The Case for a Literal, Physical, Earthly Millennial Reign of Christ
By Erich Sauer as cited in John MacArthur’s Matthew Commentary

Contrary to what some Bible teachers and theologians claim, the idea of a literal, physical, earthly Millennium did not originate in modern times. As the astute German theologian Erich Sauer has well documented, belief in such a literal thousand-year, earthly kingdom was the common and orthodox view of the early church, from New Testament times through the middle of the third century (see his The Triumph of the Crucified [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951]). Early church Fathers such as Papias, Justin, Tertullian, and Hippolytus all affirmed a literal and earthly future kingdom ruled directly by Christ. It was only later, as allegorical hermeneutics became fashionable, that literal millennialism was rejected in favor of a spiritualized interpretation (p. 144).

Those who reject a literal Millennium must do one or more of three things. The first is to confuse Israel and the church, taking the church to be a spiritualized form of the ancient nation of Israel. In that case, the Old Testament curses were for literal Israel, being already fulfilled, and the promises of blessing to Israel would be fulfilled in the church, but in a spiritual, not literal, way. That kind of divided, inconsistent hermeneutics in unacceptable. The second is to make present or past what is clearly future, assuming that all the promises to the literal nation and people of Israel have already been fulfilled, making the earthly kingdom unnecessary. The third is to arbitrarily spiritualize certain Old Testament prophecies, taking predicted places, events, or persons as being merely symbols of spiritual ideas or truths instead of physical and historical realities.

In the book just mentioned above (pp. 144–53), Erich Sauer suggests five compelling arguments for a literal and historical future kingdom. First of all, such a kingdom would be the only adequate confirmation of the truthfulness and reliability of God’s promises. Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would establish an everlasting kingdom on the throne of David (Isa. 9:6–7). Paul declared that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” referring specifically to His promises to ancient Israel (Rom. 11:29). But if those promises were merely figurative, their fulfillments could never be verified and would be meaningless. In particular, the prophecies about the Messiah would have no clear meaning and could never be verified. But Isaiah himself declared that the Lord’s promises are more unshakable than the mountains (Isa. 54:10) and Israel’s endurance as a nation will be as permanent as the new heavens and the new earth that the Lord will one day create (66:22). Jeremiah affirmed that God’s covenant promises are more secure than the pattern of night following day (Jer. 33:20) and more stable than the courses of the sun, moon, and stars (31:35–36).

Second, an earthly millennial kingdom is the only explanation of the end times that corresponds to Jesus’ teaching in the gospels. For example, His promise to the apostles that one day they would “sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28) would be meaningless apart from a literal, historical restoration of Israel.

Third, an earthly millennial kingdom is the only consistent interpretation of Messianic prophecy. It is obvious from the gospel records that a great many of those prophecies were literally fulfilled during Jesus’ lifetime. He was born in Bethlehem, just as Micah predicted (5:2). He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, and was pierced in the side, just as Zechariah predicted (9:9; 11:12; 12:10). His hands and feet were literally pierced, precisely as the psalmist predicted (22:16; cf. 16:10), and He literally died, was buried, and was resurrected, just as Isaiah predicted (53:8–12).

Those fulfillments were so obviously literal that no one suggests the predictions of them were merely symbolic of spiritual truths. Yet many other equally specific and detailed predictions
about the Messiah, such as His establishing an eternal throne over the kingdom of David, were just as obviously not fulfilled during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Therefore, to reject the idea of a literal Millennium is to maintain that some of the Old Testament prophecies were literal and some were not. And to take that position is to assume arbitrarily that all prophecies not literally fulfilled by New Testament times are to be spiritualized.

At the time they were written, all Old Testament predictions obviously pertained to the future. By what logic or authority, then, does one take some of their fulfillments to be literal and others to be only figurative?

Fourth, an earthly, visible kingdom is the best possible way for Jesus Christ to demonstrate that He is the supreme ruler over His creation. How else could He prove Himself to be King of kings and Lord of lords? How could He verify that His rulership is superior to that of all other monarchs if He had no opportunity to rule an earthly kingdom? How better could He prove Himself to be the supremely just King than by personally meting out justice to His subjects? How better could He prove Himself to be the infinitely merciful Lord than by personally showing mercy on His subjects? To do those things He would have to have an earthly kingdom, because in heaven there is no need either for justice or for mercy.

Could it be that, besides the brief time between the creation of Adam and the Fall, the world will know no dominion but Satan’s? Could it be that God will literally destroy but not literally restore this vast creation, all of which longs to “be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” and in that longing “groans and suffers the pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:21–22)?

The perfect millennial kingdom will testify through all eternity that Jesus Christ is the supreme sovereign, who alone can bring absolute harmony and peace to a world even while it is still infected by sin.

Fifth, an earthly millennial kingdom is the only and necessary bridge from human history to eternal glory. Paul declares that in the end Christ will deliver “up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power” and that “He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:24–25, emphasis added). What other kingdom could Christ deliver to His Father but an earthly kingdom? The Father already possesses the kingdom of heaven. The Millennium could not refer to the church as a spiritualized form of the kingdom, because the kingdom that Christ will deliver to the Father will include His subjected enemies, of which there are none in the redeemed church. And it will be a kingdom over which Christ exercises total authority, which could not apply to any kingdom the world has known thus far, including the ancient theocracy of Israel during its most faithful days.

The thousand-year reign of Christ can only refer to a literal, earthly kingdom that Jesus Christ could present to the Father in the way Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15. It is the kingdom of a literal earth, which Christ will literally and personally judge, restore, rejuvenate, and rule in righteousness for a literal one thousand years. And at the end of that time, after Satan is released for a brief period and then permanently defeated and cast into the lake of fire, Christ will present that earthly kingdom to His heavenly Father.¹