

The End of the Ages

Revelation 20:1-15

Russ Kennedy

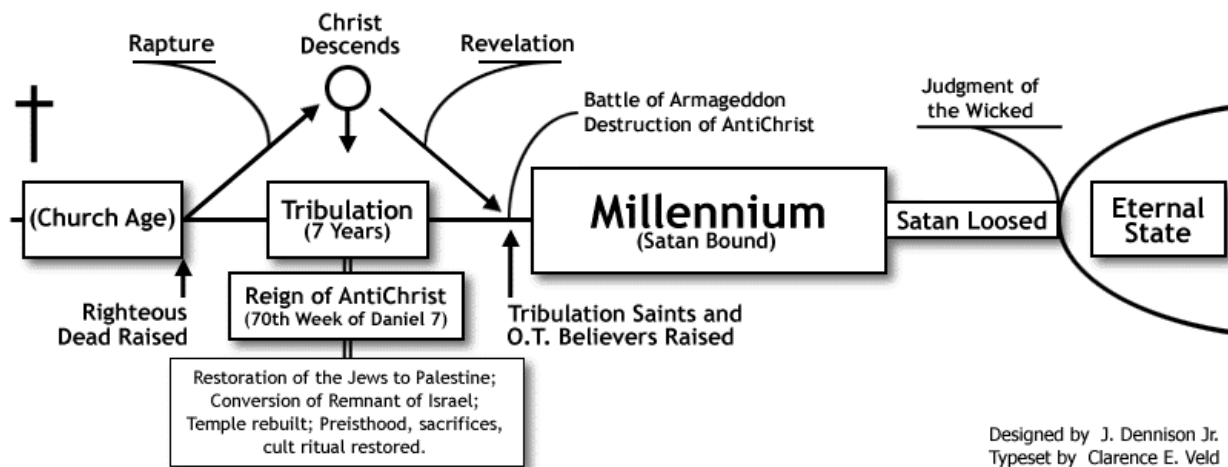
It is sad that many texts intended to encourage us and fill us with hope have not done so. They become texts we either avoid or we beat each other up over. We come now to one of those texts. The subject of this chapter is one of filled with controversy. Many good Christians and many churches use their interpretation of this text as a test of doctrine. I don't think we should do that. I think we should respect those who hold a different position than us.

I want to be clear. What I will say tonight is not to be taken as the position of the Elders or the church. I am not speaking *ex cathedra*. This is my view, as closely to the text as I can hew it. Others are persuaded differently. May we have grace to embrace the rule of Christ over our lives so that we love one another as we rule and reign with him.

Common Views

Let's take a moment to look at the common schemes and their differing views of Revelation 20.

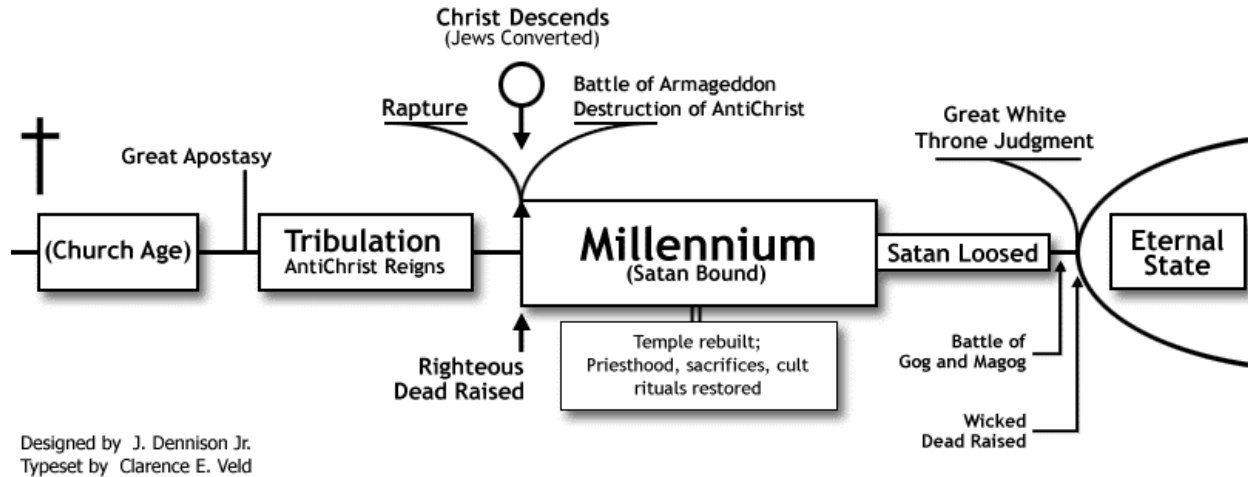
Dispensational Premillennialism



The Dispensationalist uses a kind of literal interpretation of the Bible that requires that the Old Testament promises be understood *as a Jew reading them would have understood them*. There is little room for a New Testament interpretation of the promises. Therefore, Revelation 20 is seen as a literal fulfillment of the promises of kingdom for Israel with Jesus on the Davidic throne.

For me the key issue is that 1,000 years does not and cannot fulfill the promise. When the promise was given and repeated, it is always said to be "forever". Furthermore, they believe that there will be full return to Old Testament sacrificial, cultic system.

Historical Premillennialism



Historic premillennialists use a historical grammatical approach that has some elements of redemptive-historical in it. They do not see the 1000 year reign as being for Israel, but for all of God’s people who rule and reign with Jesus over the restored Garden-City of God. Some would say there is a return to the Old Testament system but many now would not.

This view is the closest to the literal reading of Revelation 20. Its great weakness is that it teaches two different resurrections of believers which is not taught anywhere else in the Bible.

Amillennialism



Amillennialist (Inaugurated Millennialists) use a redemptive-historical interpretation of the Bible. They see the 1000 year reign as symbolic of the rule and reign of Christ in

heaven in this age with a general resurrection at the end of the age. Their views on Daniel's 70 Week vary widely.

This view has much to commend it but does not handle the 70 week of Daniel very well.

New Covenant Background

Everyone working with Revelation 20 has a framework, a background they bring that informs them. These are usually how they interpret the Bible and how they understand the relationship between Israel and the church. I want to start with some background that we bring to our study. I am not going to prove these - we have presented them over the years in the past.

Redemptive history follows a promise-fulfillment motif organized around the old and the new with Christ as the completer of the old and the inaugurator of the new.

All the Old Testament Covenants are fulfilled in Christ with the New Covenant being the central feature of the present age in all its newness.

The promises of a seed, a nation, a land, a king, a temple of which Israel was the picture, the promise, the type have all been fulfilled in Christ.

The church is formed in Christ and thus participates in those fulfillments in an all-ready but not yet way. This is called an inaugurated fulfillment.

At the cross the old wall of the Mosaic Law that divided Jew from Gentile was abolished. In Christ, we are one new man, people, nation, temple, kingdom, priests.

According to Ephesians, Galatians and Hebrews, the old sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law is done away with forever. There will *not* be a future reinstatement even as a memorial.

There is no future for Israel as a nation in blessing.

There will be an ingathering of Jewish people at the end of this present age.

All of the New Testament speaks of this age and the age to come where the age to come is the new heavens and new earth.

All of the New Testament teaches that the Kingdom of God began when Jesus came the first time. Over and over again, the kingdom is here because Jesus has come. The church is God's kingdom. Believers have been moved from the domain (a location) of Satan to the kingdom (where there is a king and subjects) of God's beloved Son.

Jesus is ruling and reigning now from heaven in the hearts of His elect. The saints are ruling and reigning with Him now.

The Thousand Years

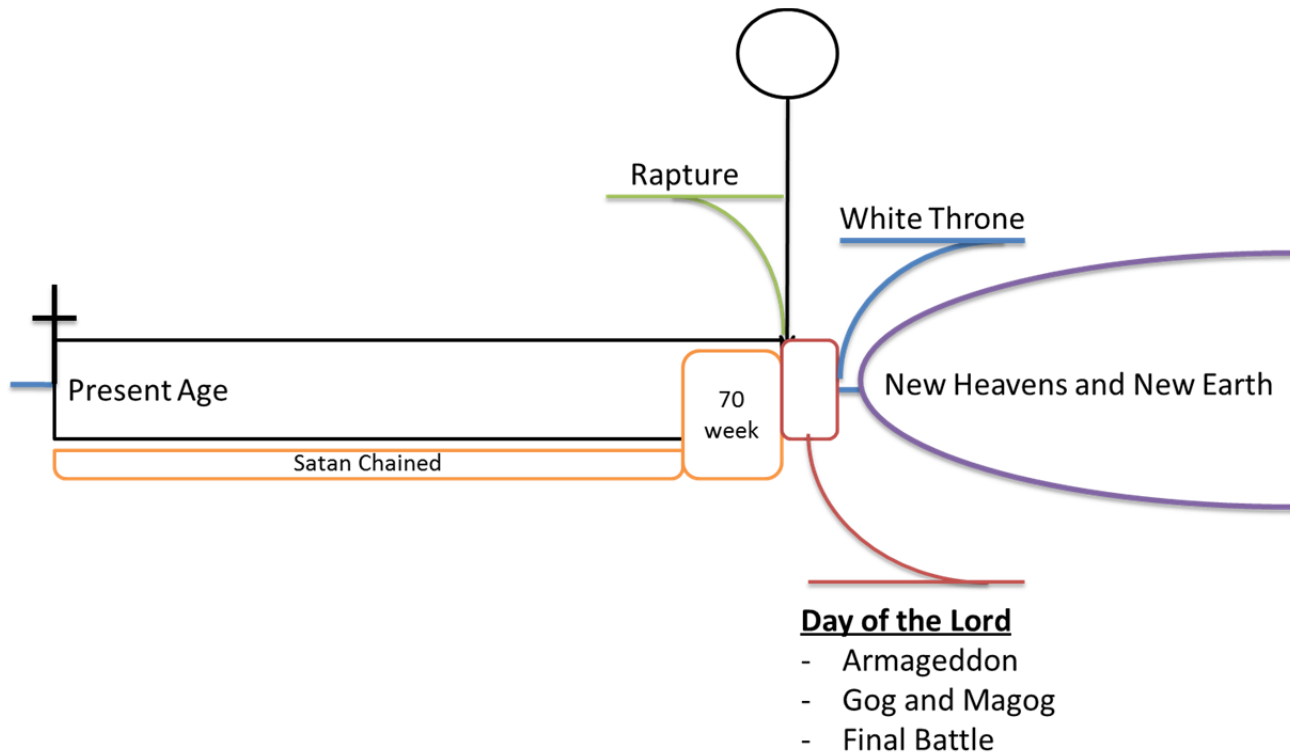
(v.1-6)

¹ Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. ² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³ 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.

⁴ 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. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ 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.

Establishing the Context

The New Testament and the book of Revelation in particular have established a simple scheme that looks like this. It has been repeated several times in Revelation.



What causes me to pause:

A 1000 year reign is never mentioned directly in rest of Scripture. Something this significant would almost surely be mentioned by Jesus, Paul or Peter. But they never do.

A 1000 year age presents a problem with "present age and age to come" language of the rest of the New Testament.

A 1000 year rule cannot fulfill Israel's Kingdom. The kingdom promised to David is to last forever.

What is its purpose? Some have said it is a final test of mankind. It proves that man will rebel against God even under a perfect rule. Yet nothing like that is ever actually said in the Scripture. It is very difficult to come up with a purpose for this period that is actually stated by Scripture itself.

Who will populate it and will be apostate at its end?

Yet the language of the two paragraphs can be fulfilled fairly literally.

What convinces me that this is not a future period of time:

Period in which Satan is bound and released when the Bible teaches that Satan was cast out of heaven at the cross

Period in which the saints rule and the Bible teaches that we are ruling and reigning with Him now. This text never says "on earth".

Period between the first and second resurrections when this text calls it "coming to life" - regeneration and our resurrection from spiritual death

Period is called 1000 years (1) common way of referring to a regency (2) connects to OT (3) no one knows the real, literal length of this age.

Parallel Structure of Context

It is important also to note the structure of the context. This structure seems to indicate that Revelation 20:1-6 are not sequential to the texts before them.

A judgment of the harlot (17:1-19:6)

 B the divine Judge (19:11-16)

 C judgment of the beast and the false prophet (19:17-21; cf. Ezekiel 39)

 D Satan imprisoned for 1,000 years (20:1-3)

 D' the saints reign/judge for 1,000 years (20:4-6)

 C' the judgment of Gog and Magog (20:7-10; cf. Ezekiel 38-39)

 B' the divine Judge (20:11-15)

A' vindication of the bride (21:1-22:5; cf. 19:7-9).

Satan's Limitation**(v.1-3)**

¹ Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. ² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³ 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.

John sees Satan bound and imprisoned for a 1,000 years. The purpose is to prevent him from doing what he does best, deceive the nations. At the end of this period, he is released for a short time presumably to deceive the nations.

The core question here is what is being portrayed by this imprisonment? Is he being physically or spiritually imprisoned so that he does not roam the earth? That is what is seen. But is that what is happening? Those who say, this is what is happening then must have a period of time between the Lord's second coming and the final judgment.

The reference to "the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain" is probably the same as the key of death and hell which Christ holds because He has overcome through His death and resurrection (Revelation 1:18).

I think, in the light of other texts, that what is portrayed here is a *limitation*. Before the cross and resurrection, Satan had much greater freedom to roam the universe and to carry out his deception of the all the people groups. Now, in this age, he is limited. Because of the gospel and the calling out of God's people into the kingdom, he no longer holds the control over the nations he had when God was mostly saving Jewish people.

It is likely that the binding here is alluding to Matthew 12:26-29 and Mark 3:26-27. There, clearly referring to Satan, the strongman has to be bound before his own can be taken. Consider the Matthew record.

²⁶ And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹ Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

In the chart above, you see that I believe that Satan is bound during this present age in which we live. He will be loosed in Daniel's 70th week and wreck havoc in the final days.

Saints Dominion

(v.4-6)

⁴ 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. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ 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.

Concurrent with the binding of Satan is the dominion of the saints. These saints in heaven are categorized three ways. They are those who sit on the thrones. They are those who are martyred for the gospel. There are those who never worshipped the beast.

They are described as having come to life and reign with Christ. This is the first resurrection. The rest of the dead being unbelievers did not come to life till the end of days. These who have come to life in the first resurrection will never be subject to the second death in hell. They will rule and reign with Christ as priests for the 1,000 years.

One interpretation is that the first resurrection is at the coming of Christ in the rapture and resurrection. Then the saints will rule and reign on the earth during the 1,000 years. At then end then the unbelieving dead will be raised to face their judgment.

Another understands the coming to life of the first resurrection as the regeneration of the saints. This is consistent with the Pauline language. The saints are seated in the heavenlies in Christ. It is from there they rule and reign. The scene of verses 4-6 is in heaven not on the earth. So, through this kingdom age, the saints have been given life and are now ruling and reigning with Jesus until this age is finished.

There is so much more that the commentators wrestle with. Let us be generous with each other. Those who hold to a literal 1,000 future rule of Christ with Satan bound and the saints ruling and reigning with Him have good grounds to believe that from this text. There are problems, the largest being that such a period is never spoken of in any other New Testament text.

Those who hold to this age is the age of the kingdom with the saints raised and ruling with Christ and Satan limited in his present power to deceive the nations and destroy God's people also have good ground to believe that. There are problems, the largest being that it requires a synthesis of prior prophetic material and a more non-literal interpretation of the text.

The Final Battle**(v.7-10)**

⁷ And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. ⁹ And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, ¹⁰ and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Satan's Leadership**(v.7-8)**

At the end of the age, Satan is released from his confinement or his limitation. He deceives the nations and gathers them together to make war on God and His saints. I believe this is parallel to Revelation 19:11-21. The scene described here is the same as is described there. We see now that behind the leadership of the beast and the false prophet is the deceiving drive of Satan.

The Nations' Folly**(v.9)**

In the vision, John connects this scene to Ezekiel 36-39. There the nations of earth who are deceived by Satan are drawn by God into this final battle so that He can vindicate His name. They go up against the camp of the saints and the beloved city. These two references, the first to Israel in the wilderness and to Jerusalem or Mt. Zion, are fulfilled in the New Covenant by the church. In the next chapter of Revelation we will see the bride of Christ descending as a city, the New Jerusalem. Once again we are pointed away from literalness to figurative, symbolic understandings.

Many Old Testament texts have these verses as their end. For example, one is Psalm 11:4-7.

⁴ The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD's throne is in heaven;
his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.

⁵ The LORD tests the righteous,
but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.

⁶ Let him rain coals on the wicked;
fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

⁷ For the LORD is righteous;
he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.

The nations are destroyed by God. It is a vast and unimaginable horror. Blood as deep as a horses' bridle for 150 miles; carnage so great it would take 6 months to clean up. But this judgment by God upon the unbelieving who rebel against Him and march against Him and His people is nothing compared to what is about to follow.

Satan's Final Destruction **(v.10)**

Along with the beast and false prophet, Satan is thrown into the lake of fire.¹⁹ There they will be tormented without end forever. While exactly what the lake of fire is, we do not know. But we do know that is a place of unending, eternal, conscious, personal punishment forever.

The Final Judgment **(v.10-15)**

John's final vision of the end of the age is the scene of God's final judgment

The Great White Throne **(v. 11)**

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.

This is the end of the age. He sees a throne. He sees the fear and terror that the One who sits on it invokes. This scene evokes the judgment scenes of the Old Testament and particularly, Daniel 7:9-10. To this throne all the unbelieving dead are summoned for their final condemnation.

The Sinners' Final Damnation **(v.12-13)**

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

Gathered before the throne are all who have ever lived. No matter where they died or their body rests, they are raised from the dead to face this judgment.

In the vision, a set of books is opened. This is a clear allusion to Daniel 7:9 and 12:1-2. One set of books is the book of life. The other books seem to be a record of what each person has done. Those who are being judged here will be judged based on their deeds. This is how God's righteousness is vindicated and how the saints received justice. No one gets away with their sins. The punishment they suffer is according to what they have done.

The Second Death **(v. 14-15)**

¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

God brings about the end of temporary judgments. Death and Hades (hell) are personified here and treated like living beings. Death is a judgment for sin against God. Hades or hell was the temporary place of punishment until the final judgment. It is important to remember that people in hell now are not in the final place of torment. They are suffering. But the final judgment is yet to come.

The lake of fire is the place and means of eternal conscious punishment. It is marked by separation from God. The first death is separation of the soul from the body. The second

death is the separation of the soul and body from the God. While the Bible does not explain much about what this means, it is described in terms that make it unimaginable torment.

The book that determines eternal destiny is called the book of life. If a person's name is not in the book of life, then they are condemned to spend eternity in the lake of fire. This book of life is the roll of the redeemed.

Revelation 13:8 - 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

Revelation 21:22–27 - ²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

So the names were written in the book of life before the creation of the universe. They are the ones who have been redeemed by the Lamb. They will never face the second death. And all whose names are not there will be thrown into the Lake of Fire to suffer the wrath of God forever.

Reflect and Respond

I want to conclude this with a serious call.

Be generous to those who hold differing views on eschatology. In many texts, it is hard to come to definitive conclusions. What is believed before coming to the text often controls how the text is understood.

I experienced a bit of what it is like to be mis-represented last week as relates to another subject.

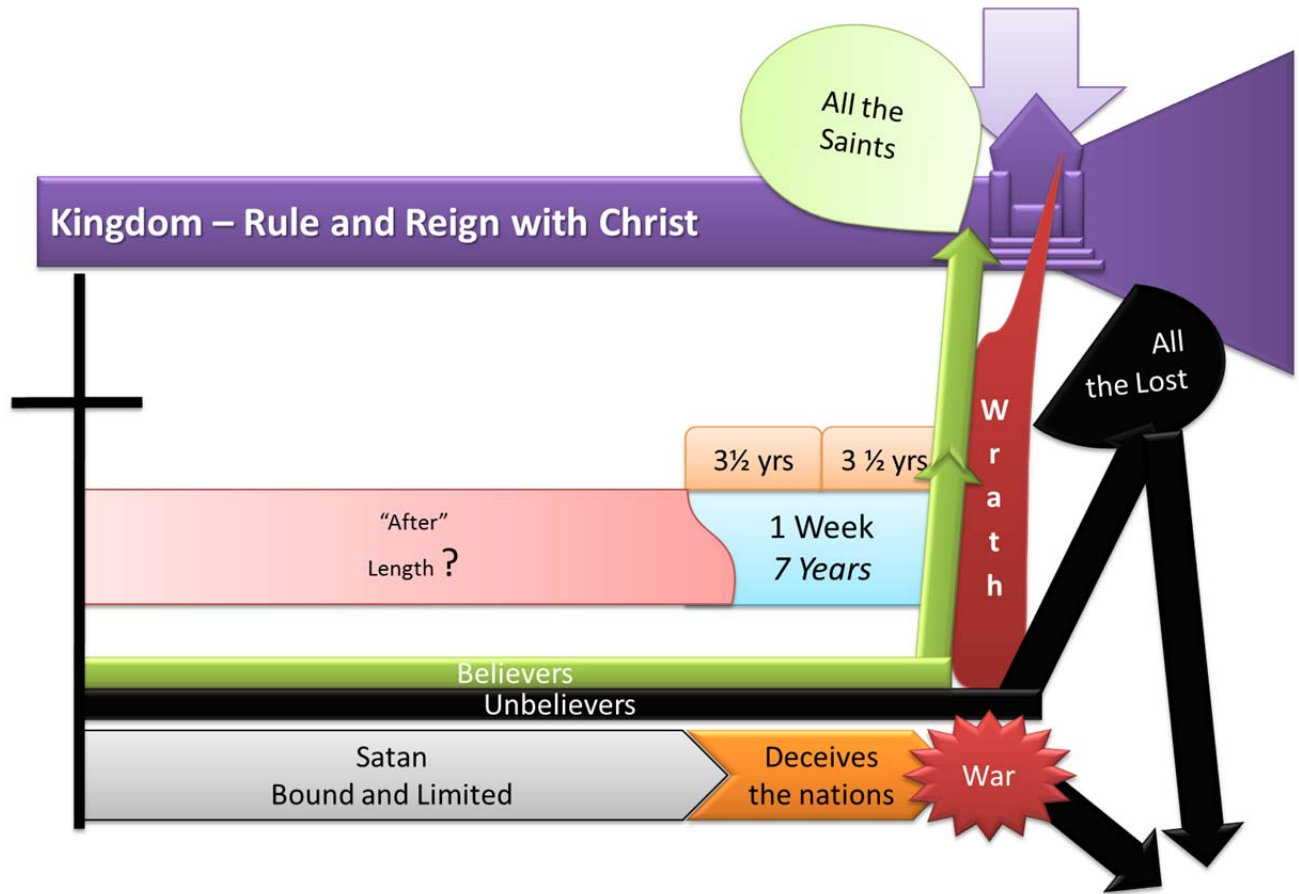
Do not caricaturize others. It is easy to present a caricature of a person's position and hold it up for ridicule.

Be sure you deal with what is actually believed by others. Do not misrepresent someone's position and then argue against that.

The judgment that is faced by the lost is both just and terrible. It ought to sober us. Are you a believer? Have you truly turned away from your sins and trusted in the Lord? Do so, even tonight.

Visualizing the Text

The following is a graphic that will represent my understanding of this present age with inauguration of the kingdom of God until its consummation in the new creation.



Notes

¹⁹ Note that the verb “were” here is not in the original. It is added to make sense in English but probably should be “are”. One should not, based on this verb, infer that there is a period of time between the beast and the false prophet being cast in the lake of fire and Satan being cast there as well. This is meant to point us back to the scene of Revelation 19 and connect them together.