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THE MILLENNIUM

BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT THE APPROACHING THOUSAND YEARS

ALL around the world vast and lavish preparations are being made for the start of the new century, and there is even greater interest than usual because, this time, it is also the start of a new millennium - a new era of a thousand years. The opportunity is thus being taken for a variety of events - from private parties to large scale building projects - all of them celebrating a new start.

But after all the excitement has died down, and the balloons have burst, what will the new millennium be like? For a thousand years is not a stage managed event, limited to a few carefully controlled hours or days, but a long, long period of time covering the lifetimes of many generations. Will the year 2000 see the start of a brave new world? Will conditions on the earth suddenly (or even gradually) improve for all who are oppressed, exploited or diseased? We know the answer to these questions. All the grand schemes and great expectations will achieve very little. It needs more than a page turned over on a calendar to put the world right, even if the date on that page is the last day of the old millennium.

2000 or 2001 ?

The eagerness to celebrate has been shown by how quickly and easily settled have been the rival claims of the years 2000 and 2001 as the start of the new millennium.

Mathematically, few can doubt that 2001 is really the first year of the new century, but public opinion will not allow for any delay. The old era is being relegated as soon as possible in the hope that something better is just round the corner.

The past hundred years have seen incredible technological changes. But alongside all the machines which man's ingenuity has produced to help him undertake necessary tasks, there stand equally ingenious machines with an almost infinite capacity for destruction. Even those - like vehicles of transport - invented to assist man's well being and to make his life easier, have been responsible for the deaths of thousands, even millions of people. None of the technological advances has managed to halt the decline in personal relationships and breakdown in society. So the start of a new era is a new horizon, providing renewed hope that such problems can be removed or at least controlled.

Greater Awareness?

But putting aside the unattainable high hopes, there is a genuine belief that the new millennium will bring a greater awareness of mankind's needs, and greater resolve to tackle them. The inner yearning of many people for increased peace of mind has been shown by the renewed interest in religion of all kinds, notably the mystic and psychic varieties. Organised religion has been associated for so long in people's minds with bitter arguments and repression - even on occasions

with warfare and genocide - that there has been a rejection of many of the traditional forms of worship. Instead, there are New Age methods to help prepare for the New Era which is about to dawn.

Some of these new religious groups see the approaching millennium as a time of personal and spiritual release. Leaders have instructed their members to be prepared for a whole variety of cataclysmic events: for armed attack, for fierce burning, for approaching space craft. There is a wide expectation among these groups that the millennium will be a time when the human body is no longer required; they expect it to be discarded, allowing its owner to be completely free from current constraints. A few have even anticipated this by joining in group suicide plots so that they will escape the widespread destruction they expect to occur.

This interest in such things has been generated in part by existing religious associations with the millennium. The event would not be celebrated if it were not for the fact that our calendar, and that of much of the world, is calculated from the date when it is believed Jesus Christ was born. More recent research has shown that this calculation may be about five years out. But give or take those five years, it is almost two thousand years since Jesus was born, and not much less than that since Christianity became a world religion. The teachings of Christ burst upon the world in the early centuries of the modern era, and many pagan practices were quickly relegated in favour of worship patterned on the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles.

To mark the start of the third Christian millennium, great religious celebrations are planned in many centres, notably in Rome where an estimated 30 million pilgrims will have the opportunity to worship in up to 50 new churches, as well as those places of worship which already exist. One of these new churches is to be called "The Church of the Year 2000", specially to mark the significance of the event. The Pope (John Paul II) has declared the year 2000 "a holy year", hoping that Christians will be "if not united, at least closer to resolving the divisions of the second millennium".

Deep Apprehension But it would be unreasonable to suggest that, for most people, the celebrations will be religious. The year 2000 may indeed be based on the date when it is calculated that Jesus Christ was born, but the link between Christianity and many of the planned celebrations is extremely tenuous. The hopes for the new era go much farther back than the birth of Christianity, to man's innermost yearnings for a better world.

At the same time as there is a great eagerness for the new millennium to start, there is also an apprehension about the new era because of dire warnings about economic collapse, global warming, over population, depleted natural resources and potential international conflict involving weapons of mass destruction. Some prophets of doom have predicted that the new millennium will herald Armageddon, by which they mean the catastrophic end of human life on earth. With such differing outlooks being prophesied, it is reasonable to enquire if the new century will bring widespread destruction or the solution to all these difficult problems.

A thousand years ago, at the end of the first Christian millennium, there was great expectation that something momentous would happen. Religious leaders taught about the impending destruction of Antichrist and an era of peace under the rule of Jesus Christ. Despite preparations being made by many people who thought the end of the world was drawing near, nothing happened. Will the same be true of the year 2000? And if it is, how will people cope with the disappointment?

A Reliable Guide

How do we find answers to these questions? Is there a reliable source of information about the future, and especially about the future of mankind upon the earth?

The only reliable guide to the future - a guide which has stood the test of time and whose earlier predictions give confidence about all the other information it contains, is the Bible. It claims to be the Word of God - who inspired human writers to record His message to mankind. What then does the Bible have to say about the millennium?

What we shall soon discover is that any reference to a millennium in the Bible has to do, not with the moment at the turn of the century but with an entire period of a thousand years. Actually the word millennium does not appear anywhere in the Bible. But there are a few places where a "thousand years" are mentioned in a general sense, and one place where an era of a "thousand years" is specifically described. Two of the general references to a thousand years use the phrase to explain how God is different from man, because He is not controlled by time: **"A thousand years in God's sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night" (Psalm 90:4); "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8)**. These verses help to put into context mankind's mad scramble to be ready for the year 2000 AD.

God is able to view all of mankind's history in a moment of time. He can look deep into the past and far into the future. He is not 'locked in the cage of time', as man is.

God has been at work for thousands of years with a plan and a purpose. He brought the world into existence at the beginning, and wants it to be a place where men and women can live at peace, with each other and with Him. Through the various Bible writers, God has revealed to mankind many of the details of His purpose. His work has continued through successive ages: the generation before the Flood; the times of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob); the formation of the nation of Israel into a kingdom; the sending of His Son; the Christian era; and finally He promises a great 'day of rest', when all His work will be complete. That this is the purpose of His creative work is shown in the opening chapters of the Bible as they speak of Him resting when His work is complete: **"God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made" (Genesis 2:3)**. In this rest, He will be associated with those of His creatures for whom **"there remains a sabbath rest... for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from His" (Hebrews 4:9,10)**.

No Benefit from Long Life Another Bible reference to a thousand years confirms that long periods of time are not sufficient to benefit mankind unless conditions in the world radically change. The wise man in Ecclesiastes notes that, **"If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things... I say that an untimely birth is better off than he ... even though he should live a thousand years twice told" (Ecclesiastes 6:3 - 6)**.

But none of these references is to a specific period of a thousand years; the concept of a future millennium did not arise from these passages. Only in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation (chapter 20) is such a period mentioned. Revelation is a prophetic book, using highly graphic images and symbols to describe what would happen to Jesus' followers after his death, resurrection and ascension, continuing right through to the time when God's purpose is complete.

The closing chapters of the book (chapters 19 - 22) concentrate on events to do with Jesus' return and the setting up of the kingdom of God. Chapter 20 explains about "the thousand years" - the Millennium.

The Events of the Millennium

Despite the Book of Revelation being written in symbolic language, some aspects of the message are obvious and easily understood:

- Jesus Christ will live and reign over the nations of the world;
- His faithful disciples will share this work with him;
- The Devil (or Satan) will be bound throughout this time; so
- The nations will no longer be deceived.

Other events are also described, which are to occur at the end of the thousand years:

- Satan will be loosed from his prison to deceive the nations again;
- Some of those nations will gather together in battle against Jesus and his helpers, and will be destroyed by God; and finally,
- Sin and death will be removed from the earth for ever.

The "thousand years" - the only specific period of a thousand years mentioned in the Bible - is a period of time when Jesus rules the world. During this "millennium", opposition to his reign will be restrained, allowing the benefits of his leadership to be widely felt, until, in the end, rebellion breaks forth, to be decisively destroyed by direct action from God, leaving Christ to reign supreme on God's behalf.

The Return of Christ

It will be noted that the chapter does not at first sight appear to describe the return of Christ; it speaks instead of "**an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit... in his hand**" (**Revelation 20:1**). We are reminded of the opening vision in Revelation where "**one like unto the Son of Man**" - surely a vision of Jesus himself - is described as "**he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell** (Hades, or the grave) **and of death**" (**Revelation 1 :18**). So who else can this angel be but the Lord Jesus Christ, "**the firstborn from the dead**" (**1 :5**), and therefore the one who is given authority by God over life and death?

The chapter therefore starts with the return of Christ to rule the earth on God's behalf. In this work he is assisted by others who share in rulership: people who remained faithful to God despite persecution. They are to "**live and reign with Christ a thousand years**" (**20:4**). Because many of these are people from earlier ages who have been in the grave for centuries, they will first be raised from the dead. Those who are welcomed by Jesus to "**live and reign**" with him will also be granted immortality, never to die again. They are called "**saints**" through their being separated to work with Jesus. As the Bible says, "**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**" (**20:6**).

Resurrection is necessary because the Bible does not teach that man has an immortal soul or an unquenchable spark of eternity within him. Death is described in Scripture as the complete cessation of all knowledge and experience: "**The dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun**" (**Ecclesiastes 9:5,6, NKJV**). (For more information on the true state of death, and what follows, please see the companion booklet, After Death - What?)

Having discovered that the thousand years mentioned in the Bible cannot start until Jesus Christ returns to earth, we now know some more details of what will occur:

1. Jesus will return to the earth, as promised by angels at the time of his ascension into heaven (see Acts 1 :11).
2. He will raise from the dead all who have known about him. **"This is the first resurrection" (Revelation 20:5).**
3. Those who are judged to be faithful (including those who have died and those who are alive when he returns 1 Thessalonians 4:15 - 17) will join Jesus in ruling over the earth on God's behalf (Revelation 5:10).

Signs of His Return

The return of Jesus to the earth is thus the first event of the thousand years. How shall we know when he is expected? And what connection is there, if any, between the year 2000 and the millennium promised in the Bible? Once again, Jesus' own words are our guide. Shortly before his crucifixion, his disciples asked him how people would know when he was to return to the earth. (He had already taught his disciples about his death, resurrection and ascension.) **"What sign will there be when these things are about to take place?"** they asked.

If his return was going to be preceded by widespread peaceful conditions, here was an opportunity to inform his disciples so that they could be prepared. But he did not speak about peace. He actually warned his disciples, **"Watch out that you are not deceived"**, knowing that there would be contradictory reports circulating, even amongst believers, about the conditions which will signal his return.

But his words are clear: **"On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21 :25 - 27).**

This is not a description of peaceful conditions, but the exact opposite. It could well be a description of our own times. Men and women today are **"apprehensive of what is coming on the world"**. As we have already considered, that is one reason why so many people are looking forward to 2000 AD. They hope it will provide the New Start the earth so desperately needs.

If Jesus says that his coming will be preceded by wars, fighting and widespread despair, and not by peaceful conditions, we can prepare ourselves as we see these conditions developing.

No More Deception

As we have already seen, one of the first things we are told about the Biblical "thousand years" is that it will be a time when nations are no longer deceived (Revelation 20:3). It will be a time when issues can be clearly seen; important matters will no longer be hidden or covered up, as so often happens today. Because Jesus Christ will be in charge of affairs, as God's king, his judgement will be just and open: **"He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear" (Isaiah 11 :3).** What human judge has ever been able to see into men's hearts or read their thoughts? With this ability widely exercised, there will be no place for those who have sought personal benefit from manipulating information. This is what the Bible means when it says that **"the nations will no longer be deceived"**.

The Devil and Satan

Those who have been involved in this world - wide deception are termed in Revelation, "**the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan**" (20:2). For many people, this language describes an indestructible evil personality, constantly at war with mankind, and seeking to tempt and draw him away from serving God. But we should note how Revelation describes the final destiny of "**the dragon**":

"The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever." (20:10)

This is similar to the language Jesus used when he was speaking to his disciples about the kingdom of God, and who would enter it. Those who would forfeit their place in the kingdom through denying all that he taught, would be "**cast into hell; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched**" (Mark 9:47,48). In the Bible, "hell" means simply the grave, so Jesus was speaking of complete destruction, with no hope of return; and not about everlasting fiery torments (see our companion booklet on Heaven and Hell). The Biblical Devil is not an indestructible evil personality, but a symbol of sin and rebellion in the hearts of men (see the booklet, Do You Believe in a Devil?).

But before evil and wickedness are destroyed by being "cast into the lake of fire and brimstone" (which is to happen at the end of the thousand years), they are bound by the Lord Jesus Christ. As we have seen, in the face of honesty, truth and perfect knowledge, there will be no place for cheating, fraud or duplicity. One of Jesus' titles is "**the Word of God**" (Revelation 19:13), and a great work of the thousand years will be the application of God's Word as a guide in all aspects of human government and personal life.

Jesus' Servants, the Saints

Jesus will be assisted in this work, as we have seen, by the "**saints**". It will be a time of rejoicing for them as the Word of God is taught throughout the world: "**Let the saints be joyful in glory: let them sing aloud upon their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two - edged sword in their hand, to execute vengeance upon the heathen, and punishments upon the people; to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; to execute upon them the written judgment - this honour have all his saints**" (Psalm 149:5 - 9).

The work of the saints under the direction of the Lord Jesus will be primarily to instruct the mortal population of the earth in the wonders of God's laws. They will be teachers, leaders and rulers on Christ's behalf. In one of his parables about the kingdom of God, Jesus spoke of a "**certain nobleman**" going into a far country to receive a kingdom, and then returning. The nobleman - representing Christ himself, of course - left his servants to work for him while he was away. On his return, he rewarded his faithful servants by giving them authority in his kingdom: "**Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities**" (Luke 19:17).

Through delegating this work to the saints, Jesus' rule will be felt throughout the earth. This is the way it is described by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

"Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge among the nations, and rebuke many people: they shall beat their swords into

ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Isaiah 2:3,4)

The only way for nations to be truly at peace is if they accept common principles. God's law is designed to ensure peaceful and beneficial cooperation between peoples. There will be no place for the deceiver, or for anyone who wants to benefit from other people's hardships.

Conditions of Peace

Gradually, under the rule of God's law, conditions will improve for everyone, but especially for those who previously have been oppressed or under - privileged in any way.

Listen to what the Psalmist says about this time:

"He (the King - Jesus) will bring justice to the poor of the people; he will save the children of the needy, and will break in pieces the oppressor ... He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing, like showers that water the earth. In his days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace, until the moon is no more. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea... His enemies will lick the dust... all kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall serve him. For he will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy. He will redeem their life from oppression and violence..." (Psalm 72)

The earth will at last begin to fulfil the promise of God's design in creation. Problems of famine and disease will diminish, for **"The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose ... Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert" (Isaiah 35:1,6).**

With food supplies improved for all, with many causes of stress removed, and with the great Healer in the earth, men and women will live longer: **"No more shall an infant from there live but a few days, nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; for the child shall die one hundred years old" (Isaiah 65:20).**

"The child shall die."? Yes, there will still be death during the thousand years. Jesus and the saints will be immortal, but the rest of the earth's population will be mortal, dying creatures, even though their life expectancy will dramatically increase. The information given in the Bible about the thousand years describes a wonderful era of peace, safety, contentment and health when Jesus is King. But it is still not a time of complete perfection. Death, and therefore sin too, will still exist.

Drawn to Worship God

But the thousand years will give opportunity for the benefits of Christ's rulership to be widely experienced. Many will rejoice in these lovely conditions, and will desire to worship God: **"Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths'" (Isaiah 2:3).** A place of worship - a **"house of prayer for all nations"** - will be established in Jerusalem, the **"city of the great King"** (Psalm 48:2; Matthew 5:35), the centre of Kingdom rule.

To this wonderful temple will come people from all parts of the world. Nations will be positively encouraged to travel there regularly. If they do not choose to worship God, He will withhold His

blessings: **"If any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain upon them"** (Zechariah 14:17). The advantage of following God's ways will soon be apparent, and many of the earth's population will be pleased to accept His laws.

Jerusalem and the Jews

But why is Jerusalem so honoured by being the centre of kingdom government and education? For long centuries the city has been the centre, not of peaceful worship, but of strife. Over two and a half thousand years ago, God revealed to Moses that when His people were at rest from their enemies, **"Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there"** (Deuteronomy 12:11). Later, the Psalmist spoke of this place being Jerusalem, **"the city of the great King"** (Psalm 48:2).

Part of Jesus' work when he returns will be to restore God's witnesses, the Jews, for he is their King - as the notice over his cross explained: **"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews"** (Matthew 27:37). On his return, some in the Jewish nation will respond positively. God said through the prophet Zechariah: **"I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first - born"** (Zechariah 12:10).

The acceptance by Jesus of his repentant countrymen, the Jews, and their acceptance of him as their King, will fulfil the purpose of God with the nation of Israel. From the time of their forefather Abraham, God has promised faithful Jews a central part in His kingdom. The continued existence of the nation has been a standing witness to God's deep concern for mankind. Under the rulership of Christ, mortal Israelites will have opportunity to continue that witness to the grace of God, who has extended forgiveness and hope of redemption, even to the nation who first rejected His Son and spurned His offer of salvation. Together with the mortal inhabitants of other nations, Jews will have the opportunity to benefit from the conditions of the kingdom age, and to offer service to the Lord Jesus Christ and honour to Almighty God.

Rebellion

However, not everyone will be pleased with the new arrangements. This is difficult to understand in view of the prosperity and peace which will be experienced by so many; but just as Jesus was rejected when he first preached the gospel of the kingdom, so there will be some who will say in their hearts, **'We don't want this man to rule over us'**.

At the end of the thousand years, opportunity will be given for these thoughts to have full expression. The symbolic language of Revelation puts it like this: **"When the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations"** (Revelation 20:7). As the previous era of deceit was ended when Jesus and the saints began widely to spread the Word of God and His Law, it will only re - commence if the teaching of God's Word is once more suspended. It appears that at the end of the thousand years Jesus and the saints will retreat from all parts of the world into the city of Jerusalem (verse 9). Their absence from government will allow rebels once more to deceive the nations and **"gather them together to battle"** (verse 8).

Final Destruction

The armies of those who choose to fight against Jesus and the saints will approach Jerusalem, where they will be decisively destroyed: **"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" (verse 9).**

This final destruction of all opposition will lead to a second resurrection and judgement of all who have lived during the thousand years: **"I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works... anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (20:12 - 15).**

It will be impossible for anyone to claim that they have been treated badly or unfairly. Ample opportunity will be given during the thousand years to understand God's ways and to see the benefit of their widespread application. Those who reject His law will also be fully aware of the consequences of their rejection.

Only when the final rebellion has been stilled, and after the second resurrection and judgement have taken place, can the last action of the thousand years be accomplished: **"Death and hell were cast into the lake of fire" and destroyed. "There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (21 :4).** All the world's troubles will be ended - there will be no more crying, and real and lasting peace will extend throughout the earth.

It is not only the book of Revelation which reveals this sequence of events. In his letter to believers living in Corinth, the Apostle Paul writes about the resurrection from the dead, starting with the resurrection of Jesus almost 2,000 years ago: **"Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at his coming. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:23 - 26).**

Filled with God's Glory

In this passage, the thousand years are described in harmony with what we have already discovered. It is a time when Jesus will rule, when he will bring to an end all rebellion against God's laws, destroying all enemies, and lastly bring to an end even death itself. The result will be an earth at peace, fulfilling its potential to bring glory and honour to Almighty God. The Word of God will once again be upheld, and there will be no more rebellion,

"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:14) This describes a kingdom not limited by time, just as God Himself is not subject to such constraints. There will then be an eternal kingdom, as Paul goes on to describe: **"Now when all things are made subject to him (Christ), then the Son himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).**

"All in all" is an awe - inspiring description of complete and perfect unity between God and His faithful creatures who have been reconciled by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"When will these things be?"

One last question remains to be answered. It is the question Jesus' disciples asked him:
"When will these things be?" (Matthew 24:3; Luke 21 :7).

To answer this, we need to return to the question of the connection between the celebration of the year 2000 and Christ's millennial reign. Will the year 2000 (or 2001?) see the start of the thousand years mentioned in the Bible? Will all the present Millennium plans be fulfilled in the return of Jesus to the earth?

The Bible answer is that we do not know exactly when Jesus will return: **"Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matthew 24:36)**. But the conditions which will exist immediately prior to his coming are known: wars, famines, disease and great distress, men and women **"apprehensive of what is coming on the world"**. To be ready for his coming means being on constant alert. This was Jesus' message to his disciples:

"If the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (verses 43,44)

To be ready for Jesus' coming means that we must try to live now in accordance with God's Word, and to seek His Kingdom and glory. Those who will be with Jesus in his glory will be the ones whose names are found written in the Book of Life.

Will your name be there?

MICHAEL ASHTON

Most Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version