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A THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN

What is the “thousand year reign?” Who will be reigning? Where will the reign be? When is that reign? Why is there a thousand-year reign? How will it happen? Those are the news reporter’s five questions as applied to Revelation 20:1-6. If people would apply those questions to that passage some might be surprised at what they would learn.

The passage really gives no idea of the why or how. We can, however, answer the other questions.

What is the thousand-year reign? It is not, as some contend, Christ reigning a specific thousand years on earth. How do we know?

A thousand in the Bible, unless part of a more specific number, is generally an either an approximation or a hyperbole. Jesus at one time fed “about five thousand” men. (Mk 6:44) and “about four thousand.” (Mk 8:9) He later referred to the numbers as “five thousand” and “four thousand.” (Mk 8:19-20) Although Jesus used the specific number he was obviously meaning a non-specific approximation of thousands of people. When the psalmist refers to “the cattle upon a thousand hills” (Ps 50:10) as being God’s he is not limiting God’s ownership to a specific thousand hills. Instead he is using that large number to represent an unspecified area. If the Revelation were a history, like the gospels, we might expect the “thousand” to be relatively specific, an approximation. Most, if not all, people I know consider the Revelation to be symbolic. That is, few would contend that the book literally talks about a woman riding a seven-headed red beast (Rev 17:3) or that Jesus has a literal sword coming out of his mouth (Rev 1:16). If people consider this a book of symbols, how do those same people insist that the phrase “a thousand years” must be one of the few literal things in the book? Why can it not signify a long, indefinite period of time, like David’s “thousand hills” represents an indefinite area of land?

Jesus the Messiah is *already* reigning over a spiritual kingdom. He never intended to rule over this physical earth. “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” (John 18:36) He was telling Pilate that he was surrendering his life of his own will

because he did not want to be a mere earthly king. By dying he was going to be given an even greater kingdom than could be had on earth. If Jesus is now reigning over an even greater kingdom, why would he take a demotion to reign on earth?

Related to the last thought, who will be doing the reigning for the thousand years? This passage is not limiting Christ to a thousand-year reign. It says absolutely nothing about how long Christ is going to reign. The who of the passage is those who died to the spiritual “world.” They will reign the symbolic thousand years, and they will reign with Christ for that time. That limits their reign, not his. Further, the ones reigning with Christ will be those who have experienced the first resurrection. Since all in the church have experienced that resurrection (Romans 6), we must be reigning with Christ right now.

Some may say, “but the ones reigning were dead, and some of the dead were not resurrected.” That is true. We are, however, talking in spiritual terms. The first resurrection is for those who died to the world of sin. The second death of God’s punishment has no power over them. The “rest of the dead” are those who have never died to sin and will be resurrected eventually to punishment. They will never reign with Christ.

It all looks so simple that one wonders why others can not see. When viewed in purely spiritual terms the thousand-year reign is the life of the church. That will end at the final judgement, when Christ gives up his authority (1 Cor 15:28) and returns the kingdom to God. Until then we should enjoy the chance we have to reign with Christ today.

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WEAR THE GEAR

One of my internet readers recently asked if I had an article on the “whole armor of God.” Since I did not, I told her I would do one this month. The passage in question is Ephesians 6:11-18.

Since the baseball season has just drawn to a close, and I have been particularly interested this year, I would like to update the whole armor of God to correspond with items of a baseball catcher’s equipment. For any international readers who may not be as familiar with baseball, most of the equipment is similar to a batsman in cricket. In baseball, the catcher’s equipment is called “the tools of ignorance,” presumably because you have to be crazy to crouch down and try to catch a ball thrown 90 miles per hour while someone is swinging a bat inches from your face. In the case of the armor of God, they are not the tools of ignorance but of wisdom.

Why Wear the Gear?

Paul tells us why we need to put on the armor in one word: stand (verse 13). This doesn’t mean to stand up.

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Saul’s armor he would
have failed.

Too often we tend to think that “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” means just to get on our feet. Instead we can stand while sitting or lying down. The meaning of standing here is rather to stand firm.

Perhaps the greatest example of what Paul meant when he said to stand came at the battle of the pass of Thermopylae. The king of Sparta and three hundred soldiers held the pass against a vastly superior Persian army. Even when betrayed by a Greek traitor, they fought to the last man. They stood firm against a seemingly unbeatable foe, true to their code of honor. Paul was no doubt aware of this event. He may have been thinking of it when he told the Ephesians to stand.

We are not fighting Persia, he seems to be saying. Instead we fight a much more powerful foe. The spiritual army of Satan has leaders in high places. The army is all around us. There are even traitors among our acquaintances who would betray us for the vain promises of their king. We must stand against sin

like the Spartans stood against Xerxes. We must fight to our last breath.

Knowing this, we must be prepared to fight. That is why Paul tells us to wear the gear. We go out prepared, or we go out doomed to failure. David could not wear Saul’s armor to fight Goliath. Had he relied on that armor he would have failed. Instead he wore the armor of God.

The Gear We Wear

Keeping in mind our stated purpose of withstanding, our armament is purely defensive. God doesn’t call on us to conquer the spiritual powers of darkness; that is his job. He has a whole host of angels trained for that purpose. Our job, like the Spartans at Thermopylae, is simply to hold off the enemy. For that we don’t need slings and arrows, howitzers, or atomic bombs. We just need to protect ourselves.

The first item of gear a catcher puts on is never seen by the crowd at the ballpark. He “girds his loins” much as the Roman army wore a belt around their waist with armor covered leather plates hanging down. Likewise we are to wear a belt of truth (verse 14) to protect our most vulnerable part, our reputation. Perhaps Paul mentioned this first because it is one of the first areas where we can fail. In America in the twenty-first century we are seeing a serious diminishing of the truth. Reporters admit that they embellished or even fabricated stories to make themselves look good. Our politicians have such a reputation that it is a surprise when they actually tell the truth. Note that Paul did not say we are to be belted with “the truth.” He is not talking here about wearing the gospel, although we surely must do that. He is talking about basic honesty. If we are to stand against the powers of Satan, we have to be reliable. God doesn’t want a soldier who gives secrets to the enemy. He doesn’t want a catcher who calls for an outside fast ball and sets up for an inside curve.

Why is truth so important as a foundational piece of equipment? Consider the enemy. “When [the devil] speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar, and the father of it.” Jn 8:44) If we don’t start with truth, we have lost the battle because we are wearing the enemy’s colors.

One of the important pieces of a catcher’s gear is the chest protector. This has saved many a catcher from serious injury from a foul ball, hit straight back at high speed. This protects the heart and the other “vital” organs. We must wear this chest protector, and it is called “the

breastplate of right action.” (Verse 14) There are those who would say that right thinking is more important than doing right. Actually, both are equally important. Why is right action so important? Right action leads to or reinforces right thinking. When I was shipboard, we had fire drills every day. We had “general quarters” (battle stations) drills at least weekly. On my last ship it was my job, along with several others, to run these drills. Although the situations and locations sometimes differed, it was our job to ensure that everyone did everything the same way each time. The reason? So that they would not have to think when the real thing came along. Right action when it didn’t mean life or death ensured right action when it did. That is why we wear the breastplate of right action. Sometimes the temptations come when we are not expecting them. If we are accustomed to doing the right thing, we won’t have to think about what to do in the face of temptation.

Most softball catchers don’t wear shin-guards. Hardball catchers always do. One of the best investments I have made in recent years was the purchase of some shin-guards. They have protected me from bouncing pitches and runners sliding in, spikes high, at home. Because I was prepared, I saved a lot of skin on my legs. Paul tells the Ephesians they need to wear shin-guards, too. The shin-guards he speaks of are the “preparedness that comes from the gospel of peace.” (Verse 15) So, how does the good news of peace prepare us? Against what does it prepare us? Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (Jn 14:27) With the peace that the Messiah gives us we are prepared when difficulties come. When we wear these shin-guards we face everything without fear or trouble. We are protected from worry, because we are prepared with the good news of peace.

One of the most distinctive pieces of a baseball catcher’s equipment is his shield, commonly called a glove or mitt. The professional catcher knows that someone is shooting at him with a projectile moving at speeds from 85 to 105 miles per hour. Paul says we have to protect ourselves from projectiles as well. Instead of fastballs, though, they are fiery darts. To protect ourselves we wear a shield. It is bigger than a catcher’s mitt. The word used here designates a large, four-cornered, oblong shield—the shield of faith (verse 16). With it we quench the fiery darts of the evil one. Without it we die; with it we continue to live. “The just shall live by his faith.” (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38) Our faith is a conviction that Jesus is the Son of God. It is also a trust that his blood takes away our sins and that his resurrection is a promise of our own new life.

A catcher’s head is protected by his mask; a Christian’s by the helmet of salvation (verse 17). What

does salvation have to do with our head? Paul told Timothy, “from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation.” (2 Tim 3:15) He also spoke about hearing “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” (Eph 1:13) Salvation has to do with our hearing and our wisdom. It is granted by God, but requires an act of will on our part. Salvation requires that we use our heads.

When I first started equating the armor of God to a catcher’s gear I thought that the sword of the Spirit (verse 17) must correspond to the bat. After all, catchers are expected to be good hitters. Then I realized that the armor of God is purely defensive. Some have pointed out, I think erroneously, that the sword is the only offensive weapon of the armor. The Greek word used by Paul, however, is not the long sword of attack. It is a short sword or dagger used for protection. For that reason I equate it rather to the catcher’s arm. A valuable defensive weapon on any baseball team is the catcher’s ability to throw out base stealers. We have an enemy who is also in the job of stealing. He wants to steal souls, to rob us of our faith, to steal truth. In our defense we have the Spirit of

The breastplate of right action reinforces right thinking.

God. Paul tells us that the Spirit (not the sword) is the word of God. That is our defensive weapon. The way to keep the devil from stealing is to know the word. It is easy for someone to lead the church astray if it is a church that uses their Bibles for doorstops or dustcatchers. Rather, we should be like the Bereans. “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

Finally, Paul says we should be praying. “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” As we put on the gear, we must do it with prayer. If we put on the gear, we will no doubt pray.

Just as a professional catcher would never think of going out to play without the tools of ignorance, we must never face our battle without our tools of wisdom. Put on the whole armor. It might save you some pain.

THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

A few weeks ago when my son and I went to play in the local park there was a party going on. Several of the local Chinese families were having a barbecue in the park. At one point all the adults gathered in a big circle and sang songs and played games. They were having such a good time I remember thinking, "I know nothing of your language except the laughter." On further reflection, though, I was wrong. There was a Sunday in Hong Kong when I went to the assembly of the local congregation of the church of Christ. The singing, prayers, and lessons were in Cantonese, translated into Tagalog for the Filipino half of the congregation. Since I know neither of those languages, I understood little of what was said, except the laughter, and the praise. It was clear that these brothers and sisters of mine were praising God, and enjoying it.

Among the great pleasures I have known, one of the greatest is the knowledge that I can travel almost anywhere in the United States or around the world and I will find family. It is true that I may be, as Moses said, "a stranger in a strange land." Nevertheless, I am home because the church is there, and the church is family. I may not speak the language, especially in such foreign places as California and Texas. I may not know the customs of the land. But I have never failed to understand a smile and a bow or handshake.

This should never surprise me. Paul, world traveler as he was, knew the same feeling. He had apparently never been to Colossae, but he sends extensive greetings to those who were there. (Col 4:7-18) He was, after some initial discomfort due to his past, welcomed in Jerusalem.

Paul felt a kinship to every Christian, and expected it to be true of everyone else. This is reflected in his descriptions of the church. Particularly, he speaks of Christians as a household. To Timothy he spoke of "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth." (1 Tim 3:15)

Paul seems to have had a special kinship with the congregation in Ephesus, the Chicago of the Roman Empire. He tells them that they may have been strangers, living in the second largest city in the world, but they are now family. "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." (Eph 2:19) Paul did not think it strange that people who spoke a variety of languages and were from practically every corner of the world could become one household. He had probably personally seen it happen one Pentecost in Jerusalem. He had experienced it in Antioch, the third city of the empire. Now he saw it also in Ephesus.

Not only had Paul seen the kinship of believers, he also expected it to affect their behavior. We know from our own family experiences that family is special. Brothers may fight, but will stand together against outsiders. Sisters may put each other down, but don't let somebody else say the same thing. Paul expects the same loyalty among Christians. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Gal 6:10)

It is great to be part of a household. How much better that we are in the household of God!

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