Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

If you heard brother Brett’s message last Sunday morning, you will remember that 1 Cor. 15 says that when Christ comes again, a trumpet will sound, and the bodies of all the dead will rise and become imperishable bodies that are reunited with their souls, and the bodies of those living will instantly become changed into imperishable bodies. And the believer’s comfort is that we will then be ready for eternity in heaven where there is no more death or sin!

So it may surprise you to learn that many (and perhaps even the majority of!) Christians today believe that there will one day be a Rapture, where just believers will disappear up to heaven, which will be followed some years later by the return of Jesus, who will rule, on earth, from a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, for 1000 years, after which will come the Day of Judgment and eternity. It is the view known as **pre-millennialism** – the belief that Jesus comes pre (before) the millennium – the 1000 year earthly reign.

And I am sure you can see that there is not even a hint of anything like that in our Confession article. So have we missed something that the Bible teaches, perhaps?

Well, Revelation 20 is a key text for those who hold this view. So we want to look at Revelation 20 together. And this easily could be the subject of a series of sermons but I hope that we can do enough today to see that the Bible does not teach a 1000 year reign on earth by Christ, but that the Second Coming of Christ will bring the general resurrection and the Day of Judgment and eternity.

So there will be three parts to this sermon:

First, I want to walk you through a very basic summary of the pre-millennial interpretation of Revelation. Then we will consider the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible about the Last Things. And thirdly and finally, we will look at Rev. 20 again in the light of all we have learned and conclude with the So what? of this topic.

1. So we begin with a basic summary of the Pre-millennial interpretation of Revelation and especially ch. 20.
   1. And basically, they view the Book of Revelation as a record of a series of events that follow one after the other:
      1. So the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 are a description of the different types of congregations that are found during **the church age**. And the church age is the time between the ascension of Jesus and the Rapture.
      2. **the rapture** is the moment when just believers are taken straight up to heaven to be with the Lord. And although the Rapture is not taught explicitly here in revelation, pre-millennialists believe it is *implied* in ch’s 4-5 where we have a description of the church worshipping in heaven. So, according to this view, unbelievers remain here on earth while believers who died and believers who were raptured are with the Lord in heaven. And this will probably be for a short period of around seven years, according to the view of most pre-millennialists).
      3. But it is during this period of seven years that the events of Ch’s 6-19 take place, which pre-millennialists refer to as the **Tribulation** or the time of great trouble. And those chapters mention the twelve tribes of Israel and the nations of the world trying to destroy Israel. And if you look back at ch. 19, you will see that a great battle is described in the first part of the chapter. But in v11, Jesus comes down to earth on a white horse, and from v14, the “*armies of heaven*” join Him, and they help Israel defeat the nations of the earth and the beast and the false prophet.
      4. And what we read in ch. 20 is what happens next:
         1. Satan is thrown into a pit for **1000 years** so that he cannot deceive the nations during that thousand years.
         2. And from v4, Jesus is joined by those who died as martyrs, which is described as the first resurrection, and those who resisted the beast, and He reigns on earth with them for 1000 years to establish His kingdom.
         3. And then, from v7, Satan is released at the end of the 1000 years to gather the nations of the world for the battle of Armageddon, which is fought near Jerusalem, the “beloved city,” as you see in v9, but fire will come down from heaven to defeat the devil and his armies and they will be thrown into the lake of fire.
         4. And then vv11-14 describes the second resurrection, the general resurrection of all the dead, and **Judgment Day** and everlasting life for the children of God and everlasting damnation for the wicked.
      5. And finally, ch. 21 describes everlasting life as the **New Heaven and the New Earth**.
      6. So, by way of review, there is the church age, the rapture, the tribulation, the Second Coming, the 1000 year reign on earth, the general resurrection, Judgment Day, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.
   2. And you have to admit, the Bible is taken seriously and literally in this interpretation. You can see the logic. And a thousand years is mentioned *six times* in this chapter! And so, given that we put a lot of emphasis, in all sorts of areas of theology, on taking the Bible literally, you can understand why our Pre-millennial friends think that they have a very strong case for their interpretation of Revelation.
2. So this is a good time for us to review a couple of Bible study rules: First, we are to **interpret Scripture with Scripture**. Because the God who inspired the Bible is a God of unity, there will always be harmony of teaching in the Bible; we won’t find one thing taught here and another thing taught there. And second, **the plain always trumps the less plain**. So if we have three passages which plainly teach A, and one that appears to teach B, then we have to do more work with understanding the one that appears to teach B because it will teach A. So what we need to do now is to look at the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible about the Last Things.
   1. So please turn with me to **Ephesians 2:12**. You will recall that the OT, by and large, is the record of God’s dealings with Israel. It was with them, almost exclusively, that He worked in a saving way. The other nations of the world, the Gentile or Non-Jewish nations, were outside of salvation. In v12, to the Gentiles, Paul said, “*Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*.” But the wonder of NT times is what Paul describes next, “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*.” And then he celebrates the wonderful truth that in terms of salvation, there is no longer Jew and Gentile; there is “*one man in place of the two*.” There is just the church of all those who trust in Jesus Christ! Paul now understood that the time of Jew and Gentile division was finished and that the church was God’s plan of salvation for the nations.
      1. And in a similar vein, you may remember that **when Jesus was talking to the Samaritan woman at the well**, she asked him which of Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim was the right place for God to be worshipped? And Jesus replied, “*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father … the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth*.” So the time of Jerusalem being central to God’s plan of salvation was over. And that moment when Jerusalem ceased to be the place of worship was symbolized by the temple veil that tore in two when Jesus died. Do you remember that, boys and girls? And later, in AD 70, Jerusalem was completely destroyed, as God’s Judgment for what had been done there to the Lord Jesus.
      2. And the point of considering these things is that one of the problems with the pre-millennial view is that it undoes what Ephesians 2 and Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman make very plain – that with His coming it is no more about a Jew and Gentile division, and it is no longer about Jerusalem. Do you see that? In the Pre-millennial view, after the church age it goes back the Jews and the Temple for the thousand year reign. But congregation, **the church of Christ is the pinnacle, the crown jewel, the end goal, if you like, of God’s salvation plan in history**. So the Pre-millennial view would be like if the story of Cinderalla had her marrying Prince Charming in a glittering wedding but then after a few years of marriage going back to live with the ugly sisters and her Step-mother. What?
      3. So, in terms of understanding Revelation, we need to keep in mind that the consistent truth of Scripture is that the church of Christ is the pinnacle of God’s salvation plan in history.
   2. And what comes after salvation history is what we turn our attention to next. And I am going to quickly mention several passages, which you are welcome to look up if you know your Bible well, or just listen along and you can look them up later.
      1. Earlier we sung **Psalm 96**. That Psalm says, “The Lord “*comes, for He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in His faithfulness*.” So what will follow the coming of Jesus? Judgment of all people. There is no hint there of a 1000 year reign between coming and judgment.
      2. And we find the same thing in **Matthew 25:31-32**, “*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on his glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*.” Again, it is Second Coming and Judgment day; there is no hint of 1000 years in between.
      3. And **Romans 8** talks about the Spirit of God at work in the church of Christ throughout history that concludes when the sons of God are revealed, a clear reference to the Second Coming and the resurrection and the Day of Judgment. And what comes next? Creation is “*set free from its bondage to decay*.” And again, there is no room in there for a 1000 year earthly reign of Christ
      4. And I began the sermon by mentioning **1 Cor. 15**. It says that Christ will come and all those who have fallen asleep [which means died] will rise because “*the last enemy to be destroyed is death*.” So again, it is Second Coming and no more death or sin or decay; not Second Coming and then 1000 more years of sin and death and decay.
      5. And it is exactly the same with **2 Cor. 5**, **1 Thess. 4**, and **2 Thess. 1**. These passages all plainly connect the Second Coming with Judgment Day, the resurrection, and no more death or decay or sin. They are incompatible with the idea of a 1000 year reign of Christ on earth.
      6. And all this is why the church has always believed what is stated in the ancient **Apostles’ Creed**: “He shall come again to judge the living and the dead.”
3. So with all that in mind, let’s look again at **Revelation and especially ch. 20**. And here too we can only scratch the surface, but hopefully it will be sufficient.
   1. I think I have mentioned it before, but a very helpful and easy to read book about Revelation is Vern Poythress’ book, *The Returning King*. He summarizes Revelation in this way, “God rules history and will bring it to its consummation in Christ”; or, in short, Jesus is gonna win! That is the repeated message of Revelation – Jesus is gonna win! And the key interpretation difference that Poythress helpfully explains is that Revelation is not a sequence of events that take place one after the other, but seven descriptions of the time between Jesus’ first coming and His Second Coming from different vantage points or perspectives. So it’s not seven events, but seven views of the same event from different angles.
      1. Let me illustrate this for you. Back in the olden days when there was sport, I would get these video clips from the football team that I like to follow called **Access All Areas**. And the idea behind the clips is that because there are cameras all around the stadium that are all following the action, you can see the same goal from 20 different angles. Now, if you did not understand the idea of the video, you might think that you just saw a game with 20 goals by one player. But because you understand the idea behind the video, you know it is 1 goal from a bunch of angles.
      2. And that is what Revelation gives us – seven different angles or perspectives of the time between Jesus’ first Coming and His Second Coming. Some are on earth and some are from heaven and some focus more on the early events of that period and just end with Jesus’ victory, while others focus more on Jesus’ final victory, etc, but they are all describing the same period – the time between the first coming and the second coming.
      3. And while we could look at all sorts of technical explanations for this understanding, I just want to point out one example from Revelation 19 and 20. And it is this: If you look at the last verse of Revelation 19, **a great battle** ends with birds eating the flesh of the enemy armies. And if you look at 20:8, there is reference there to **Gog and Magog and a battle**. And our Pre-millennial friends view this as one battle before the thousand year reign and another one after it. But Ezekiel 38-39 describes a great battle with Gog and Magog and the Lord giving their bodies to the birds to feast on. Right? So ch. 19 and 20 are actually describing the same battle, but from different angles.
   2. So remembering all that we have looked at together, let’s walk through ch. 20 again as an account of the period of time between Jesus’ ascension and His Second Coming.
      1. And it begins with the binding of Satan. In **John 12:31**, Jesus said, “*Now will the ruler of this world be cast out*.” In **Luke 10:18**, Jesus said, “*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*.” The binding of Satan happened with Jesus first coming and His victorious death on the cross. Prior to that time, as we noted earlier, Satan ‘owned’ all of the nations of the world, except for Israel. That is why he could offer them to Jesus during the wilderness temptations. But after the cross, with Satan having been bound, Jesus said, “*Go and make disciples of all the nations*.” Now the nations would come to Jesus Christ.
      2. So now let’s look at the thousand years. And there are many more examples I could give you but here are three examples of a **symbolic use** of a thousand from Scripture:
         1. In the 10 Commandments, God promises to show steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love Him. Does that mean that God’s love runs out with the 1001st generation? No, a thousand is just symbolic for many.
         2. In **Psalm 50:10**, God says, “*Every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills*.” And again, that is just symbolic for many.
         3. **2 Peter 3:8** says that “*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years*.” And again, that thousand is symbolic for many.
         4. Nowhere else in Scripture is there a reference to a literal one thousand year reign of Christ on earth. This is the only place in the Bible that appears to suggest such a thing. So interpreting Scripture with Scripture and letting the plain interpret the less plain, the thousand years mentioned here is symbolic for the whole period of time between Christ’s first and second coming.
         5. And this is also consistent with the frequent mention of the word ‘sign’ in Revelation and the many other symbolic numbers that we find there.
      3. And vv4-6 are a description of this period of time between Jesus’ first coming and Second Coming.
         1. Where does Jesus reign now? In heaven. John mentions seeing thrones. And **Revelation 3:21** says, “*The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne*.” Where is the throne of Father? In heaven. These are thrones not on earth but in heaven. So right now Jesus is reigning in heaven with the souls of all the believers who have died. That is what is being described here.
         2. And we see this also in v5’s use of the term “**first resurrection**.” On the surface, first suggests two instances of the same thing; two instances of bodily resurrection, which is the Pre-millennialist view. But again, interpreting Scripture with Scripture gives us a different interpretation: Listen to the language of **Ephesians 2:5-6**, “*God made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*” Do you see how that language harmonizes, very beautifully, with what is described in vv4-6? So our coming to faith in Christ is described in Eph. 2 with resurrection language. And those who go through that *spiritual* or *first* resurrection need not fear death, because their souls go immediately to reign with Christ in heaven. And then the second resurrection is the one described in v12, which is the general and bodily resurrection of all who have died when Jesus comes again. OK? So the first resurrection is the spiritual resurrection of all who come to faith in Christ in this life and the second resurrection is the second, general, bodily resurrection takes place when Christ comes again.
      4. And then vv7-10 are a description of the short time of tribulation that will take place just before the return of Jesus, and vv11-14 describe the return of Jesus, the general resurrection, and the day of Judgment, and ch. 21 describes eternity in the New Heavens and New Earth.

So to answer the question that we began with, our confession article is not missing something that the Bible teaches. The end will come when Jesus returns and the dead are raised and judged, and some are welcomed into the eternity of heaven and others are condemned to an eternity in hell. And that leaves us with a pretty big **So what? question**: And we can’t put the question any better than the Lord does in 2 Peter 3:

*Scoffers say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" … [they need to know that] the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly … The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*

So did you catch the ‘So what?’ question? “*What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God*?”

And are you [being] “*diligent to be found by Him without spot or blemish, and at peace*”?

None of what we have done today is so we can pat ourselves on the back about understanding Revelation 20 properly. In fact, given our human limitations there will undoubtedly be points that we don’t fully understand yet. The question is: Have you put your faith in Jesus as your Saviour? And does knowing that Jesus reigns now and that your soul will go to be with Him when you die and that you will be declared innocent on the Day of Judgment affect the way you live, each day? Is holiness and godliness in speech and sexual purity and relationships and honesty something you strive for? Are you pursuing a spotless and blemish free life? Is hating sin and evil and loving right and good really important to you? And are you quick to flee to Jesus in confession when you stumble into sin?

May it be so. May it be so. For if it is, then your favourite prayer will be, “Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly. Amen.”