

“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, 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. 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. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I passed a billboard the other day, inviting people to a lecture or sermon series on the end times. The ad encouraged people to prepare and that the presentation would tell them what lies ahead. When I drove by the sign, I thought it was a timely illustration of the reason for our requested theme today—a request that has been the subject of sermons ever since the day that John was given this revelation. In symbols and figures that surely must have been more readily understood by the first century Christians who read the book, John is inspired to tell us of the glorious victory of Jesus Christ over the powers of darkness in this world. Revelation is not a linear book, progressing from one point or event to the next. Revelation is not a secret code, telling us when the end of the world will come. In a series of repeating cycles, each with a different angle or point of view, John tells us what will occur in God’s church from the time of Christ until the very end of time, as well as describing some of the things that will occur right at the end.

This is a wonderful book, written to encourage Christians in every age who must suffer because of their faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ. It tells us of the ongoing struggle of good versus evil. But it assures us that even in those moments when the devil and his evil hordes seem to be winning, God is still in charge, and is leading His people to a blessed future of glory and life.

There is no shortage of those who are willing to tell you the “hidden meaning” of Revelation. There is a great deal of interest in the message of this book even outside of the church. While it is now a bit dated, the “Left Behind” series was based on one view of Revelation, and appealed to the general populace, not just to Christians. There was even a television series loosely based on this book. That may be why certain things from this book are so well known: the mark of the beast and the number 666; the 144,000 in heaven; the anti-Christ; and the 1,000 years or millennium. We’ll focus on this last aspect that comes up in this particular text today.

How do we understand the millennium? What happens during this thousand years? I don’t have time in this sermon to talk about all the different views of the millennium, which is so often misunderstood and

misrepresented by so many people. There are those who believe in *dispensational premillennialism*; some who believe in *historic premillennialism*; others believe in *postmillennialism*. There are also offshoots of these teachings. While we don't have time to discuss them, we also don't agree with them. In agreement with the Scriptures we believe the truth that is commonly defined as *amillennialism*.

We have to be careful that we don't take this thousand years too literally. The idea of the thousand years is based on the biblical concept of numbers. The number 10 is the number of totality and completeness. When we multiply 10x10x10 we get 1,000, or God's total complete time. In other words, the 1,000 years is the total time God has planned for the events that are to come—or in this case, for the events that are taking place even now.

Let's look a bit at the characters and events of this text. First, we have *the 'angel'*, who is Christ. In the Old Testament the Eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity is often called *the angel of the Lord*. The *bottomless pit* is hell. The *chain* is not something wrapped around the devil, nor is it handcuffs and leg irons. Rather, it is like the chain which may be attached to a guard dog, allowing the devil to move, but also limiting his power, protecting those who stay beyond his reach. Peter tells us ***“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”*** (1 Peter 5:8–9, ESV) Scripture does not tell us that the devil will be removed from earth for any length of time prior to the day of judgment. But the devil's power is limited through the preaching of the Gospel, for where the Gospel is proclaimed, the devil has lost his power. Jesus rejoiced in Peter's confession and said: ***“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*** (Matthew 16:18, ESV) When speaking of His coming crucifixion Jesus said: ***“Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*** (John 12:31–32, ESV) And Paul assures us that Christ, ***“disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”*** (Colossians 2:15, ESV)

The thousand years or the millennium began when the eternal Son of God left His throne on high to come into this world of sin and death. From the time of His birth, the devil and his evil minions have been in terror. Jesus often speaks of Satan as *fallen* (Lk 10:17-19), *cast out* (Jn 12:31-32), and *judged* (Jn 16:11) because of all that Jesus was doing, and all that He would accomplish through His suffering, death and resurrection. Because Satan has been bound by the truth of the Gospel, he has also lost his power to *deceive the nations*. How sad it is, then, that Jesus says: ***“For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.”*** (Matthew 13:15, ESV)

We are also told in this text that after the time of the church, the devil ***must be released for a little while***. For reasons hidden in God, the Church must pass through tribulation and testing at the end times. We also know this will be a time of apostasy—a time when people turn from the truth and fall away. I often wonder if we are living in this 'short time' now. Jesus once asked: ***“when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*** (Luke 18:8, ESV) All too often it seems that faith is becoming a rare commodity in our world. Tom Cruise boasts of his association with the Church of Scientology. Other celebrities attract attention with their interest in the New Age movement or in some other extreme teaching. When celebrities embrace falsehood, it makes unbelief something chic and popular, leading

many others astray. Our world denies the truth of God, and say that all truths are equal. We accept, condone, even glorify things that were once shameful. In the midst of this we see the persecution of the church itself. Jesus told us these things would come. Thankfully, Jesus assures us of the victory that awaits us by His grace, for He has already won the victory when He died for us on the cross, and rose again from the dead.

The millennium is an important teaching of Scripture, but because so many misunderstand or deny the Scriptures there are those who teach that Christ will return visibly to this earth a thousand years before the end of the world and establish a dominion of the Church over the world. Others teach that before the end of the world the Church is to enjoy a season of special prosperity. Still others teach that before a general resurrection on Judgment Day a number of departed Christians or martyrs are to be raised again to reign in glory in this world. Still others believe that before the end of the world a universal conversion of the Jewish nation will take place. Yet this wonderful word of God simply talks about the time of the Church, as it proclaims the Gospel that goes out into all the world to bring all who believe out of the devil's grasp; to free them from the condemning power of sin and death and to give life through Jesus Christ. In the midst of this time of unbelief, we are still led by the Saviour to bring His healing grace to the world. Through the Word and Sacraments, the Spirit brings life, the life we can properly call *the first resurrection*. Paul reminds us: ***“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”*** (Ephesians 2:4–5, ESV) The first death—physical death—comes to us all sooner or later. But the second death is eternal death in hell. When we are alive in Christ, we escape the second death. And the time is coming, at the end of that thousand years—that complete time of God's plan—when the Lord will come again to bring about the resurrection of all flesh: for believers this will mean eternal life in the glory of heaven; for those who *worshipped the beast or his image*, it is a time of eternal death.

John wrote the book of Revelation about AD 95, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. At that time the churches of Asia Minor were being persecuted from within by false teachers and from without by the Roman government. Certain Jewish synagogues were persecuting them as well. Some Christians were even martyred for the faith. No doubt many believers then as now despaired that the gates of hell had prevailed against the Church. What a comforting message of Good News these words must have been in the face of all these things! For them, and for us, John wrote this comforting chapter. Christ, the Lamb who was slain for the forgiveness of sins, is the victorious Lord who defeated Satan. Satan is bound and will not prevent the Gospel from going out to all nations. Contrary to reason and experience, Christians, though persecuted, are already more than conquerors. Our citizenship is in heaven. Nothing can keep us from the victory that we have in the Lord who was crucified and died for us, and who rose again to bring us to eternal life. Though Satan is permitted to persecute the Church intensely for *little while* the Church is assured of the victory. Those who are Christ's will be raised from the dead to inherit eternal life on the last day. As Luther wrote in that great hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God: *The Kingdom ours remaineth* (LSB 656, st. 4) for we will reign in glory with our Saviour—not just for a thousand years, but forevermore. Amen.