

FGBC: The Rider and the City: Millennium Mystery

Revelation 20:1-10

April 5, 2020

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If you know me you know I grew up in a Christian family. So basically, I've spent my life in church. When I was 10 I had a dream that I died and went to heaven and was horrified to find out I had to spend eternity in church wearing a nit wool sweater and sitting in some back row reserved for parents with kids, which meant I was so far from the front I couldn't even see what was going on. At least I got an aisle seat.

It's weird growing up in church. And it's weird what growing up in church can mean for your faith. So even though I knew all the Bible stories, and certainly loved Jesus and called myself a Christian, it wasn't until the year after high school that my faith really came alive. Before this it was culture for me.

But the year before going to university, I did a DTS – discipleship training school. And during this program I bumped into people who didn't just believe in Jesus, their belief was making a difference in their lives. They were all in. Their faith was affecting what they did with their time, how they used their sexuality, where they spent their money, and how much money they gave away. Jesus was affecting every aspect of their lives and I was blown away.

It was beautiful, and I wanted in. And so during this year I learned how to pray for the first time in my life. Before this I prayed every day, but it was the same: "Dear Jesus, thank you for the food. Please bless it to my body's use. In Jesus' name amen."

And now that I think about it I'm not even sure what that prayer means. Is blessed food healthier? Does this prayer work if I eat nothing but Doritos and pizza? I'm not sure.

But at 18 things changed and I started talking to God and hearing Him speak back; feeling His direction; understanding scripture. And all this began lining up with stuff that was going on in my life. And it was amazing!

And then at 19 I decided to go to Bible school and seminary to become a pastor. But as I told people about this something strange happened. Instead of being happy for me, some of the people in the church community I was part of tried to talk me out of it.

They said things like "Don't go to seminary. It's like cemetery. It will kill your faith." And when I asked why they replied: "All people do at seminary is argue about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin and other stupid stuff like that. They spend too much time learning about the Bible and not enough time actually reading it or connecting with Jesus."

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I had never encountered this kind of thinking before and didn't understand what they were talking about. And so I went anyway.

And I learned some very interesting things. I learned, for example that Bible schools are full of intelligent people who are both passionate about Jesus and smart – in the scientific age we live in it was awesome to learn that! But I also learned that there are some people teaching and studying in environments like this who are doing it for the money and don't believe in Jesus at all – that was not so awesome to find out. I mean teaching theology for the money is a pretty sad career choice. But there are people like this. And they can get really excited about arguing theology while not caring about faith. And this can be very damaging to the faith of everyone around them.

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Why do I tell you all this? It's because today we come to a text that more people have argued over than just about any other text in scripture. And some of these arguments have resulted in Jesus followers not talking to other Jesus followers for the rest of their lives – I'm serious. And when this happens it is evidence that Christ's heart has been totally missed.

So to be honest I wish I could just skip the debate and get on to the important stuff – I've tried to do that through most of this series – however I can't think of a way to preach this text without addressing the debate. This means if you hate theology the next few minutes might be a bit painful. I'm sorry about that. Hang in there.

On the other hand, if you love debating theology, there may be a bit here for you. That said, don't email me all passionate about which side of the argument you come down on, or how wrong I am. Honestly I don't care what side of the argument you come down on. I love Jesus, and I think that's what you should do too. Friends, we don't get into heaven by figuring out all the mysteries of Revelation. People who win are sinners who need a Saviour and get forgiven at the foot of the cross. So get passionate about that – deal?

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Alright, today we are in Revelation 20 starting in verse 1. If you've got a Bible please open it up so you can follow along. Would you stand with me as we read? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Revelation 20:1-10]

What a text! Sometimes preaching right through a book of scripture, like we do here, can mean you end up in a place no one would choose to go on their own. This is one of those places for me. But if you skipped these sections you would miss some of the more beautiful pictures in scripture – we will end there today.

But for now we are following up last week's text and are finding out what happens at the end just before the big beginning. Are you with me?

Alright, one of the first things you do when you study scripture is look for key words and repeating phrases. And you can't read these verses without noticing the phrase "a thousand years." It pops up six times in these 10 verses, but this is the only place in scripture that mentions Jesus reigning for a millennium – a thousand years. So six times right here – it's obviously central to what this passage is about – but nowhere else in the Bible – that's strange.¹

It's strange because the vast majority of the rest of scripture doesn't work like this. So there is one message that runs clear as day through the entire Bible. It is in every book of the Bible, and there are pieces of it in essentially every paragraph of the Bible.

And the message is this: God made a beautiful world. And He made it because He wanted a relationship with people. God is an infinitely glorious being, and He wanted to increase that glory and the only way to do that was to create some people to share Himself with who could bring Him glory.

And so He created us in His image. People have the ability to connect with God. And for a while that was great until we decided – under the direction and temptation of Satan – that instead of increasing God's glory we wanted to increase our own – we didn't want Him to be the God of our lives and tell us what to do, we wanted to be our own gods.

If you think you are being creative by wanting to be the boss of your own life you have to know it's a classic human trick that's been around from the beginning.

Anyway, God has never allowed our rebellion to go unchecked. So in the beginning He kicked us out of His presence. But He still loved us and didn't want His plans for communion with us to be ruined so He promised that one day He would make a way for us to come back. And this way would come, not because we earned it, but through a family He would choose through no merit of their own.

Well, in classic human pride we set off to prove we wouldn't need His way. And so human history is all about building towers up to heaven and making names for ourselves. And all these stories all end badly because life without God is not what we were designed for. The Old Testament is full of failure after failure.

But then, at the right time, God brought His plan into fruition. Instead of humanity climbing up to God, God came down and lived among us. And He did this in the most unexpected way. He didn't come as a king, but as a servant. He didn't come as a warrior, but as a baby.

And then, by taking the hurt of the world upon Himself He took the punishment our sin deserved and paid the price each of us owes for our rebellion. And His payment was enough. God Himself paid the price enabling us to have the relationship with Him we were designed for in the beginning.

¹ Outline adapted from Darrell Johnson's "Discipleship on the Edge" (Vancouver, Regent College Publishing), 2004.

And then Jesus returned to heaven, but He didn't leave us. Instead He sent His Spirit to live inside us and empower us to live the life He wants us to live while we wait for His return. We still live in a broken world. And sin still tempts us. But if we give ourselves to Jesus, we don't have to be defeated by sin anymore. We can live holy lives of obedience and enjoy victory right now while we wait. This is the good news of the Bible.

And Jesus promised we won't have to wait long. He is coming back. But it turns out "long" is a bit of a relative word, and we don't know when it is going to happen. But the word is "soon." And when He does return He will right every wrong. He will judge the wicked, and we will be with Him forever. Amen?

That's the message of the Bible. And that message is found on every page and virtually every paragraph. And that is the message I preach here every weekend. I've only got one message because the Bible only has one message and it is crystal clear – God saves sinners through the blood of Jesus.

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That said, there are some things in scripture that aren't clear. And these are topics that aren't on every page, but just pop up in one or two places. And the fact is we aren't 100% sure how to read them. So for example the particulars of how creation happened are not known. We don't know whether Job and Jonah are historical accounts or not. We don't know for sure who wrote 2nd Peter. And when we come to our text today Jesus-loving theologians have proposed three different ways to read these verses. And these frameworks are called Pre-Millennialism, A-Millennialism and Post-Millennialism.

I'm going to try hard not to kill you here but let me unpack these ideas for you as briefly as possible because the fact is we don't know which framework is most accurate. But here we go:

Pre-Millennialism is the idea that Jesus comes back before – pre – the millennium. In this framework the millennium is exactly 1000 years – it's not a symbol or a sign, it's a statistic. So someday soon Jesus will return, the saints will be raptured, and Satan will be bound. Then for a thousand years Jesus will set up "the kingdom of saints" on earth where God's people will rule with Him. At the end of exactly 1000 years Satan will be released for a brief period and then thrown into "the lake of fire."

At this point the rest of humanity gets resurrected and brought before the throne of judgment. And here all the unrepentant get thrown into "the lake of fire." After this we get the new creation. And that's pre-millennialism in three paragraphs.

Now please don't email me and say "you left out this section" – I get it. Whole books have been written on this, both non-fiction and piles of poorly written fiction, along with a whole bunch of movies. I'm already in trouble, so I'm going to stop there.

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The second framework is called A-Millennialism. The main idea here is that the 1000 years is understood symbolically. So there is no literal 1000 year reign of Jesus, just like Jesus isn't literally a lamb with seven eyes and seven horns. The numbers in Revelation are symbols in this framework – hence the “a-millennial.” Adding “a” to the beginning of a word in Greek negates it – no millennium.

People who take this approach emphasize that throughout the rest of the New Testament there is only one future coming of Jesus. Nowhere else does God rapture the righteous away and return later to judge the wicked. Everywhere else it is just one event. Jesus returns, the sheep get put on this side, the goats on the other.²

So what's the 1000 years then? In this framework the millennium is the church age. Jesus started this 2000 years ago. This is when Satan was defeated and bound. And it will end when Jesus returns. But just before He does Satan will be released for one final evil onslaught. And then Jesus will come, evil will be vanquished, and the glorious new creation will begin. That's a-millennialism in three paragraphs.

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Finally, there is Post-Millennialism. Post-millennialists agree with A-millennialists that there is only one coming of Christ where the righteous are rewarded and the wicked judged. But they think this will occur after – or post – a 1000-year period (which may or may not be exactly 1000 years) – it's symbolic for them too.

For Post-Millennialists Jesus began reigning back at His first coming but they think both Pre-Millennialists and A-Millennialists underestimate the power of the gospel. Post-Millennialists believe that at some point people around the world are going to come to Christ on mass.

And this mass conversion will start the beginning of this 1000-year period. And it will begin when Jesus binds Satan in a new way. It's going to be a golden age. And at the end of this period Satan will be released for one last kick at the can. And then Jesus will return. That's Post-Millennialism in three paragraphs.

Now I know that's a pretty rough break down of these big ideas – really people have spent a ton of work unpacking each of them – but I hope that gives you a little understanding of how the three major frameworks of eschatology – or end times – work. Just nod your head at me so I can tell you are tracking. Good. How many of you nodded your head to show me you are tracking? That's great participation. Thank you. I really can't see you so I have no idea.

Here's what I want you to take away. All three of these frameworks were developed by serious Jesus loving students of scripture. All of these frameworks want to unpack scripture accurately and submit their lives to it. So when we choose between them we aren't choosing between conservative and liberal theology, nor are we choosing between people who believe in the inspiration of scripture and those who don't.

² See Matthew 25:31-46 for example

Unfortunately, since 1948 and the founding of the state of Israel, views on how Revelation unfolds have been used to draw lines in the sand. And the result has sadly been a lot of division within the church. Spoiler alert, it's not Jesus who wants division in the church, it's Satan. That's the first thing; all these views are backed by genuine disciples of Jesus, so let's not fight each other.

Here's another thing we can take away from this. Each of these frameworks sees something in Revelation that the others miss. None of the systems are watertight – there are problem verses that seem to contradict each one. Obviously if there weren't everyone would agree – but we don't. There is mystery here, and it's not going away.

And so I'd like to propose a fourth option which you could call Pan-Millennialism. Here's the idea: somehow in the end it's all going to pan out. Now I didn't invent this, but I like it.³ I don't know which of these frameworks is best or most faithful to the text. And honestly I don't think it matters. What does matter is where all these frameworks agree. And here's where I want to end.

First and foremost, all the frameworks agree Jesus is coming back. But one thing I really appreciate about Pre-Millennialists is their passion for Jesus' return. So much money and time and energy has been spent here and it's great. Christianity without the return of Christ is pointless and powerless. If Jesus isn't coming back, there is no hope. And to academically believe He is coming back without ever talking about it or thinking about it emasculates the message of the Bible.

Here's the temptation: we live in the scientific age where we know how lots of things work. And as a result lots of the superstitions people used to have about life are gone. We know people don't get sick because a witch cursed them. We know people who read the Bible are just as susceptible to Corona-virus as those who don't. In the olden days people used to have a "God-of-the-gaps" framework. If they couldn't understand what was happening then it was caused by the spiritual realm. And the result was that as science grew God got smaller.

And the temptation today is to fall into this old way of thinking – believing that God is a God of the gaps. And since we understand so much He plays a small role in our reality. And so certainly something huge like Him coming back doesn't really sound scientific, so we don't talk about it much.

But the fact is God has never been a God of the gaps. The windows John looks through in Revelation expose the reality behind the reality we see with our naked eyes. And the message is clearly that God's domain isn't relegated to what we don't understand. Instead God is involved in everything that is going on.

³ Darrell Johnson's friend Ralph Winter may have coined this. Johnson, pg 339

So right now as the world reels from this virus God is involved. Through it He is calling us to wake up and realize we aren't the masters of our fate. We aren't in control. And so we need to stop trusting in ourselves and start trusting Jesus. Everything is spiritual.

So the spiritual realm is very real, and very near in every aspect of life. And a huge part of this is the finish line. So keep your eyes on it, Jesus is coming back.

Second, we need to believe that the gospel changes things. One thing I love about the Post-Millennial framework is their commitment to radical discipleship right now. They aren't waiting for Jesus to come back in order for the gospel to start changing culture, they are invested in it today.

And this is bang on. From the very beginning of scripture right through to the end God calls His people to be a blessing to those around us. God tells Abraham he's going to be a blessing to the whole world. And that's our job. Our job is to look like Jesus right now. And Jesus came to save hopeless people and point them towards the abundant life that God designed us to live in the first place.

Friends, right now so many of your neighbours and family members are scared and hopeless. They don't know if they are going to be able to retire. They don't know if someone in their family is going to die. Life without God has always been terrible, but right now the façade that we are in control is crumbling and people are seeing this for themselves. So connect with those God has put in your life. Live radically. Share your toilet paper. And let them know that you aren't living for this life alone, you have hope for another. People are hungry for hope right now.

Finally, the message of scripture is that Jesus is king right now and He's got this. The A-Millennialists nail this. For them Jesus' good news, the gospel, is so clear in Mark 1 where it states that God's kingdom is breaking into this world right now.⁴

And this means the chaos we see around us isn't because Satan is ruling – he isn't. He's been thrown down. And yes he's thrashing. And yes his beasts are wrecking havoc. But the end has already been written. Jesus wins.

So friends, don't spend your passion arguing about the details of theology – that's a great way to be totally irrelevant. Instead spend your passion reveling in the message of scripture that is clear. Jesus loves you so much that even though you are a broken sinner who doesn't deserve anything good from Him, He came down and became one of us to take your place, to take your sin upon Himself and let you in on the abundant life that God has for you. It starts right now and lasts forever. And one day soon He's going to come back. So don't give up. Instead live your life for Jesus' glory. This is how to win.

⁴ Mark 1:14-15