

A Thousand Years, Part 2

In our last session, we established an understanding of the two main theological perspectives within the Protestant faith: Dispensationalism and Reformed theology. We noted that they share many beliefs, especially about salvation, but differ significantly on eschatology and the events following the Cross.

The primary focus of this study is the interpretation of a thousand years in Revelation 20. The answer is that it refers to a period we call the Millennium, which the Reformed churches flatly reject. We will now attempt to support that position with Scripture and extensive historical evidence.

Some History

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 text explicitly repeats a “**thousand years**” six times—so the term must be central to this vision given to John. A thousand is *mille* in Latin, from which we get the term “Millennium.” In Greek, the word translated as

“thousand” is *chilias*, from which we get “chiliasm,” the belief in a literal, future, one-thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth.

The Big Question: Should a thousand years in this passage be understood literally or symbolically?

Literal View

The Literal View holds that there will be a real, future thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth. Because it posits that Christ returns *before* this period begins, this view is also called “Premillennialism.” The “thousand years” (or Millennium) is a literal period of time following Christ’s Second Coming, during which He physically rules on Earth from Jerusalem. As we discussed in our last session, during this time, Satan is bound with chains and thrown into the Abyss, a compartment of the Underworld also known as Hades. As a result, the world will experience peace, righteousness, and restoration before the final judgment that ends the Millennium.

The primary support is the repeated phrase “thousand years,” along with Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah reigning on Earth, as seen in Isaiah 2, 11, and Zechariah 14. This perspective interprets Revelation 20 as describing a literal, future golden age *that will occur after* Christ's return at the end of the Tribulation.

Symbolic View

The symbolic view considers the present Church Age to be the thousand years of Revelation 20 and is also known as amillennialism, which means there is no literal Millennium. In this view, the “thousand years” represents the current era between Christ’s first Advent and His Second Coming. The number 1,000 symbolizes completeness or fullness, not a literal count of years. Second Peter 3:8, “But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day,” is cited to support that “thousand years” should not be understood literally. Christ reigns spiritually now from Heaven, and Satan is “bound” in the sense that he cannot stop the spread of the gospel. The “thousand years” is simply symbolic of an unspecified period of time.

Additional support for this position is the argument that Revelation uses numbers symbolically throughout, and John’s language of “binding Satan” (v.2) parallels Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 12:29, “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong

man? And then he will plunder his house.” Supposedly, Satan is the “strong man” whose “goods” are plundered by the spreading Gospel, and the “house” is this world.

Within this, we have a subgroup holding a postmillennial view that believes there will be a period of gospel prosperity *before* Christ returns as judge at the end, hence the term “postmillennialism.” Through the spread of the gospel, the world becomes increasingly Christianized, and Satan’s binding reflects the growing triumph of truth and righteousness in history.

Then we have the idealist view that the “thousand years” symbolizes Christ and His followers’ complete reign over evil forces throughout history. It is not linked to a specific timeline but reflects the certainty of Christ’s ultimate victory.

Early Church Understanding of a Thousand Years

The earliest church (1st–2nd century) understood the thousand years as literal and called it “chiliasm,” a term derived from the Greek word *chilias*, meaning “thousand.” Chiliasm is the belief in a literal, future, one-thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth called the Millennium, which begins after His second coming at the end of the Tribulation. It is mostly based on a literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1-7. Most of the earliest Christian teachers took the thousand years literally, expecting a real, future thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth after His return.

Papias (c. AD 60–130)

- A disciple of John’s disciple, Irenaeus says Papias learned from people who heard the Apostle John.
- Believed in a literal 1,000-year kingdom on Earth where believers would experience peace and abundance.
- Quoted by Eusebius (*Church History* 3.39.12) as teaching that “there will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up visibly on this earth.”

Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–165)

- In *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 80, Justin wrote: “I and many others are of this opinion, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged.”

- He viewed this as a literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah 65 and Ezekiel 37–48.
- However, he acknowledged that some Christians did not share this view, demonstrating diversity even in the 2nd century.

Irenaeus (c. AD 130–200)

- An ardent supporter of a literal millennial kingdom.
- In *Against Heresies, Book 5*, Chapters 32–36, he described the saints reigning during a restored creation for 1,000 years, citing Revelation 20 directly.
- He saw this as the last stage before the eternal kingdom—the “sabbath rest” for creation.

During the 3rd century, a shift toward symbolic interpretation happened as Christianity spread in the Greco-Roman world, and some thinkers grew less comfortable with the idea of a physical, earthly kingdom.

Origen (c. AD 184–253)

- A pioneer in allegorical interpretation.
- Rejected a literal 1,000-year earthly reign as too materialistic.
- Interpreted the millennium spiritually, as the reign of the soul with Christ in Heaven.
- His influence started shifting the church away from literal chiliasm.

Dionysius of Alexandria (c. AD 190–265)

- Criticized the literal interpretation of Revelation 20.
- Claimed the book should be understood symbolically, not chronologically.
- Helped suppress chiliastic teachings in the Alexandrian church.

With Augustine and the 4th–5th Century Church came the rise of amillennialism.

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430)

- Originally believed in a literal millennium, but later reversed his position.
- In *The City of God, Book 20*, he taught that:
 - The “thousand years” equals the current Church Age, which is the period between Christ’s first and Second Coming.

- The “binding of Satan” is the limitation of his power to hinder the spread of the gospel.
- Augustine’s interpretation remained the dominant view of the Western Church for more than a thousand years and laid the groundwork for amillennialism.

The Medieval Church almost universally adhered to Augustine’s amillennial view. Then came the Reformation, and most reformers, including Luther and Calvin, also maintained Augustine’s amillennialism.

In the modern era (19th century), literal premillennialism was revived by interpreters such as John Darby, Dwight Moody, and C.I. Scofield.

Today, both literal (premillennial) and symbolic (amillennial/postmillennial) interpretations are common among denominations, with amillennialism preferred by Reformed churches and premillennialism favored by dispensational churches.

Jewish Expectations of the Kingdom

This is where the story of the Millennium truly begins. To understand why the earliest Christians, such as Irenaeus and Papias, expected a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth, it is necessary to examine how Jewish messianic hopes before Jesus influenced their worldview.

The Jews held the hope of a Messianic Kingdom on Earth. They believed the Messiah would create a powerful kingdom with global respect and authority, including, of course, driving the Romans out of Israel. By the time of Jesus, the main belief was that the Messiah would defeat Israel’s enemies, restore the Davidic kingdom, rule from Jerusalem, and bring peace, righteousness, and abundance to the world.

This idea came from Old Testament prophecies like:

- **Isaiah 2:2–4** – Nations streaming to Jerusalem; swords turned into plowshares.
- **Isaiah 11:1–10** – The “Branch” of Jesse ruling with justice; harmony in nature.
- **Ezekiel 37–48** – Reunified Israel, rebuilt Temple, and God’s presence dwelling there.

- **Zechariah 14:9, 16** – The LORD reigning over all the earth from Jerusalem.

For the Jews, the Messiah's reign was envisioned as a tangible, earthly kingdom rather than an abstract spiritual authority.

Intertestamental & Second Temple Writings

Between the Old and New Testaments (400 BC–AD 100), Jewish writings expanded on this hope. The Book of Enoch (1 Enoch 91–105 not canonical) speaks of ten “weeks” of history, ending in an **age of righteousness** before the final judgment. It describes a temporary, blessed kingdom of the righteous on earth.

2 Baruch 29–30 (not canonical) teaches that after the Messiah appears, there will be a **period of peace and abundance** on earth before entering the eternal state.

4 Ezra 7:28–31 (not canonical) predicts that the Messiah will reign for **400 years**, after which all humanity will die and the final resurrection will occur. Different duration, but the same *pattern*—**a finite golden age before eternity**.

These texts show that many Jews expected two stages:

1. A messianic kingdom on earth, followed by
2. The final, eternal kingdom of God.

Jesus' teaching and the apostles' expectation supported this literal view. Jesus announced, “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). This stirred Jewish listeners who expected a physical reign. The disciples asked after His resurrection: “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). This showed that they still anticipated a literal, earthly restoration. Jesus didn't deny the kingdom; He simply said the timing was in the Father's hands (Acts 1:7).

Early Christians believed that **the kingdom was already inaugurated spiritually** but would be **fully realized physically later**, a pattern that naturally led to millennial expectations.

How This Shaped Early Christian “Chiliasm”

Writers such as Papias and Irenaeus interpret Revelation 20 from a Jewish perspective. They viewed the “thousand years” as the promised earthly Messianic age, with Christ, the true Son of David, ruling from Jerusalem. The saints (resurrected believers) would share in His reign before the final judgment.

Irenaeus even connected it to the “seventh day” rest pattern: Six thousand years of world history followed by one thousand years of rest (the Millennium), then eternity. This “sabbath of Creation” concept comes from rabbinic traditions that see human history as a 7,000-year cycle. (More on this later.)

As Christianity spread into the Gentile world, it became less connected to Jewish roots. The idea of a national, earthly kingdom in Jerusalem appeared too “Jewish” or material. Thinkers like Origen and Augustine spiritualized the kingdom as the Church with a heavenly reign by Christ. However, the earliest Christian millennialism accurately reflected Jewish messianic eschatology.

So, the “thousand years” in Revelation 20 directly draws from Jewish apocalyptic thought—the idea that God’s Messiah would establish a tangible, righteous rule on Earth before the final judgment. The early Church saw Jesus as the Messiah, the risen King.

Already / Not Yet

The concept of two stages of the Kingdom—one spiritual and present now through the Church, and one physical and future after Christ’s return—appears *throughout the New Testament*, not just in Revelation. Let’s examine the main passages and how they illustrate this “already / not yet” pattern of the Kingdom.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; ²¹ because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²² For we

know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. ²³ Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

Paul says that believers already possess the Spirit (v. 23), but full redemption, including the resurrection body, remains in the future. This indicates two phases: the current phase is spiritual salvation and inner renewal, while the future phase involves the physical restoration of creation itself (v. 21). The coming renewal aligns with the earthly kingdom, which Revelation 20 depicts as the “millennial” stage before the eternal new creation shown in Revelation 21–22.

1 Corinthians 15:20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. ²³ But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. ²⁵ For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. ²⁶ The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “He has put all things under His feet.” But when He says “all things are put under Him,” it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. ²⁸ Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

There’s a sequence: First, Christ reigns (v.25 “He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet”). Then, after His reign, He hands the kingdom over to the Father. This aligns with Revelation 20: a period of Christ’s reign (the millennium). That is followed by the final judgment and the eternal state.

Whether taken literally or symbolically, Paul affirms a transitional reign between Christ’s resurrection victory and the final eternal order.

The Regeneration (“*Palingenesia*”)

Matthew 19:28 So Jesus said to them, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

This indicates that Jesus promises a future “regeneration” (Greek: *palingenesia*, meaning a new beginning). It refers to the *renewal of the world itself*, not just spiritual new birth. The disciples are told they’ll rule with Christ, which parallels Revelation 20:4 (“they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years”). Once again: present calling, future rulership.

“Times of Refreshing” and “Restoration of All Things”

Acts 3:19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, ²⁰ and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.

Here, Peter states that Jesus will remain in Heaven until the time of universal restoration (*apokatastasis*). That “restoration” refers to the same future, earthly renewal of creation that prophets like Isaiah described. This emphasizes that the kingdom is partly delayed. Its fullness arrives when Christ returns.

The Parable of the Nobleman

Luke 19:11 Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. ¹² Therefore He said: “A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. ¹³ So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, ‘Do business till I come.’ ¹⁴ But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We will not have this man to reign over us.’

¹⁵ “And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. ¹⁶ Then came the first, saying, ‘Master, your mina has

earned ten minas.’ ¹⁷ And he said to him, ‘Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.’

¹⁸ And the second came, saying, ‘Master, your mina has earned five minas.’ ¹⁹ Likewise he said to him, ‘You also be over five cities.’

²⁰ “Then another came, saying, ‘Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. ²¹ For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.’ ²² And he said to him, ‘Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow. ²³ Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that at my coming I might have collected it with interest?’

²⁴ “And he said to those who stood by, ‘Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas.’ ²⁵ (But they said to him, ‘Master, he has ten minas.’) ²⁶ ‘For I say to you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. ²⁷ But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me.’ ”

This passage shows that the Kingdom is *not* fully established while the nobleman is away, symbolizing Jesus’ ascension. Only after his return does he take authority and reward his servants. This illustrates the same pattern: Now, Christ is away, ruling from Heaven. Then, He comes back to reign openly and reward His followers.

“They Shall Reign on the Earth”

Revelation 5:9 And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰ And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth.”

Believers are *already* made kings and priests through redemption; however, their reign on earth is still in the future, anticipating Christ’s return and the establishment of His earthly kingdom.

The New Testament consistently teaches that the Kingdom is already here, in spiritual power, in the hearts and lives of believers. Its physical, visible manifestation awaits Christ’s return.

This “already / not yet” tension explains why early Jewish Christians naturally viewed Revelation 20’s “thousand years” as the bridge between the present age and the eternal new creation, the time when the Messiah finally rules over a restored Earth.

The Pattern of the Creation Week

Genesis tells us that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day (Sabbath). Early Jews and Christians alike interpreted this not only literally but also typologically. Just as God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, history will run for 6,000 years and then enter a 1,000-year “Sabbath” rest, the Millennial Kingdom.

The key texts that inspired this pattern:

- **Psalms 90:4** — “A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday.”
- **2 Peter 3:8** — “With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”

They combined these with the seven-day creation cycle to form what became known as the “Millennial Week of History.”

The *Epistle of Barnabas* (Late 1st – Early 2nd Century, not canonical) is the earliest explicitly Christian work to interpret Revelation 20 within that framework.

“Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, ‘He finished in six days.’” This implies that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him as a thousand years. And He Himself testifies, saying, “Behold, today will be as a thousand years.” Therefore, children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. And He rested on the seventh day. This means: when His Son shall come and destroy the time of the lawless one, and judge the ungodly, and change the sun and the moon and the stars, then He shall truly rest on the seventh day.”

— *Epistle of Barnabas* 15:3–5

Meaning

- Six “days” = 6,000 years of human history.
- Seventh “day” = 1,000-year reign of Christ (the “Sabbath rest”).

- After that comes the *eternal eighth day* — the new creation.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202 AD) *Against Heresies, Book 5*, offers the most straightforward explanation of this “7,000-year plan.” He writes:

“For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded... For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end in the sixth thousand year. And the Sabbath is the seventh day, in which God rested from all His works... This is an indication of the future kingdom of the saints, when they shall reign with Christ.”

— *Against Heresies* 5.28.

“Then shall the righteous bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food... and all creation shall be fruitful and blessed.”

— *Against Heresies* 5.33.3

Meaning:

- Human history spans 6,000 years of work and sin.
- The 7th millennium equals the “Sabbath rest” — the Millennial Kingdom on Earth.
- After the Millennium, there is the eternal eighth day — the new heaven and new earth.

These writers viewed the Millennium as the Sabbath of history, not merely a random number, but a divinely ordained culmination of God’s historical plan. When Augustine (4th–5th century) reinterpreted the “Millennium” spiritually, this 6,000 + 1,000 pattern was mostly abandoned. However, some medieval and later interpreters kept the “sabbath of history” symbolism, seeing it as a pattern of rest after labor, both for humanity and the soul.

Summary Thought

The early Church connected Genesis, the Psalms, Peter’s epistles, and Jewish apocalyptic thought into a single grand timeline of redemption, viewing Revelation 20’s “thousand years” as the Sabbath rest of history.

- Six millennia of labor

- One millennium of rest
- Eternity beyond time.

Conclusion

Is the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 literal, as the dispensationalists believe, or is it, as the reformers believe, merely symbolic of a period of undetermined length that we are currently experiencing, and we are even in its later Tribulation stage?

You be the judge, but I agree with dispensational and historic premillennial scholars such as C.I. Scofield, John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, Charles Ryrie, Louis Sperry Chafer, and Bob Thieme who say the “thousand years” in Revelation 20 refers to a literal, future reign of Christ on Earth, with the focus on the restoration of creation and the vindication of the saints before the eternal state. I believe the thousand years refers to the Millennium, which is both literal and future, and the Reformers are wrong.