at Holy Spirit Seminary. Now, you all get to join me for the final exam.

The question arises because there are two main theological perspectives regarding the concept of a “thousand years.” One side believes the “thousand years” should be interpreted literally, while the other sees it as figurative language representing an “indefinite period of time.” Dispensationalists firmly support the literal interpretation of the “thousand years.” Those who favor figurative language are mostly members of the Reformed Church. This group includes Presbyterians, some Baptists, Anglicans/Episcopalians, the Reformed Church in America, some Lutherans, and Congregationalists, along with a few denominations primarily located in Europe. All of them generally adhere to core Reformed doctrines, specifically Calvinism, covenant theology, and replacement theology, which asserts that the Church has taken the place of Israel in God's plan. I am a dispensationalist, but I will do my best to present both viewpoints fairly and accurately. You be the judge.

The meaning of a “thousand years” may seem trivial, and in some ways it is, but it is crucial to the difference between the two theological views. What makes it important is that how a thousand years is understood influences many other doctrines, or perhaps, how other doctrines influence the meaning of a thousand years. Let's examine what sets these two theologies apart.

The Reformed Position

Reformed theology, a major branch of Protestantism, emphasizes God's sovereignty, the authority of Scripture, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and a covenantal framework for understanding the Bible. Except for possibly the definition of “covenantal framework,” this closely aligns with Dispensationism.

The “Five Solas of the Reformation” are principles that serve as the core gospel focus of Reformed theology.

- ***Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone)***: The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and ultimate authority on all matters of faith and life, taking precedence over church tradition or human opinion.
- ***Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)***: Salvation is entirely a gift of God's undeserved grace, not earned by human merit or good works.
- ***Solus Christus (Christ Alone)***: Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity, and salvation is achieved solely through His atoning work.
- ***Sola Fide (Faith Alone)***: Justification (being declared righteous before God) is received solely through faith in Christ, not by any personal effort or good works.
- ***Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God Alone)***: The ultimate purpose of all of life, including salvation, is to give all honor and glory to God alone.

I don't think any dispensationalist would criticize that. However, part of their belief system is the Five Points of Calvinism, which are often summarized by the acronym **TULIP**. These doctrines specifically emphasize God's sovereign role in salvation.

- ***Total Depravity***: As a result of Adam's fall into sin, all human nature is completely corrupted and cannot be saved by its own innate strength or will.
- ***Unconditional Election***: From eternity past, God has sovereignly and unconditionally chosen specific individuals for salvation, a choice not based on any foreseen merit *or faith* in them.
- ***Limited Atonement***: Christ's atoning death on the Cross was specifically meant to secure the salvation of *only the elect*, for whom he effectively paid the price of their sins.
- ***Irresistible Grace***: When God extends His saving grace *to the elect* through the Holy Spirit, they cannot resist it and will inevitably come to faith in Christ.
- ***Perseverance of the Saints***: Those whom God has elected and genuinely saved will be eternally preserved by God's power and *will not fall away* from their faith.

It should be noted that the point about “Unconditional Election” means God is completely sovereign, chooses to save whom He will, and that man or woman has no influence in the process. They are so depraved that they contribute nothing, and God *must supply even the faith* required for salvation.

Christ's work of atonement on the Cross was "limited" and applies only to those whom God has predestined to salvation. God will not permit those elected and saved to ever fall away from their faith.

Reformed theology is fundamentally connected to **covenant theology**, which differs significantly from dispensationalism on important issues like the relationship between Israel and the Church and the interpretation of biblical prophecy.

Covenant Theology Positions:

- The Church is an organic continuation of Old Testament Israel. It is the *True Israel of God*, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles.
- Views OT promises, such as the Land Grant Covenant, as already fulfilled or will be fulfilled eschatologically through Christ and the Church.
- Views the New Covenant as the culmination of the Abrahamic Covenant and other biblical covenants applied to all believers in Christ.

Although both systems affirm core evangelical beliefs like biblical authority and salvation by grace through faith, their differing hermeneutics (methods of biblical interpretation) lead to different conclusions about eschatology (end-times beliefs) and the overall structure of God's redemptive plan.

Major Reformed denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), adhere to historic confessions like the Westminster Confession of Faith that explicitly teach covenant theology and reject dispensational views. Covenant theology and dispensationalism interpret Old Testament prophecies differently, mainly because of their contrasting views on the relationship between Israel and the Church and their methods of interpretation.

Many physical and national promises in the OT are understood in a topological or spiritual sense. For example, the promises of a physical land for Israel are seen as fulfilled in the ultimate, eternal inheritance of the *new heavens and new earth* for all believers (the Church). Similarly, the temple prophecies are fulfilled in Christ's body and the Church as God's dwelling place through the Spirit.

They believe that the Church consists of both believing Jews and Gentiles and is regarded as the "true Israel of God" as well as the continuation of the Old Testament people of God. Therefore, promises made to Israel are inherited by the Church through union with Christ.

As mentioned, Reformed theology teaches that the reference to a "thousand years" in Revelation 20 is symbolic, represents an unspecified period of time, and the number signifies completeness. It should not be taken literally as a thousand years. The Reformed view is that this "unspecified period" began with the Cross 2,000 years ago and will continue until the gospel is spread to the entire world. During this time, it is seen as the Kingdom of God, with Christ ruling in people's hearts. Interestingly, they also believe that as this period approaches its end, it will intensify into the events described in Revelation, ultimately culminating in the Battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming. In simpler terms, this undefined period between the First and Second Advents is the Kingdom that ends in the Tribulation.

Reformed theology completely rejects the doctrine of the rapture of the Church. For them, it simply does not exist, and they argue it cannot even be found in Scripture. Holding that position would mean that the Church would go through the Tribulation.

Reformed theology does not believe the Temple in Jerusalem will be literally rebuilt. They believe that passages about the rebuilt Temple refer to the believer's body becoming the Temple of God, where God dwells as the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the Millennium, some Reformed churches believe it does not appear in Scripture and therefore does not exist, a view called Amillennialism. Some do believe in a "catching away," as seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, but they see it as occurring at the end of this kingdom of undetermined length, just before the Second Coming. Those "caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" are seen as a kind of welcoming party for the return of the Lord, and they immediately turn around and return to earth with Him. This view is called Post-Millennialism. All judgments of the saved and the lost will happen after the Second Coming.

In chronological order, this is generally what they believe:

1. The Cross begins the Kingdom of an unknown length.
2. The Church, composed of believing Gentiles and Jews, takes the place of Israel in God's economy.
3. This Kingdom will last, however long it takes for the gospel to be spread to the entire world.
4. The Kingdom concludes with the Tribulation, which the Church must endure.
5. The Second Advent concludes this Kingdom/Tribulation period.
6. This is followed by the judgments of both the saved and the lost.
7. And that is followed by the creation of the new heavens and new earth.

The Dispensational Position

"Dispensation" is a theological term that describes different periods of divine revelation in human history. Augustine (354–430) once said, "Distinguish the ages, and the Scriptures harmonize." In other words, understanding dispensations helps make a lot of what seems contradictory in Scripture make sense and align.

Some argue that this is a new doctrine first introduced by Catholic priest Manuel de Lacunza y Diaz (1731-1801), which John Darby expanded on. C.I. Scofield further developed it with his *Scofield Study Bible*, followed by Louis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Seminary. However, as Augustine's quote indicates, this concept was known to him over a thousand years before any of them.

The idea of dispensations is that God has divided human history into distinct periods, often called "ages." These periods may vary in length, but what sets them apart is not their duration but how God interacts with humanity during each period.

The dispensations represent the gradual and interconnected revelation of God's interactions with humanity. Sometimes, this includes all of mankind, while at other times, it relates explicitly to certain groups, such as Israel or the Church.

These different dispensations do not signify separate ways of salvation. During each dispensation or age, humanity is reconciled to God in only one

way: by faith through God's grace and the work of Christ on the Cross. Before the Cross, people were saved by *anticipating* the Messiah's atoning sacrifice and by *trusting* the revelation given to them up to that point. After the Cross, people are saved by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom revelation and redemption are fulfilled. A simple way to understand this is: "Old Testament believers looked forward to the yet future Cross, while New Testament believers look back on the reality of the Cross."

While divine revelation unfolds gradually, the truths from earlier periods are not discarded but built upon. As a result, truth does not change but accumulates. Our knowledge and understanding of God's divine plan for humanity expand with each age as God reveals more details of His purpose. This process is called "progressive revelation," where new insights given in successive dispensations build on those provided in earlier ones. In each dispensation, God teaches humanity something important about Himself and our nature. Consequently, God's plan for humankind is revealed progressively through these dispensations.

You might dismiss the term "dispensations," but even a casual student of biblical chronology can notice these "eras" or "ages," along with the fact that God interacts differently with humanity during each period. The Greek word that gives us "dispensations" is *oikonomia*.

Ephesians 1:9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, ¹⁰ that in the **dispensation** of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. (emphasis added)

Ephesians 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— ² assuming that you have heard of the **stewardship** of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (emphasis added)

Oikonomia refers to managing a household or household affairs and is sometimes translated as “dispensation,” “stewardship,” “fullness of time,” or simply “time.” We get the English word “economy” from *oikonomia*. It's challenging to think about dispensations without also considering time. For example, the history of the United States is divided by administrations. We refer to the Biden administration or the Trump administration, showing how the government operated under those presidents. Dispensations can be compared to an administration, which is why the translation “stewardship” makes sense.

Each dispensation seeks to establish a specific rule of conduct or administration for humanity, yet humanity fails in every dispensation.

God often interacts differently with people throughout different periods in history. For example:

- Leviticus 11 designates certain foods as unclean, but in Mark 1:19, Jesus declares all foods clean.
- In Ezra 10:3, the Jews were told to separate from their foreign wives and children; however, in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, believers are advised against doing so.
- According to the law, only the high priest could enter the presence of God, called the Holy of Holies in the Temple (Hebrews 9:7). However, during the Church Age under grace, all believers now have access to the Most Holy Place (Hebrews 10:19-22).
- Animal sacrifices were necessary to symbolize the Cross during the Age of Israel; however, they are not needed in the Church Age.

These are not contradictions; instead, they show that God has different expectations in various dispensations. These examples clearly demonstrate a shift in dispensations and how God interacts with humanity.

The Dispensations

While not all pastor-teachers agree on the number of dispensations, most agree that there are seven. Since seven is significant in Scripture, symbolizing completeness or perfection, it is likely the correct number. The following is the most common list of dispensations.

1. The Age of Innocence (Gen. 1:28): From Adam's creation to his fall.

2. The Age of Conscience, or moral responsibility (Gen. 3:7), extends from the Fall to the end of the flood.
3. The Age of Human Government (Gen. 8:15-19) covers the period from the end of the Flood to the calling of Abram.
4. The Age of Promise, or the Age of the Patriarchs (Gen 12:1), extends from Abram's call to the giving of the Law.
5. The Age of Law, or the Age of Israel (Exodus 19:1), covers the period from the Giving of the Law to the Day of Pentecost in AD 30. It is then interrupted by the Dispensation of the Church, which ends with the Rapture of the Church. The Age of the Law then resumes with the Tribulation, culminating in the Second Advent.
6. The Church Age, also known as the Age of Grace (Acts 2:1), is inserted near the end of the Age of Israel as a distinct dispensation. It lasts from Pentecost in AD 30 until the Rapture, after which the Age of Israel resumes with the seven years of the Tribulation, Daniel's Seventieth Week.
7. Kingdom Age (Rev. 20:4) follows as the thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth, known as the Millennium by Dispensational Christians.

As Augustine said, "Distinguish the ages, and the scriptures harmonize." This makes dispensations a vital doctrine to understand, and therefore, Satan must strongly oppose it. The issue with dispensations is that they often challenge sacred theological beliefs, especially when they relate to eschatology (the study of end times events).

Any serious study of this doctrine must be based on the Bible, which raises the question: Can dispensations be supported by Scripture? I argue that it is firmly supported by Scripture.

Biblical Support for the Doctrine of Dispensations

2 Timothy 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

The Greek word "*orthotome*," meaning to cut straight, translates as "rightly dividing." Paul says the Word of Truth can be accurately divided. In the present tense, this suggests that it should be an ongoing action—

continually dividing correctly. This important passage refers to the doctrine of dispensations.

Matthew 12:32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in **this age** or in the **age to come**. (emphasis added)

The word translated as "age" is the Greek word *aeon*, which signifies a period of time—a literal span of time. This word is also translated as system, period, era, or, at times, eternity, and in this verse, it refers to two distinct dispensations. Since Jesus was speaking to Jews during the Age of Israel, the phrase "this age" refers to the Age of Israel (the fifth dispensation). The dispensation called the "age to come" relates to the forthcoming Church Age, the sixth dispensation.

Matthew 24:3 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the **age**?" (emphasis added)

Jesus has just revealed to his disciples that the Temple will be destroyed. They ask when this will happen, referring to it as "the end of the age." They understand that the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem is linked to His return and the establishment of the Kingdom (age). This event will occur at the end of their current age.

Dispensations should be seen as periods when God interacts with humanity according to specific rules for that time. We can call this an "administration." There are seven dispensations, and God uses them to gradually reveal His plan for humanity. The truths of each new dispensation build on those established in the previous one, with the ultimate aim of restoring what was lost at the Fall of Adam.

Characteristics and objectives of dispensations:

1. Every dispensation begins with a blessing for humanity that acts as a test.
2. Man will ultimately fail that test.

3. Every dispensation concludes with God's judgment for that failure.
4. Each dispensation is designed to teach man something about himself.
5. Each dispensation is designed to teach man something about God and His plan for mankind.

Reform Theology vs Dispensational Theology

Both agree that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and final authority for all matters of faith and life, overriding church tradition or human opinion. Both believe that the ultimate purpose of all life, including salvation, is to give all glory to God alone.

Both believe that justification (being declared righteous before God) is received solely through faith in Christ, not by any personal effort or good works. They differ in that Dispensationalists believe that mankind must provide the faith, while the Reformed view is that man is so utterly depraved that God must supply even the faith. That would make mankind mere automatons doing God's will. Where is the love and appreciation of God in that? And how is God glorified in that? God gave mankind free will, through which they can choose God over the alternative. In that, God is glorified.

Reformed churches generally adhere to covenant theology, which teaches that the Church replaces Israel in God's plan. Covenants made to Israel will ultimately be fulfilled in the Church. Since Christ's death on the Cross, the Church, composed of believing Gentiles and Jews, has taken Israel's place in God's plan.

Dispensationalists, on the other hand, believe that God has a plan for Israel and a separate plan for the Church, which *will be united* in the Millennium, something the Reformed churches reject. They assert that we are in the Kingdom now, and in one sense, they are right. Since Church Age believers have the indwelling Holy Spirit, He enables them to experience the *spiritual aspects of the promised Kingdom* in this Church Age. However, this is not the literal Kingdom when Christ will reign here on Earth (Revelation 20:6).

The Reformed view on the Millennium is that it is purely a creation of the Dispensationalists, and that the Kingdom with Christ reigning is already happening. Dispensationalists believe the Millennium will actually occur

and that it signifies Christ reigning in person from Jerusalem in a 1,000-year, Eden-like environment. It is difficult to interpret the term “thousand years” used six times in Revelation 20:1-7 and think it was not meant to be understood literally.

Consider the context. The Revelation 20 passage *follows* Revelation 19:11-21, which depicts the imagery of the Second Coming. Revelation 20 is *followed by* the judgment of Satan “when the thousand years had ended” (Revelation 20:7).

Also note that Revelation 20:1-3 mentions Satan being restrained for a thousand years. “The dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him” (Revelation 20:2-3). The Dispensationists interpret this literally, while Reformed theology asserts that it refers to Satan's restraint *in our current time* by the presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling believers. Yet we see wars, rumors of wars, famine, and evil everywhere. It doesn't seem to me that Satan is terribly inconvenienced right now, much less confined to the Abyss.

The Reformed theology relies on a passage in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 to support their view: “And you know what is **restraining** him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now **restrains** it will do so until he is out of the way.” This passage actually refers to the Church and the indwelling Holy Spirit acting as a limiting factor on the world being removed at the Rapture. The word translated as “restrain” is *katecho* and means to hold back or hinder. The word translated as “bound” used in Revelation 20:2 is different; it means to be bound as with chains or forbidden, a much stronger form of restraint.

The context after Revelation 20:1-7 speaks of the final judgment in verses 11-15, followed by the new heavens and the new earth. It is clear that the events are shown in chronological order, which contradicts Reformed dogma. It is hard to see the thousand years as anything but a literal thousand years, and the chronological context of this section of Revelation seems to support that.

The dispensational view from the Age of Israel onward, listed in chronological order, appears as follows:

1. The Age of Israel (Age of the Law) was *paused* because Israel rejected and murdered their King, thus rejecting the offered Kingdom. According to Daniel 9 and the Seventy Weeks prophecy, seven years remained of the Age of Israel.
2. The Church Age (Age of Grace) was inserted, and God offered the Kingdom to the Gentiles.
3. All believers in this age experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the potential to partake of all the spiritual blessings of the promised Kingdom through faith and obedience.
4. The Church Age will end with the Rapture of the Church as Christ comes to retrieve His bride to take us to His Father's house.
5. The Age of Israel will continue through its final seven years, which is the Tribulation, and judgment for Israel and the Christ-rejecting world.
6. The Tribulation ends with the Second Advent and Christ's return *with* His bride.
7. That is followed by the judgment of the nations and Old Testament saints.
8. Then comes the Millennium, during which Christ will physically reign on Earth for 1,000 years, as stated in Revelation 20.
9. The Millennium concludes with Satan's release from his imprisonment in the Abyss, followed by one final rebellion suppressed by God.
10. Then the White Throne judgment of all the lost.
11. Followed by the creation of the new heavens and new earth into eternity.

Conclusion

This lays out an understanding of the two theologies involved with this issue. Having established this theological base, in the next session, we will dive into the original question about the meaning of a thousand years.