

The Millennium

Revelation 20:1-15

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth--Gog and Magog--to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of

fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

The story is told of the Dr Alexander Whyte, that he had an understanding with his local book store. Every new commentary on Romans would be sent to him so that Stewart could read the comments of the seventh chapter and the vexed issue of the identity of one who speaks in the second of the chapter. If the commentary did not identify it as a "Christian under conviction of sin," he would return the book saying, "This book is not for me."

Similar stories, no doubt, could be told in relation to the twentieth chapter of Revelation and the identification of the "thousand years" (20:2). No passage has highlighted in greater relief the differences between the various schools of millennial interpretation. The passage is, then, something of *cause celebre*.

Part of the problem with this, and other passages in Revelation, has to do with the opening phrase: "And I saw..." (20:1). As we have already noted, interpreting this as a reference to an unfolding chronology in history leads to all kinds of problems. Rather, wherever this expression, or a similar one occurs (e.g. 4:1; 8:2; 9:1; 13:1; 15:2; 19:17), we are meant to infer that this was the order in which *John saw these visions*. That means that we are not to imply that there is an historical sequence of events from the end of chapter 19 to the beginning of chapter 20.

So far, in the section which began at 17:1, we have been told of the destruction of Babylon (17:1-19:3), and the beast and the false prophet (19:11-21). Still at large is the organizer of all evil, *the root of the trouble*, Satan. There is no assurance of victory whilst he is still at large. A threat still exists to Christ's ultimate triumph so long as the devil exercises *any* influence on the outcome of the kingdom of God. It is the destruction of Satan that occupies our attention in this chapter. Several references have already been made of an impending *war*, or *battle* (16:14; 17:14; 19:19; 20:8). All opposition is defeated through warfare. The struggle which is first announced in Genesis 3:15 has now reached its climax.

John glimpses the battle from four particular angles each of which demand a more detailed examination.

1. The Binding of Satan (20:1-3)

It is tempting to think that the reference in verses 1-3 to the binding of Satan takes place at the end of history. After all, it is mentioned *following* the destruction of Babylon, the beast and the false prophet. This has led many to interpret this scene in conjunction with a view that expects a future millennial reign of Christ on earth. The binding of Satan, therefore, takes place during this

millennial reign, following Christ's return. If, however, we take the reference, "And I saw..." in verse 1 as we have suggested above, what John is seeing in this vision is something which is true *at the time he wrote it*. That is, Satan is already bound.

This proves impossible for some to accept since Satan seems to be very much at large. After all, does not the New Testament spend a great deal of time warning the saints not to ignore him (e.g. Eph. 6:10-18; 1 Pet. 5:8-9)? This is true, but equally, there are some pointed indications in the New Testament that Satan's power in this period between the two advents of Christ is drastically reduced.

i. A key point in the understanding of this passage is to note that the word "nations" (20:3) which Satan can no longer deceive as a result of this binding, is, more specifically, "Gentiles". From the point of view of the history of redemption, Satan's power over the nations of the world is now not what it was during the period of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the kingdom of God was limited to one particular location and ethnic group, *Israel*, apart from some notable proselyte conversions. The Gentiles were, on the whole, excluded from the kingdom. Taken as a whole, the Gentile nations "sat in darkness and the deepest gloom" (Psa. 107:10). There were some wonderful examples of Gentile conversion, such as Ruth; but these were the exceptions and not the rule. Prophets, such as Isaiah, foresaw a day when the Gentiles would flow into the kingdom (Isa. 9:1; 42:6; 49:2,22). But that was to be *after* the first coming of Christ into the world. The basis, therefore, upon which evangelism in the nations can be done in obedience to the command of Christ to "go and make disciples of all nations" is that Satan's grip upon the Gentile nations has now been curtailed (Matt. 28:19).

ii. Indications of this curtailment can be seen in various statements made during Jesus' ministry. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus replied: "how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man?" (Matt. 12:29). The expression "ties up" is the same word rendered "bound" in Revelation 20:2. Again, when the seventy disciples returned from the preaching tour, they were ecstatic: "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." To which Jesus responded by saying: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:17-18). Satan's fall is surely the same event spoken of as a "binding" in this chapter. A similar reference is to be found in John 12:31-32. When certain Greeks came asking to see Jesus, it triggered off something in the mind of Jesus. If there were Greeks wanting to see him, it can only mean that Satan's kingdom was being pillaged. Speaking of His work in relation to Satan, Jesus could say: "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." The verb "driven out" is of the same root as the verb of Revelation 20:3, "He threw him into the Abyss" which speaks of how Satan is consigned into the pit. Here, too, those who are drawn to Christ are to come

every nation. It belongs to the same order of thought as the words of Paul to the Athenians in Acts 17: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). When Jesus told His disciples that they must "go... to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:6), He was underlining the fact that the widespread inclusion of the Gentiles came *after* Pentecost, rather than before. Satan held "the nations" in blindness and unbelief. There was no "church" in Africa, or Asia or Europe, or the Americas! Satan's power is currently restrained. All around us, we are seeing today the fulfillment of the cry of Psalm 2:8: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." Satan's binding ensures and enables the evangelism of the world.

It is not that Satan has *no* power at all; rather, his freedom is limited. He is on a chain. He is cast into the "Abyss" (20:1,3; later "prison" 20:7). The "lake of fire" mentioned later in the chapter (20:10, 14, 15) is that final place of punishment assigned to Satan, and therefore the "Abyss" of verses 1 and 3 must refer to some intermediary condition. Perhaps, given the symbolic nature of Revelation, we should try and avoid thinking of some *physical* expression of the Abyss. It is a figurative description of Satan's curtailment.

This curtailment for a period of a "thousand years" has given rise to millenarianism (or *chiliasm*, the Greek for thousand is *chilioi* 20:2,3,4,5,6,7) in its many forms. The question that has now to be faced is: is this one thousand year reference meant to be taken in a literal sense? Obviously, if the binding of Satan is a reference to the entire period between the advents of Christ, any literal interpretation of the thousand years is impossible. Given the use made of number patterns in the book of Revelation (e.g. 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, 666, 144,000) it would be fitting that a symbolic use of *thousand* is intended here also representing the period of time from the resurrection/ascension of Christ until a period shortly before his return (1000 = 10 x 10 x 10, or 10³). Ten and three are both "ideal" numbers: ten fingers and toes, three reminding us of the Trinity. One thousand is an ideal period of time. The "thousand years," therefore, rather than being a time at the end of the age (either *before* Christ's return s *postmillennialism*, or *after* Christ's (initial) return s *premillennialism*), is to be understood as a figurative expression denoting the *finite* period of time from the first to the second advents of Christ. We are therefore living in this millennial period.

2. The reign of the saints (20:4-6)

The second thing that John sees ("I saw..." 20:4) is described as "thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge" (20:4). It is tempting to think of this as description of a reign *on earth* in some way. This has led some to interpret this as corroboration of a promise of an earthly reign of resurrected saints *with* Christ" described later in the same verse ("They came to

life and reigned with Christ a thousand years" [20:4]), possibly in Jerusalem. Various other features of an end-time sequence of events must, of course, be inserted to complete this picture as a premillennial return of Christ being one of them. But this is unnecessary, for the following reason.

The depiction of the reign of the saints is prefaced by yet another of these expressions, "I saw..." (20:4), and it is assumed that this vision *follows* the vision already given of the binding of Satan in verses 1-3. This is not necessary. It is perfectly feasible that John intends to say something like this: at the same time as Satan is bound, the saints are reigning. That means that the saints are reigning *now*, in the period of time between the two advents. How can this be? Where are they reigning? Where are these thrones?

The answer, of course, is an obvious one: they reign *in heaven!* With one exception, the cathedral seat of Satan described in 2:13, all references to "thrones" in Revelation are to seats of power that exist *in heaven*. Corroboration for this view is given in verse 4, where John tells us that he "saw the souls of those who had been beheaded..." It is not an earthly, physical reign that he sees, but a heavenly, spiritual one. It is yet another answer to the question that underlies the entire book of Revelation: what has happened to those Christian who have been killed for their testimony to Jesus Christ? This pressing pastoral concern has been answered again and again, and now receives this glorious answer: they are reigning with Christ in heaven and entering into judgment upon their persecutors.

It is difficult to imagine an answer better calculated to produce encouragement on behalf of those who remain than the one given here. These are the ones who lives bore all the marks of regeneration (the meaning of latter half of verse 4). They have come to life. They are the true victors. Imagine the smile on behalf of anxious relatives as they hear this message for the first time. It is not that they will come to life in some future millennial age; that would be comforting too; but, they are already alive, already reigning. Their triumph is as certain as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cry of the persecuted for vengeance in chapter 6 is answered by this glorious scene of judicial vindication. For refusing to worship the image of the beast, they had been killed (13:6). But now, they are very much alive.

Is the vision of verse 4 wider than just that of the persecuted martyrs of Revelation 6? It appears that it is. Verse 5 includes a remark placed in parenthesis in our English translations: "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended." It is followed by the statement, "This is the first resurrection." The "rest of the dead" is an allusion to the *physical* resurrection of the unbelieving dead, which implies that those seen in verse 4 must include all believers who have died, rather than the narrower thought of the martyrs alone. It is possible that John intends in verse 5, the rest of believers. Either way, whether this refers to believers or unbelievers, we need to ask the

question: What does John mean by saying that they "did not come to life" until the thousand years were ended?

Most commentators understand this as a reference to the physical resurrection of unbelievers at the end of the age, and that despite the fact that the previous sentence had alluded to a spiritual resurrection. At the end of verse 4 we read of some who have "come to life" and thereby experience something called "the first resurrection." They have died, as they have lived, *in Christ*. They are sharing in the fruits of his resurrection from the dead (the first resurrection). Because he lives, we shall live also (John 14:19).

The very next verse, uses the identical expression, but this time it is to a physical resurrection of unbelievers at the end of the age. This has led some to insist upon grammatical considerations that the word has to mean the same thing in both cases. This is why verse 4 is sometimes interpreted in a premillennial way: there must be a *physical* resurrection in verse 4. This has led to the idea of a physical resurrection of the saints reigning with Christ for a thousand years.

But this objection has no real foundation, for there other examples where the idea of "resurrection" and "life" can have both spiritual and physical connotations within the same passage. Try asking the question as to whether a physical or spiritual resurrection/life is meant by the words "resurrection" and "life" in the following passage.

[J]ust as Christ was *raised* from the dead... we too may live a new *life*. If we have been united with Him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His *resurrection*... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also *live* with Him... but the life he *lives*, he *lives* to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but *alive* to God in Christ Jesus... offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to *life* (Rom 6:4-13).

A blessing is now pronounced (20:6) upon those who have died, for they take part in the first resurrection and over them, the "second death" has no power. This second death is a reference to eternal punishment as 20:14 makes clear. The assurance is yet another pastoral word from John to concerned believers over the fate of they deceased loved-ones. They are safe *for ever!*

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. New England Primer, 1737

The Judgment of Satan (20:7-10)

The closing verses of this chapter describe the defeat of Satan and the "second death" to which he is subjected (20:7-15). Following the thousand year reign (which we have seen is a reference to the period of time which begins at the

resurrection of Jesus), Satan is released from prison (earlier called "abyss" 20:7). That from which he was been restrained, viz., "deceiving the nations (20:8; c.f. verse 3) is now to be returned to his power. The language of Ezekiel 38 and 39 returns again with a reference to Gog and Magog gathering in war against Israel. Here it is God's people and Jerusalem that is the focus of their hatred.

The expectation that at the end of history a battle will take place of immense proportions between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil (Armageddon in 16:13-16, and Gog and Magog here in 20:7-10) is one of those factors which makes a postmillennial interpretation of history difficult to sustain. A period of time in which all such opposition against the kingdom of God is to cease is a paradigm that is difficult to maintain. There is to be a "short time" in which Satan will wage war (20:3). It is the same prophecy as we have already seen in 16:14-16 and 19:17-21.

The number of the nations assembled are "like the sand of the seashore" (20:8). The language is borrowed from Ezekiel's description, emphasizing the impossible odds arrayed against the people of God. But battles of the kingdom of God have always been unevenly matched. It is not the power of man that prevails, but the power of God. In this battle, as in every other, it is the power of the Warrior Christ that overcomes.

The defeat is sudden and dramatic. Fire descends and devours the hostile army of forces. Satan is cast into the "lake of burning sulphur" where the beast and false prophet has already been cast. The general judgment scene that follows includes a depiction of all the dead (not just unbelievers) now raised and standing before the throne (20:12). Like 4:2, the throne is described in terms calculated to emphasize the greatness of God. The throne of God is the answer to the problem of evil.

The Final Judgment (20:11-15)

Another section begins, "and I saw..." (20:11), in which John sees "a great white throne and Him who was seated on it." This is the final judgment of mankind. We have seen it many times in Revelation already, but this is its final manifestation. What is immediately apparent, and it is the focus of John's description of it, the ultimate basis for rescue from the "lake of fire" (20:14) is the inclusion or non-inclusion of our names in what John calls, "the book of life" (20:12, 15). This the "the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (13:8). This is thought to be the book containing the names of the elect.

Salvation is not an issue of works, but the free grace of God. The words of the final verse are solemn: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (20:15; c.f. 3:5; 21:27). Can my name be added to this book? Or, perhaps better, how can I be sure that it is already there? The answer to this question, the most important question that can ever be asked,

is the very gospel way itself. It is by faith in God's offer of mercy that there can be assurance of salvation. In one sense, we cannot examine the book of life. Our election (for in the last analysis, that is what it means) is not open to scrutiny as, say, the records of public office may be. As Calvin often repeated, Christ is the mirror of our election. When we look into the mirror we must see, not our names written on the book s an impossibility!, but Christ who offers freely pardon to all who will receive him.

The alternative to faith is a certain, and endless, judgment: "they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (20:10). There is a judgment which is according to works (20:12-13). It is a scrutiny that is sure to end in sorrow. Grace, and grace *alone*, can ensure deliverance from the fiery lake of God's eternal wrath.

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