**Foundations (56 of 60) The Millennium - RC Sproul**

Does the word millennium actually mean 1,000 years? And will there be a rapture? Dr. R.C. Sproul explains these end-times events today on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to Renewing Your Mind with the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. Today we continue our series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology.

The book of Revelation describes a time period in the last days called the millennium, and this period is generally assumed to last 1,000 years. But there is disagreement about what the millennium actually refers to. Some people believe that this period has already begun, while others declare it as a future event.

Today, Dr. Sproul gives an overview of the various millennial views prevalent today. Today, in a spirit of fear and trembling, we're going to approach the concept of the millennium, which is one of the most highly debated issues there ever has been with respect to eschatology. In fact, it's been said about my views of the millennium that they're very much like the weather in central Florida.

If you don't like it, wait five minutes and it'll change. And there's a lot of truth to that because I've skated through just about every millennial position there is in my own pilgrimage as a Christian, and every time I land on a millennial position, I land like butterflies with sore feet, and my position tends to be somewhat tentative and tenuous, as I'll say. I think this is where I am now, and part of the reason for that is that it's so difficult, for me at least, to come to a dogmatic conclusion on some of these questions because of the nature of the literature and the genre of literature in which so much of these things about the future are cast.

Let me read, for example, the passage in which we meet up with the concept of the millennium, which is found in the 20th chapter of the book of Revelation, where chapter 20 begins with these words, Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit, and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. This is our first reference to the millennium.

The millennium refers to that period of time that extends for one thousand years, and here it is mentioned with respect to the binding of Satan. 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 until the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

Then it goes on to say that he saw thrones, and they that 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 worshipped 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. And now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison, will go out to deceive the nations, and gog and magog in the four corners of the world and all of that. So, in this twentieth chapter of Revelation we have these several mentions to that thousand-year period that is called the millennium.

And now the two basic issues that the church faces with respect to the concept of the millennium is the question, first of all, of its actual nature. What is it? And second of all, what is its chronological relationship to the consummation of the kingdom of God or to the final coming of Christ to establish that consummated kingdom? And so, when you hear about millennial positions, you usually hear about them with a prefix attached to the word millennium. You will hear people speak of being premillenarian, amill, or postmill, or dispensational premillenarian, and so on.

And those prefixes have to do with their understanding of the order in which the millennium occurs and Christ establishes His final kingdom. Now, again, one of the problems we have here is, in the first instance, that chapter 20 is really the only place we find this concept in the Scripture, and that doesn't mean that it's not important just because it's in one place. But that is in the context of a book that is highly imaginative and filled with all kinds of difficult-to-interpret symbols.

The immediate problem that the interpreter faces is, what is the specific literary genre or form of the book of Revelation? And so, what rules of interpretation should we bring to it? And usually, the debate has to do with the question of literalism with respect to prophetic interpretation. And this word in itself needs to be interpreted because it's somewhat misleading, because at the time of the Reformation, the basic principle of biblical interpretation established by the Reformers was called literal interpretation, meaning, using Luther's phrase, sensus literalis, that the responsible interpreter of Scripture will always interpret the Bible literally, that is, in the sense in which it was written. That's what it means to interpret the book literally, in the sense in which it was written.

If it's written in a poetic style, you interpret it the way you interpret poetry. If it's written in a didactic style, you interpret it the manner in which you interpret didactic literature, and so on. In the Bible, a verb remains a verb, a noun remains a noun, a simile is a simile, a metaphor is a metaphor.

Now, what is often meant by literalism is by applying what we would call a wooden literalistic interpretation to a poetic image. For example, when the psalmist says that in that day the hills will clap their hands, we obviously understand that that is a figurative way of speaking, and we don't expect hills to actually grow arms and hands and start clapping them. We wouldn't think of interpreting that in a crass wooden literalistic way.

But then when you get to these questions of prophetic fulfillment, the millennium and so on, then the question is, how much of this is figurative, and how much of it is grammatical, historical, just simple, ordinary prose? And there's where there is widespread disagreement. I once heard a TV preacher talk about you have to interpret the prophecies of the future literally if you're going to be faithful to the Bible. And so when the Old Testament prophets talked about the final conflict of the forces of good and evil in terms of these massive locusts that would come and bring destruction to the land, he said, we have to interpret this literally, and these refer to attack helicopters coming in our day.

And I said, wait a minute, what's wrong with this picture? If this man is insisting that we interpret it literally in this sense of literalism, then what should we be looking for? Locusts, not helicopters. But even in his insistence on being literal, he was being figurative in the application of the reference to the locusts. Now that's the kind of thing you have to be very, very careful of when we deal with these passages, and so that's why I tend to be somewhat cautious before coming down too strongly in various positions.

Now, I will go over briefly for you the main features of the various competing millennial positions, and if you don't mind, I'm going to take advantage of work I've done on this in the past and use as my cheat notes some of my work here from the book, The Last Days According to Jesus, where I give a summary of the different millennial positions. First of all, in its briefest overview, premillenarianism teaches that there will be a future, literal, earthly, millennial kingdom that will be started or begins when Christ returns, and the pre means that Christ will return before the millennium is established. Now when we talk about premillenarianism, or the premill position, again, this is not a position where there is monolithic agreement among all of its advocates.

In fact, there are two very distinct forms of premill competing with each other in the world today. On the one hand, there's what's called historic or classical premill position, and then there is dispensational premillenarianism, which has its own variety of eschatology. In fact, even though dispensational theology is a complete system of doctrine, what it is most noted for and to which most people are attracted is its particular scheme of understanding the future prophecies of the Bible, where they see that the prophecies of the kingdom that are to be given to Israel in the Old Testament will be literally fulfilled with the Jewish state that has been organized and is now struggling for survival in the Near East.

They look for a literal rebuilding of the temple and reinstitution of the sacrificial systems, and fundamentally what dispensationalism teaches that differs from every other position is that God has two separate plans of redemption for Israel and for the church. And so that that strong distinction between Israel and the New Testament church is part of the warp and woof of dispensational premill eschatology. The amill position teaches that there will be no literal millennium.

Whenever we put an ah or a in front of a word, all that does is negate it. And to be amill, it's just like the difference between somebody being moral or immoral or amoral. If you're amoral, that means you don't have any morality.

So to be amill says you don't think there is or will be a literal thousand-year period, but rather that the concept of the millennium is a symbol for something else. And thirdly, there's the postmillennial position that says that Christ will come back to this world after the millennial kingdom concludes. So amill, there is no millennium.

The premill says that Christ comes back, and then the millennium comes. The postmill says the millennium endures, and after the millennium ends, then Christ returns. Now, those are the fundamental differences, and I'll give you some more basic characteristics of these views.

Let me begin with a summary of the dispensational variety of the premill position and give you eight points that summarize this view. Number one, that Christ offered to the Jews the kingdom of David in the first century. The Jews rejected the Davidic kingdom, and so therefore the coming of a kingdom of David, a Jewish kingdom, was postponed until sometime in the future.

Second of all, the church as we know it is in what is called the church age. Dispensationalism is called dispensationalism because in the initial formulation of this system of doctrine, the founders of it divided biblical history and redemptive history into seven different time periods or dispensations, which were distinguished one from another according to the way in which God punished or rewarded people or tested them. And there was the age of innocence and the age of law and the age of grace and the church age and the kingdom age and all of that.

And the church age is the current age, and it exists as a parenthesis between the advent of Christ, His first coming, and the coming of the kingdom, which is in the future. Again, as I mentioned, God has separate programs for the church and for Israel. Fourth, the church will ultimately lose influence in the world and become corrupted or apostate toward the end of the church age.

That is, the dispensationalist view of the current Christian community is very grim and quite pessimistic that the church is going to get worse and worse until the great apostasy comes and won't be restored until after the return of Christ. Fifth point is that Christ will return secretly to rapture His saints before the great tribulation. Now, not everybody who is a dispensationalist believe in what's referred to here as the pre-trib or the pre-tribulation rapture, which means that before the great tribulation at the end of time comes to pass, Christ will come for the first of His two second comings.

He's going to come back twice. The first one is secret, where before the tribulation He will translate His people up into the clouds, and they will escape all of the pain and persecution of the tribulation, and then will come back with them after the tribulation or in the middle of the tribulation to establish His messianic kingdom. Pre-tribulation is very, very popular.

It gives people a lot of hope that they're not going to have to face Armageddon or the great tribulation at the end of the age. And again, it's a very, very popular doctrine, and it probably is the majority report among evangelicals. For the life of me, I've not yet in my lifetime been able to find a shred of evidence to support the pre-trib rapture.

I think that the theological and logical foundations for it historically are poor indeed, and I don't put very much stock in it. Anyway, after the tribulation, point six, Christ will return to earth to administer a Jewish political kingdom that will be headquartered in Jerusalem, and that headquartered kingdom in Jerusalem will last for exactly a thousand years. During that time, Satan will be bound, the temple rebuilt, and the sacrificial system of the Old Testament will be reinstituted.

Point seven, near the end of the millennium, Satan will be released, and Christ and His followers will be attacked at Jerusalem. And at this point, point eight, Christ will call down judgment from heaven, destroy His enemies. The second resurrection, judgment of the wicked will occur, and the final eternal order will be initiated.

Let's look then at historic premillennialism, briefly, which taught that the New Testament era church is the initial phase of Christ's kingdom, as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets. Two, the New Testament church gains occasional victories in history, but ultimately fails in her mission. She loses influence, becomes corrupted, as worldwide evil increases towards the end of the church age.

Third, the church will pass through a future worldwide unprecedented time of travail. This will be known as the Great Tribulation that will punctuate the end of history as we know it. Point four, at the end of the tribulation, Christ will return to rapture His church, to resurrect deceased saints, and conduct the judgment of the righteous in a twinkling of the eye.

Point five, Christ will then descend to the earth with His glorified saints, fight the battle of Armageddon, bind Satan, establish a worldwide political kingdom, which will then be personally administered by Him for a thousand years from the city of Jerusalem. You see some of the points of similarities here. At the end of the millennial reign, Satan will be loosed, and a massive rebellion against the kingdom of Christ will occur, and then finally God will intervene with fiery judgment to rescue Jesus and the saints, and then will be the resurrection and the judgment of the wicked.

Now, with respect to amillennialism, the amillennial position says that the church age is the kingdom age prophesied in the Old Testament as the New Testament church becomes the Israel of God. The second point is that the binding of Satan took place during Jesus' earthly ministry, and He was restrained while the gospel was being preached in the world. So, in that sense, the reference to the binding of Satan in Revelation would be figurative.

Three, insofar as Christ presently rules in the hearts of believers, they will have some influence on the culture in which they are living, but they will not transform the culture. Four, toward the end, the growth of evil will accelerate, resulting in the great tribulation and a personal antichrist. So that you see, there are even some points in common between the amill position and both of the premill positions.

Fifth, Christ will return to end history, resurrect and judge all men, and establish the eternal order. And the eternal destiny of the redeemed may be either in heaven or in a totally new, renovated earth. Finally, we come to postmillennialism, which has these several features.

The first is that the Messianic kingdom of Christ was founded on earth during the early ministry of Christ in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The church is Israel. The second is that the kingdom is essentially redemptive and spiritual rather than political and physical.

So, the postmill position is that they're not looking for a political kingdom, but rather a spiritual kingdom. The third factor is that the kingdom will positively exercise a transformational, sociocultural influence in history. In fact, some have called this the most distinctive characteristic of postmill eschatology, the optimistic view that the influence of the church of Jesus Christ will have a positive, redeeming influence on culture and on the world over time.

This does not mean that the church will not go through periods of weaknesses and of corruption and of an apparent loss of influence. But the postmill is not a person who is polishing brass on a sinking ship. The postmill position really believes in the inevitable, ultimate triumph of the church over the wickedness of this world and of the influence of the kingdom of Christ over the nations of the world.

Fourth feature is that the kingdom will gradually expand in time and on earth. This will be accomplished not without Christ's royal power as king, but without His physical presence on earth. The fifth feature is that the Great Commission will succeed.

The thing that distinguishes postmills from all mills and premills is the belief that the Scripture teaches the success of the Great Commission in the age of the church. Now there are differences among postmill people, just as there are among premill and all the rest. And then add to this mix of millennial interpretation is the current debate over preterism, both full and partial, where preterism in its fullest dimension teaches that all of the future prophecies regarding the coming of Christ, the millennium, the last judgment, everything has already been fulfilled and was fulfilled in the first century.

The moderate preterist position or partial preterism, which I write about in this book, is that position that believes that many of the New Testament prophecies of the future did take place within the context and framework of the first century and were fulfilled chiefly in the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 70. But not all of the New Testament future promises were fulfilled. Most of the partial preterists would say that all of the first twenty chapters of the book of Revelation have already taken place, but the last two chapters are yet to be fulfilled.

And partial preterists tend to be postmill in their thinking, meaning that the millennium began with the first advent of Christ, but it's not strictly a literal one thousand years. But these are the different viewpoints, and I obviously can't analyze them in great detail in this brief overview, but I want you to be aware that there's this ongoing debate. I've just mentioned six different eschatological viewpoints, and it's not something that you just want to dismiss.

One of the reasons why we have difficulties is it's one thing to analyze the past. We have 20-20 vision looking backwards. And it's another thing to understand what is God's agenda for the future.

And we have to be humble about it and say, we don't know for sure whether our view is the most accurate, but at the same time, we don't want to dismiss this as irreverent. Two-thirds of the doctrinal teaching of the New Testament has to do with future things. And how we understand God's promises about the future have a dramatic impact on our personal confidence, our personal involvement, whether we're going to be pessimistic and say, why bother? Or whether we're going to be aggressive and working for the fulfillment of the agenda that Christ gave to His church, that has an implication, but also on the comfort of our souls with respect to the promise that we do have a future as the people of God.

Explaining the various millennial views popular in the church today, and reminding us of our hope for the future, that's Dr. R. C. Sproul, and this is Renewing Your Mind. Today's lesson is simply titled The Millennium. It's part of the most comprehensive series we've offered at Ligonier Ministries.

The series is called Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. Systematic theology is a method of studying the Bible that seeks to understand how the truths of Scripture relate to each other in perfect harmony. And this eye-opening series addresses a wide variety of questions about the origin and authority of the Bible, about God, about the Trinity, about humankind, sin, salvation, miracles and more.

Today, you can request this entire 60-lesson study on DVD when you give a donation of any amount. Call 1-800-435-4343 or look for Foundations online when you give a donation at rymoffer.com. This is a unique, special edition set that's not available for purchase. Yes, you'll receive the entire Foundations series on DVD, but we'll also include the audio from all 60 teachings on a CD-ROM.

You can upload these files to your iPod or MP3 device and listen at your convenience. And then the set also contains a printable study guide which includes an outline for each message including questions, suggested resources and plenty of space for taking notes. Sixty lessons on DVD, that's 23 hours of teaching.

A CD-ROM containing the audio from all 60 lessons and a printable study guide. That's what you'll receive when you request Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. We'll send you the entire set when you give a donation of any amount.

So call right now. The number is 1-800-435-4343. We're nearing the end of this series.

There are just a few messages left. So give your gift of any amount and make your request online at rymoffer.com. Dr. R.C. Sproul is the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, the home of Renewing Your Mind. Our desire is to teach the holiness of God faithfully and accurately to the glory of God and we are grateful for your financial support which allows us to continue.

I'm Lee Webb. The return of Christ has been one of the most controversial theological topics. The schools of thought abound as to when and how Jesus will return.

Is there anything concrete in the midst of so many voices? Well, next weekend Dr. Sproul teaches us three things we can know for sure about the second coming of Christ. So we invite you to join us next weekend for Renewing Your Mind.