A THOUSAND YEARS

The Millennium, the Last Day, and the Christian Hope

BEFORE THE THOUSAND YEARS?

Premillennialism, the Rapture, and the Return of Christ

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

THE SOUND WE WERE WAITING FOR

I was six years old, and we were waiting for my grandfather.

He drove a semi for Phillips 66, out of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and he was coming to Reedsburg, Wisconsin to see us for Christmas. That year a winter storm moved in ahead of him. Snow and ice covered the roads. The night was very cold and very dark. My parents, my older brother, my older sister, and I sat in the house and waited, and the longer we waited, the more the questions started.

Would he make it through before the roads got worse. Would the ice take the truck off the road the way it takes cars off the road every winter. He was not driving an empty trailer. He was pulling a tank full of gasoline, and everyone in that house knew what could happen to a truck like that on ice.

So we waited, and we listened, and we were afraid.

Last week we said that Christian hope is not that we know everything that happens next. Christian hope is that we know the One who comes next. That is true for the whole of history, and it is also true for one house in Wisconsin on one cold night. We did not know when my grandfather would arrive, or by what road, or whether the ice would win. We only knew that he was coming, and that love does not make waiting easy.

Revelation 20 puts that same waiting in front of the whole Church. Satan is bound for a thousand years. The saints reign with Christ for a thousand years. Then Satan is released, and God brings evil to its final end. And the question that rises out of that chapter is the one premillennialism answers with the most confidence of all three readings we are testing this series.

Does Christ return before the thousand years. Does He come, gather His own, and then reign on earth for a thousand literal years before the end finally comes.

I do not want to mock that answer. I want to understand why sincere believers hold it, test it against the whole of Scripture, and then come back to the house in the storm, because that is where the real comfort is found.

CHARTING THE ROUTE

Start with the sequence itself, because premillennialism takes the sequence seriously, and so should we.

At the end of Revelation 19, heaven opens. Christ appears as the rider on the white horse, the Word of God, and he judges his enemies. Then Revelation 20 opens, and an angel binds Satan for a thousand years. The saints reign with Christ. Read straight through as a timeline, it looks simple. Christ returns in chapter nineteen, the millennium follows in chapter twenty.

Some early Christians, Justin Martyr among them, did expect a future thousand year reign, and Justin himself said plainly that other orthodox Christians did not share that expectation. That ancient hope is not what stands behind most of what you hear today. What animates television preachers, prophecy conferences, and the bestseller shelf is a newer and far more detailed system, assembled especially in the nineteenth century. The Church is secretly removed, a seven year tribulation follows, Christ returns visibly afterward to reign a thousand years on earth, and Israel and the Church remain two separate tracks in God's plan throughout.

That system leans heavily on one verse in particular.

> *For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*
>
> *1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, ESV*

Caught up. The Latin word behind our English word rapture means exactly that. Paul says believers will be caught up to meet the Lord, and on that point every faithful reading of this text agrees. The question is not whether. The question is what Paul is describing, and whether it is a private rescue that happens before a seven year countdown, or something else entirely.

Notice how public this scene actually is. A cry of command is what a king gives, not a thief. An archangel's voice and the trumpet of God are not secret. The dead are raised in full view of heaven and earth, not quietly relocated. And Paul does not say Christ comes partway, gathers His people, and withdraws again for seven years. He says the Lord descends, the dead rise, the living are gathered, and from that moment we are always with the Lord.

Now set that beside the rest of the New Testament, because Scripture does not leave us with two different pictures of the end.

> *An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice, and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*
>
> *John 5:28–29, ESV*

One hour. One voice. Resurrection and judgment together, not centuries apart.

> *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*
>
> *Matthew 25:31, ESV*

The nations are gathered before him, and judgment follows immediately, the same day he comes.

> *Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, after destroying every rule and every authority and power. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*
>
> *1 Corinthians 15:24, 26, ESV*

Paul does not describe a thousand year interval where death still reigns on earth while Christ reigns from a throne nearby. Death is destroyed when Christ comes, not a thousand years later.

> *Death is swallowed up in victory.*
>
> *1 Corinthians 15:54, ESV*

And when Paul writes to this same Thessalonian church again, warning them not to be shaken by false reports that the Day of the Lord had already come, he describes one coming, not two.

> *Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers.*
>
> *2 Thessalonians 2:1, ESV*

Our being gathered together to him. The same gathering as 1 Thessalonians 4. One coming, one gathering, not a secret rapture followed seven years later by a second, visible return.

Even the hard verses in Matthew 24 that modern teaching leans on most heavily do not say what you may have heard. Jesus describes the days of Noah, when people went about their lives until the flood came and swept them all away. Then he says:

> *Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.*
>
> *Matthew 24:40–41, ESV*

Being taken in that flood was not rescue. It was judgment. The ones left behind in Noah's day were the ones left safe, still standing, when the water came. Read in its own context, Jesus is describing the suddenness of judgment, not a secret rescue of believers before the worst of history begins.

Why does the system sound so convincing, then. Partly because the people who hold it are reading Scripture carefully and taking its sequence seriously, and we should respect that. But partly, if we are honest, because it offers something we want very badly. It offers a map. It offers a way to know the route, to measure the risk, to watch the headlines and calculate the distance between now and home. Wars, the modern state of Israel, earthquakes, new technology: each one becomes a mile marker on a chart someone has drawn for us, promising that if we read it closely enough, we will know exactly when the storm will end.

We wanted that kind of map in our house that night too. We wanted to know exactly how far my grandfather was, exactly which roads were worst, exactly when the danger would pass. No one gave us that map. What we got instead was something we could not chart and did not need to.

Our Lutheran Confessions summarize all of this in a single sentence. The Brief Statement of 1932 puts it plainly. We reject every type of millennialism, or Chiliasm. Scripture gives us but one resurrection of the dead. One return. One resurrection. One judgment.

THE SOUND IN THE STORM

It was late. Later than any of us wanted to admit out loud. And then, underneath the wind, we heard it. A low drone, steady, growing. The engine of a diesel truck, working its way up through the dark.

It did not sneak in. It was not a secret. The whole house heard it at once, my mother, my father, my brother, my sister, me, all of us straining toward the same sound, because a sound like that

announces itself to everyone in the house who is listening. Then the engine went quiet. The door opened, and the cold came in with him, along with the smell of cigarette smoke on his trucker's jacket. Tucked in his breast pocket was a little puppy with long light brown hair. We named him Fluffy.

That is what Paul is describing in 1 Thessalonians 4. Not an escape before the danger. An arrival after it, loud enough and public enough that no one in the house could miss it.

> *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*
>
> *1 Thessalonians 4:13–14, ESV*

You are not waiting for a secret coming before the real coming. You are waiting for the same Jesus who already came once, who was crucified for you, who rose from the dead, who ascended to the Father's right hand, and who reigns even now over everything that frightens you, the ice, the dark, the distance. That same Jesus is coming for you, and when he arrives, you will hear him before you lose him.

In the ancient world, when a visiting king or official approached a city, the people did not stay hidden behind locked doors. They went out to meet him on the road and walked him in together. That is the picture behind being caught up together to meet the Lord in the air. It is not an evacuation. It is a welcome. It is a household going out together to bring the king home.

And the dead in Christ go first. Not missed. Not left behind on the road somewhere. First. The ones you have buried in Christ: he is bringing them with him, and when he comes, death itself is swallowed up in victory. No one who belongs to him will ever again be unaccounted for in a storm.

STANDING AT THE WINDOW

So what do we do while we wait.

We do not need the chart. We do not need to calculate the distance or time the storm. My family waited for that sound together, and when it came, we all went toward the door.

> *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*
>
> *1 Thessalonians 4:18, ESV*

That is the whole instruction. Not frighten one another with charts. Not out argue one another over timelines. Encourage one another, because the One who is coming is already on the road, and he has never once failed to arrive.

I do not need a secret coming before the coming. I do not need two returns. I do not need an escape route built out of headlines and prophecy charts. I need Christ, the same Christ who was crucified, who rose, who reigns now, and who has promised to come again. And until he comes, he does not leave us to wait in silence. And the dead in Christ are not lost while we wait. They are asleep in him, and the same voice that will call them out of the grave is the voice we hear now in His Word and in His Supper.

Next week we ask the question that follows from this one. Does Christ already reign now, and what does the thousand years describe. We will open John 5 and listen to Augustine, who came to see the thousand years not as a future kingdom still to come, but as the present reign of Christ in his Church even today. We will test that reading the same way we tested this one, letting Scripture interpret Scripture and keeping Christ at the center.

The storm does not have the last word.

The sound in the dark does.

Amen.

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