

The Priests Who Reign

Revelation 20

November 25, 2001

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Happy Thanksgiving!

America is at war.
We're terrorized by terrorists,
Anthrax, small pox, nuclear weapons.
For the moment, Russia appears to be our friend.
But China is a Super Power — They have
the H-bomb, and they aren't far from Afghanistan.
Kings of the east from the other side of the Euphrates (Revelation 9),
Symbolized by the Dragon (Revelation 12).

On October 1, 1949, Mao Tse Tung declared the birth of the People's Republic of China. All missionaries were kicked out; churches were closed and burned; pastors were executed. The Communist Beast began to rule.

In his book The Late Great Planet Earth, in the chapter entitled "The Yellow Peril," Hal Lindsey writes that China has boasted of an army 200 million strong, the exact same number as that of Revelation 9:16.

In his book The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon Lindsey reveals that the western nations will battle the oriental peoples (led by China) in the planet's last great war — Armageddon, which will usher in the millennial reign of Christ.

Wars,
 rumors of war,
 terrorism,
Plagues,
 immorality,
 abortion,
Drugs,
 promiscuity,
 divorce . . .

On top of all that, the Church has lost its place in society: the courts and the schools, belittled in the media. We've lost power, authority, and control. We've become victims in a hostile world.
Victims!

And that's ironic, for God's plan was that we would rule the world from a paradise garden. For in the beginning God created man in His own image and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply .

.. and have dominion [rule] over every living thing that moves on the face of the earth.” That would *certainly* include *snakes*. But you know what happened — *deception*.

The punishment was death, futility, and snake bites—
dragon bites—bruised heels,
And we were banished from the Garden.

Now this world is hardly a garden. So *Happy Thanksgiving*. The world is going to Hell in a hand basket. “The time is at hand,” we live in the last days, so we need to be prepared for His coming. Instead of a feast, maybe we need to stockpile food and head for the hills. It’s time to get *out* of here! It’s time for the Rapture!

In youth group we used to hold “Rapture Practice Drills.” We would all jump as high as we could into the air. I’m being silly, but I earnestly believe that on the last day “we will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord, and so we shall always be with Him” (I Thessalonians 4:17).

This is our 30th sermon from the book of The Revelation, and a whole lot of things are coming together.

Revelation 20:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan [the snake], and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived [some translations say “they came to life,” but the Greek is simple — aorist active indicative: “they lived”] and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations [the Gentiles] which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea.

They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them.

Revelation 20 is probably the most controversial chapter in all of Scripture. So I have included a chart of four dominant millennial views from Christian History magazine. Remember that Millennium means 1,000 years.

In the upper left hand corner of the chart is the **Historic Premillennial** view. Several of the early church fathers believed that after Christ returned bodily He would reign for 1,000 years on earth, and then the final judgment would come.

In the upper right corner is a view labeled “**Amillennialism**.” Several other early church fathers taught that this *present age* is the Millennium, and Christ reigns on earth *now* through His Church. As Christ taught in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of Satan both grow in history until the end when Jesus returns, and the earth is reaped on the last day.

About 410 A.D. Augustine wrote The City of God and argued for Amillennialism. In 431 A.D. at the third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus, the early Church denounced the Pre-millennial view as superstitious and unbiblical. The Amillennial view was the dominant and official church view for 1,400 years. It was the view of Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and as always, the Roman Catholic Church.

In the nineteenth century **Postmillennialism** became the dominant view in America. It is the view that the 1,000-year reign of Christ happens in the future, but that it happens through the “ordinary means of grace.” Therefore, Christ’s bodily return is after the Millennium at the final judgment.

Postmillennialists believe a day will come when Christ, through the Church, will convert the nations and usher in a 1,000-year period of spiritual blessings and physical prosperity not yet experienced here on earth.

Postmillennialism gave rise to abolition, temperance, and the great missionary thrust of the 19th century. It was behind the Great Awakening and the second Great Awakening: the great American revivals. Both Charles Finney and the Puritan Jonathan Edwards were avid Postmillennialists. But over time much of Postmillennialism devolved into optimistic liberalism, the belief in utopia by human energy.

Well, none of those views are the popular view in America today. Some time in the mid-19th century in England, John Darby developed Dispensational Theology and added an “extraordinary innovation” to his Premillennial scheme: the heretofore unheard of Pretribulation Rapture.

Dispensationalism teaches that Christians are mysteriously “raptured” prior to a seven-year Tribulation. They argue that the Tribulation has to do with the conversion of ethnic Jews and that this is what most of Revelation is about. After the Tribulation Christ returns with His raptured Church. They set up an earthly government in Jerusalem and reign 1,000 years on earth, fulfilling Old Testament and Messianic prophecies. *After that* the other dead from throughout history are raised and are judged. Then the end comes: New Heaven and New Earth.

Traditionally there has also been a fifth view known as the “Igno-apothomillennial” view. It means roughly “I don’t know and I don’t care.” For most of my life that has been my staunch position.

Well, we’re preaching through The Revelation, so now I *have* to care. I’ve been reading like a wild banshee-boy, and I can’t even begin to explain everything I’ve learned. But now I have a view, and I have real problems with the popular view. I want to tell you what the problems are, because our view of the end changes how we live *now*.

I want to tell you, but I don’t want you to be offended or feel attacked. We’re all learning, and I could be *wrong*.

Very simply, these are some of my problems with the popular view:

1. The popular view is part of Dispensationalism, a scheme which says that certain gifts of the Spirit, like prophecy, are no longer for today.

While I’ve been preaching through The Revelation, many of you have even had visions of things in the book. It’s happening *now*. In Acts 2 Peter says these *are* the last days.

2. The popular view teaches that Israel and the Church are separate groups, that the Old Testament and most of Revelation is about the state of Israel not about *me*.

But I *am* Israel, a child of Abraham by faith, one of the chosen people. Old branches were broken off, and I was grafted in. Scripture is extremely clear on that. Read Romans.

I hope that the old branches are grafted back in again, but the Church is not a parenthesis in God’s plan for the worldly state of Israel. The Church is why the Lamb bleeds on the throne. She is why Christ died; she is His Bride, His temple, His body, His suffering presence in this world, redeeming the world.

3. The popular view doesn’t take Scripture literally. They *say* they do, but I think they take it empirically, fleshly, scientifically, worldly.

“Taking it literally” means taking it according to its literal form, how the author intended it. It’s painfully clear to me that The Revelation is not meant to be taken as a calendar. And the one thing the popular view takes as obvious is the one thing Scripture says is *not* obvious. II Peter 3:8: “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord a day is a thousand years and a thousand years is a day.” Who’s counting? God? Us? Are we traveling at the speed of light?

In our text John writes of those who live — “kings and priests” who reign with Christ 1,000 years. Then John stops his description of the 1,000 years and says, “Hey, this is the first resurrection”—as if those folks in Ephesus and Colossae and Asia Minor ought to know what that is.

In Ephesians Paul says, “We’ve been raised with Christ and seated in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6).

In Colossians Paul writes, “If you’ve been raised with Christ, seek the things above” (Colossians 3:1).

And if you’ve ever read the Gospel of John or his letters, you know he is Mr. Born Again . . . always talking about eternal life and how we’ve “passed from death to life” (I John 3:14).

In John 3 Jesus talks with Nicodemus and says, “Nicodemus, you must be born of the Spirit . . . you must be born again.” Nicodemus says, “You mean I have to enter again into my mother’s womb?” Jesus says, “Come on, Nicodemus. Just take a shot at abstract reasoning.” Actually Jesus says, “If I’ve told you earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things?”

In Revelation 20 John is now speaking of heavenly things, for Heaven has been opened. But we don’t believe it. We don’t *get* it. We don’t take it *seriously*. I think the modern Church is absolutely infected with “Nicodemitis”: spiritual blindness. So we pull out our calendars and start counting a thousand years in space and time. John stops and says, “This is the first resurrection.”

Have you not been raised with Christ?
Do you not have eternal life now?
You’re His body, the living Christ is in you,
And He’s not dead.

“May the eyes of our hearts be opened . . .” (Ephesians 2:14).

The popular view doesn’t take Scripture seriously, and . . .

4. The popular view takes this world *way* too seriously . . . when this world will be dissolved by fire and faith will remain.

It takes space and time and empirical evidence way too seriously and spiritual realities not seriously. It “walks by sight and not by faith.” So the kingdom comes with “signs to be observed,” and we’re always asking, “When does the kingdom come?” — just like the Pharisees did in Luke 17. And Jesus says, “The kingdom does not come with signs to be observed. The kingdom is in the midst of you.”

And Jesus said, “In this world you will have tribulation [don’t take it so seriously!], but be of good cheer, for I have conquered the world . . . I rule the world.”

The popular view says, “Well, Jesus won’t let us suffer tribulation.” It’s not that He conquers and rules the world through us *in* tribulation, but that He takes us *out* of the world — Rapture Practice!

I believe the idea of a Pretribulation Rapture is unbiblical. It sends an awful message to the world . . . not that Christ suffers *for* the world, but that He hightails it *out* of the world. We are the body of Christ. We “fill up the measure of His sufferings,” writes Paul . . . that must be in the world. “He overcomes the world *in us in* tribulation.” “Be of good cheer!”

I have Romanian friends who bear the scars of torture on their bodies. One friend held his dying wife in his arms, because she would not renounce her faith. Mozambican friends were persecuted and imprisoned for their faith, and I’m supposed to say, “Be of good cheer”? — “because God will rapture His faithful Church *before* the Tribulation”?

Americans taught that doctrine to the Church in China in the 1940’s. When the Communists took over and started torturing the Church, many Chinese Christians thought they had missed the Rapture. According to Brother Andrew many missionaries were not allowed back by the Church, for those Chinese Christians said, “You told us that before tribulation we’d be raptured. You’re liars.”

The cross is tribulation, and we’re crucified with Christ.

5. The popular view makes the cross small. It discounts what God has already done and is doing.

“*Now* is this world judged, *now* is the ruler of this world cast out, and I, when I am lifted up (said Jesus speaking of his death), I will draw all men to myself” (John 12:31).

On the cross Jesus bore our judgment, conquered the enemy, and conquered the world. And we are “more than conquerors through him who loves us” (Romans 8:37).

On the cross Jesus “disarmed the principalities and powers” (Colossians 2:15). He told us, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).

In Luke 10 He said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you.” — No more snake bites.

“If God is for us who would be against us” (Romans 8:31)? “For all things are yours . . . and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (I Corinthians 3:21). Revelation 1:5-6: “By loving us and washing us in his blood [that is, his cross], He [Jesus] has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

Gosh! If you really believed the cross and took Scripture *literally* and didn’t take this world so *seriously*, I think you’d almost figure the Millennium is *now*.

Technically, I suppose that puts me in the Amillennial camp. But “Amillennial” means “no Millennium,” and I believe in the Millennium. I believe the Millennial reign of Christ happens whenever we walk by faith. Whenever we walk by faith the kingdom of God is upon us. And eternity (“*kairos*”) invades each moment (“*chronos*”).

Of course, I believe all chronology will end. Jesus will return with fire . . . *as* fire consuming the earth and His adversaries. And there will be judgment at the last day (John 12). And He will raise us up on the last day (John 6). And it will be the *last day*, not 365,000 days *before* the last day.

Until then, I am to “occupy” . . . “occupy until He comes” (Luke 19). I’m to reign and rule.

I know what you’re thinking . . . “If I were king for a day, things would be different!” Well, you’re not to be king for a day but for eternity, and being a king is far more difficult than you think. Ask Abraham or Joseph or Moses or Saul or David. (Their stories are all about you.) Or ask King Jesus . . . Being a good king can hurt.

And we are child kings now. Child kings reign with a reagent. We reign with Christ. But we really do reign and rule. Rule over what?

1. We are to reign over **sin** in our own flesh (Romans 6:12). The world is enslaved to sin. We rule it through grace. We’re forgiven . . . no longer condemned. That means . . .
2. We rule over the Accuser, **Satan**. Satan is *bound* by the Gospel Word on your tongue. He is bound in Hell. Yet I suspect Hell is among us just as Heaven is among us. Satan’s only hope is to get you to believe lies, live in lies, and believe Hell.
He is unbound at the end to mislead the nations. (I imagine that’s outright Satanism . . . when he no longer needs the Beast and False Prophet.) But he is still bound by the Word that rides on your tongue.
3. Sin . . . Satan . . . We even rule over **creation**. “All things work for the good with them that love him.” Yeah, it can *hurt* a lot! But for you tribulation has been transformed from wrath into grace.

In trials God shapes you into the image of Christ the King.

In trials you exhibit the Gospel of Christ.

In trials Christ Himself communes with you in suffering.

Every moment you receive in gratitude by faith becomes an eternal moment.

Christ is with you, and you commune with Him—walk with Him. You walk with God, like in the Garden.

Your prayers rise before the throne as He speaks creation into existence. You rule the world by faith. Don’t let it rule you.

4. We rule over sin, over Satan, over creation and even over the **hearts** of men and women. We are priests; that is, we bring them to God. We are the body of Christ in this world, and when *His* body is broken and when *His* blood is shed . . . when *His* body (us) is crucified, when we suffer in love, He draws all men to Himself through us.

Who are the priests who reign on earth? They are persecuted pilgrim people who declare a feast of thanksgiving to God in the midst of tribulation. *Happy Thanksgiving!* Read about those Pilgrims some time.

“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (II Corinthians 2:14).

I may be wrong about the Millennium, but I am right about this: “You are a chosen race, a royal [“basileous” - kingly] priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” *Why?* “That you might declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Peter 2:9).

So I may be wrong about the Millennium, but the resurrected Jesus did appear to His victimized, seemingly powerless disciples and did say, “All authority [rule, reign] in heaven and on earth has been given unto me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations [They’re no longer bound by Satan] . . . and lo I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

You are kings and priests . . . that you would live and reign and declare the Word—the Rider on the white horse.

Satan’s only hope is to convince you it’s not true . . .

So you’ll get all depressed, fearful, and anxious;

So you’ll close your heart and mouth, keeping the Rider inside;

So you’ll stockpile food and hoard the feast and wring your hands as you wait for the Rapture and dream of the Millennium.

Satan’s only hope is to convince you you’re a *victim* when you’re really a victor. His only hope is to convince you the world rules you when, in fact, you rule the world.

In 1949 when Mao took over China, American Christians wrung their hands, and many thought, “That’s it. The Church is powerless in China.” It’s a good thing Chinese Christians didn’t believe that. It’s estimated that there were 750,000 Chinese Christians in 1949. China is now the second largest evangelical Christian community in the world with a conservative estimate of 35 million believers. I’ve read numbers as high as 100 million believers, which would make it the largest Christian community.

In the U.S. the Church is stagnant. In China, Africa, and South America it grows at an unprecedented rate. While Lindsey wrote The Late Great Planet Earth and we wrung our hands over the “Yellow Peril,” Pastor George Chen was shoveling human sewage in a Chinese prison camp. They thought putting him deep in the cesspool was the best punishment for a pastor.

But George Chen loved it there because he was left alone with Jesus, the King of kings. When he was released from prison after eighteen years, he found his churches had grown from 300 to 5,000 people. He had reigned in the cesspool.

That's *crazy!* Yes . . . just about as crazy as the King born in a barn and placed in a manger . . . or the King stripped naked and nailed to a cross. Even there, *especially there*, He conquers. Look who sits on the throne bleeding.

Years ago my friend Ed got to hear a pastor named Y. Chan share his testimony. I don't know if "Y. Chan" is the same man as "G. Chen," but Chan was sentenced to labor deep in the prison camps cesspool as well. He said, "I enjoyed it there in the cesspool because I could pray as loud as I wanted, I could recite Scripture and no one would come near me, I could sing hymns with all my energy. One of my favorite hymns was 'In the Garden.'"

"I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear falling on my ear the Son of God discloses. And He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known!"

Chan said, "When I sang this hymn in the cesspool, I understood the meaning of the garden. I met my Lord in the garden of the cesspool."

Instead of death, futility, and snake bites, he lived, reigned, and stomped on the old Dragon. Just think of it! On earth (in the cesspool) he exercised dominion as he walked with God in the garden. Amen.

"So, Lord God, we do thank you. We're toward the end of The Revelation, and what things you are revealing to those seven little churches in Asia Minor! In reality, those seven little churches, those suffering witnesses, those bleeding saints conquer the Roman Empire. God, we can look back on history and see that it's true. But, Lord God, it's not only true for them, it's true for us."

"So forgive us, Lord God, for walking by sight and not by faith. Help us to trust *you* and not everything we experience in this fallen world."

If you have a cesspool, which I suppose we all do, just think of it now. Maybe it's a painful situation . . . maybe it's some sins that seem to have a hold on you . . . maybe it's fears, anxieties, insecurities, shame, and guilt — *human waste*.

From that place, repeat these words quietly: "Lord Jesus, come to my cesspool and be with me."

If you really ask Him, He does come. I imagine He was already there. Now pay attention to Him. I believe this is what He tells you: "I've got this place beat! So don't let it lie to you. You walk with me. Let's go conquer the world." In Jesus' name believe the Word of God and walk by faith not by sight. Amen.

Further Reading

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can this be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

-John 3:6-12

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. . . . And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

-Revelation 19:11a, 20:4-6

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. "

-John 5:24

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

-Colossians 3:1-4

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all. And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

-Ephesians 1:15-2:7

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

-Matthew 28:18-20

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then

the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

-II Peter 3:8-10

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