

Revelation 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Revelation chapter 20. Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 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. 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 worshipped 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. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 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. And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison, 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.

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. 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, for ever and ever. 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. 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. 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. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. One of the great questions that preoccupies many interpreters of Revelation arises in chapter 20. What are we to make of the millennium?

There are four major positions on the question, with a number of variants. There are traditional and dispensational premillennial positions, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.

Premillennialism in its traditional form holds that a literal 1,000 year period, the millennium, or the messianic reign, will pass following Christ's return. Dispensational premillennialism is a more modern form of positions, relating to the theology of dispensationalism, which has a futuristic reading of the book of Revelation. Postmillennialism believes that Christ will return following the millennium, a period of great success for the kingdom of Christ. There are, as in the case of the other positions, various forms of this belief. Many of the Puritans, for instance, awaited a glorious age of spiritual revival prior to the second coming of Christ. Other postmillennials who read the book of Revelation in a largely preterist manner believe that the age of the millennium began in the first century and that we are currently living in it. Postmillennials do not necessarily believe in a literal 1,000 year millennium. Amillennialists typically regard the millennium as a symbolic period too, generally believing that it is a symbolic way of speaking about the age of the church. Such amillennialism can be attractive to those who have an idealist reading of the book of Revelation. Despite their name, amillennialists should not be regarded as denying the existence of the millennium. Or rather, the millennium that they deny is the millennium understood in the manner of the premillennials and certain of the postmillennials. Amillennials generally believe that we are living in the millennium of Revelation chapter 20, and many postmillennials, especially those who relate Revelation 20 to events of the first century AD, or shortly after, believe the same. The difference between these two groups is in many cases not an especially sharp one. One respect in which differences between various species of these positions can be seen is in the way that they conceive of the impact of the binding of Satan, and the location of the reigning of the saints. Postmillennial interpreters are more likely to conceive of the thousand-year reign in a manner that emphasizes its impact upon the earth.

[4 : 58] Christ will reign until all enemies are placed under his feet, the gospel will prosper throughout the world, and Christ's kingdom will advance and transform all nations and areas of life.

This understanding of the thousand-year reign also often suggests that it is one of increasing extent for the effective rule of Christ, not just an extended period of gospel success for a figurative thousand years, it is a figurative thousand years of advance. Amillennial interpreters, by contrast, can be more inclined to regard the reign in ways that downplay its progressive character, its impact upon the earth, and they can locate it more within heaven.

Revelations teaching about the thousand-year reign should be related to Jewish beliefs about the messianic reign, a few of which posited a thousand-year period during which the Messiah would reign.

As a period of time, it is the full flowering of the authority of Christ achieved through his death, resurrection, and ascension, the authority described in Matthew chapter 28 verse 18.

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. As a period of time, one thousand years should probably be understood figuratively. One thousand is ten cubed, ten raised to the third power. One thousand and multiples of one thousand occur on several occasions in the book of Revelation. For many, the question of the millennium is regarded as the most important question of Christian eschatology. However, this is to abstract a single interpretive question from the larger fabric of the book of Revelation and from the rest of the New Testament in a way that really courts misunderstanding. As any attentive study of the book of Revelation should reveal, so much depends upon reading each passage in the book, both in light of the rest of the book and in light of Old Testament prophecy that serves as the background for it. The teaching on the millennium in Revelation chapter 20 is no exception in this regard. Maintaining Revelation chapter 20 in the big picture provided by the rest of the teaching of Revelation, the New Testament, and the entire scripture will help us a lot here. Chapter 20 opens with an angel coming down from heaven with a key to the bottomless pit and a chain. He binds the dragon, here identified as the devil and Satan, confining him in the pit and preventing him from deceiving the nations any longer for the duration of a thousand years.

[7 : 23] It should not be difficult to recognize parallels between this passage and earlier passages in Revelation. For instance, Revelation chapter 12 verses 7 to 12. Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who was called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony. For they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short. Also Revelation chapter 9 verses 1 to 3.

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. Greg Beal identifies seven close points of parallel between chapter 12 and chapter 20. While he goes too far in arguing that these two accounts depict the same events and mutually interpret each other, he is correct in recognizing the closeness of their relationship.

Together, these passages chart a process of descent. The dragon is first cast down from heaven in chapter 12. This limits his authority, while still giving him scope for his destructive and deceptive activity. In chapter 20, he is restricted further, being bound, cast into the pit, and sealed there for a lengthy time. Babylon has fallen, and now the dragon will be further bound. As in his earlier descent from heaven, on his descent the dragon is spoken of with a number of different titles. Here he is described as the dragon, the ancient serpent, the devil, and Satan. Each of these titles capture something of Satan's character. As the dragon, he is the mighty monster, the destroyer. As the ancient serpent, he is the wily, seductive, and deceptive tempter of the Garden of Eden. As the devil, he is the adversary and opponent. As Satan, he is the accuser. Here it is the power of Satan as the deceiver of the nations that is in the foreground. The fallen star of chapter 9 was given the key of the bottomless pit, but the angel of chapter 20 is not merely permitted to use the key, he is a rightful user of it. The angel here is likely the Holy Spirit himself, the messenger of Christ. It is he who seizes the dragon, binds him, and casts him into the pit. The binding of Satan has a specific purpose and effect, that of preventing him from deceiving the nations for its duration. Satan had authority over all of the nations, able to keep them under his thrall, governing them by his lies and the fear of death.

His power to deceive the nations made him like a great puppet master behind all of them, able to coordinate them through his deceptions for his own purposes. Earlier in the book, we saw an example of Satan's power in the way that he was able to establish and manipulate the sea beast, the land beast, and the image of the beast for his own designs.

After his binding, however, he will not enjoy such power again for the duration of the thousand-year confinement. The figurative thousand-year period will end, however, at which point he will enjoy a brief and final window of power during the period of the thousand years, a period of time in which I believe we find ourselves. The nations will be disciplined, Christ's kingdom will expand throughout the world, and great satanically controlled powers that held the world in their thrall will be brought low. Hearing this passage from our vantage point in history, we can really miss how truly remarkable the binding of Satan was. This passage was first written to beleaguered Christians in a situation of persecution, experiencing great satanic oppression and deception in their communities, who, within the coming years, would suffer an intensification of such persecution, often encouraged by Jewish opponents in their cities. These Christians were operating in a dark culture of paganism, superstition, and demonic oppression and activity. Within a few years, however,

[12 : 15] Jerusalem and its temple would fall, sending shockwaves throughout the empire. The Roman empire itself would suffer a great blow and fall into a short civil war. At the time of John's writing, the Christians were a small and marginal minority in the empire. Fast forward about 300 years, and they are the established religion. Early church fathers described the remarkable power of the gospel displayed in dispelling the influence of Satan wherever it went, which we should understand to be a fulfillment of this passage in Revelation. The following lengthy description of this is found in the writings of Athanasius.

When did men begin to desert the worshipping of idols, save since God, the true word of God, has come among men? Or when have the oracles among the Greeks and everywhere ceased and become empty, save when the Saviour has manifested himself upon earth? Or when did the deceitfulness and madness of demons fall into contempt, save when the power of God the word, the master of all these as well, condescending because of man's weakness, appeared on earth? Or when did the art and the schools of magic begin to be trodden down, save when the divine manifestation of the word took place among men?

And whereas formerly every place was full of the deceit of the oracles, now, since Christ has begun to be preached everywhere, their madness also has ceased, and there is none among them to divine any more.

And whereas formerly demons used to deceive men's fancy, occupying springs or rivers, trees or stones, and thus imposed upon the simple by their juggleries, now, after the divine visitation of the word, their deception has ceased. For by the sign of the cross, though a man but use it, he drives out their deceits. And while formerly men held to be guards the Zeus and Kronos and Apollo and the heroes mentioned in the poets, and went astray in honouring them, now that the Saviour has appeared among men, those others have been exposed as mortal men, and Christ alone has been recognised among men as the true God, the word of God. And what is one to say of the magic esteemed among them? That before the word sojourned among us, this was strong and active among Egyptians and Chaldees and Indians, and inspired awe in those who saw it, but that by the presence of the truth and the appearing of the word, it also has been thoroughly confuted and brought wholly to naught. But as to Gentile wisdom and the sounding pretensions of the philosophers, I think none can need our argument, since the wonder is before the eyes of all, that while the wise among the Greeks had written so much, and were unable to persuade even a few from their own neighbourhood concerning immortality and virtuous life, Christ alone, by ordinary language, and by men not clever with the tongue, has throughout all the world persuaded whole churches full of men to despise death, and to mind the things of immortality, to overlook what is temporal, and to turn their eyes to what is eternal, to think nothing of earthly glory, and to strive only for the heavenly. We have seen the progressive descent of Satan over the course of the book of Revelation.

In stark contrast to Satan's descent and binding is the ascent and the enthroning of the martyrs. They were put to death and waited under the altar, calling out for vindication and vengeance in chapter 6. Over the chapters that followed, they were raised up to heaven, and now they are given thrones, which might be the thrones formerly occupied by the 24 elders. Satan is stripped of his dominion, and the martyrs are raised up into theirs. The thrones here should also be related to the vision of Daniel in Daniel chapter 7, where he describes thrones being set up, and the kingdom and dominion being granted to the saints of the Most High. The group being elevated here has a number of distinguishing characteristics. Being beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, being beheaded for the word of God, not worshipping the beast, or the image of the beast, and not receiving the mark of the beast.

[16:18] At the heart of those sharing in this first resurrection are the 144,000 of the renewed Israel. Recognising the strong connections to the book of Ezekiel that move through the concluding chapters of Revelation, we should probably recognise Ezekiel chapter 37 and the vision of the valley of dry bones here. That vision was one of a symbolic resurrection of Israel and Judah from the grave of exile. The first resurrection here has something of the same character. From the grave of martyrdom, this company is raised up to rule over nations. The core group to which rule is granted is the 144,000 faithful witnesses or martyrs of Israel. In the blessing of verse 6, the impression, however, is given that others will share in this first resurrection, we might presume from throughout the age of the church. The 144,000 are at the head of the company of the church triumphant. The impression can be given by some that the church triumphant are like those individuals who have finished the

Christian race before us. They're milling around the finishing line, as it were, enjoying refreshments. Yet this is not adequately to consider the reality of their participation in the reign of Christ.

Earlier in Revelation, the dead martyrs prayed for vindication from beneath the altar. Now they can pray for vindication from thrones before the very throne itself. We can easily fall into the error of limiting judgment to something that only occurs at the very end of history. However, if there is one thing that the book of Revelation makes apparent, it is that God judges in ongoing human history. The judgment of Babylon the Great and the beasts that she rode upon is a final judgment for both of them, but by no means the final judgment of human history. The nations are gathered before the enthroned Lamb and his enthroned martyrs and the vast company of the saints and angels. Before this ruling company, throughout human history, Christ is separating the nations as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The martyrs and the saints in heaven participate in this rule. After being bound for one thousand years, Satan is granted one final hurrah as he is released from the prison of the bottomless pit, permitted by God to deceive the nations once more. Revelation has been tracing the pattern of the book of Ezekiel in these concluding chapters, and here we arrive at the battle against Gog and Magog in chapters 38 and 39 of that book.

Gog is the prince of Magog, one of the sons of Japheth mentioned in Genesis chapter 10 verse 2. Like Babylon the Great, Gog and Magog should not be taken literally. They are archetypal enemies of the people of God, and the hero of the prophecy is expected to be familiar with the prophecy of the book of Ezekiel in the background. Gog and Magog surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city, images that depict the people of God according to the pattern of Israel in the wilderness and as Mount Zion. Forces aligned with Satan never ceased to exist during the millennial reign of the saints, but they were limited in their authority and power and never enjoyed the same degree of ascendancy that they had prior. After Satan is unleashed, suddenly they can enjoy considerable power and sweep much before them. However, just when the faithful people of God seem to be doomed to defeat, besieged and decisively surrounded, the fire of the Lord comes down and consumes their enemies.

The great gathering of Gog and Magog, numbering like the sand of the sea, ends up being a gathering for final destruction. The devil is then finally cast down into the lake of fire and sulfur with the beast and the false prophet. The beast and the false prophet are corporate entities, the monstrous and persecuting Rome and the perversion of the Jewish authorities respectively, but their destruction is one that implicates individual persons as well. Satan's story has a symmetry to it, and when he is unleashed from the bottomless pit in which he was bound and returns to his old ways, it will finally come to an end. As is the case in Christ's death, the moment of the devil's apparent triumph and unleashing is all in order that he be utterly defeated. Revelation chapter 20 ends with a great and terrifying judgment scene.

[20 : 36] After the final decisive victory of the Lamb, the defeat of the ancient dragon, and the placing of all enemies under his feet, a comprehensive judgment of the dead occurs. Any hiding place is removed, and all is laid bare before the judge of all. Multiple books are opened, and then one specific other book is opened, the Book of Life. Judgment occurs on the basis of what is written in these books, both the multiple books of works and the one Book of Life. Judgment is according to works, but the righteous are recorded by grace in God's Book of Life. Revelation has also expressed the subtle interplay between grace and works in its treatment of the garments of the saints. The garments are given to them and washed in the blood of the Lamb, but they are also the righteous deeds of the saints themselves, without which they would not enjoy access to the wedding feast. The Book of Life is the Book of the Lamb, and one's name being in the book implies Christ's testimony in one's favour, as we see in chapter 3 verse 5. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the Book of Life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. Various realms, the sea, death, and Hades, give up their dead. Determining what exactly is being referred to by these different realms is not easy, and various suggestions concerning them could be given. I am inclined to take death and Hades as largely synonymous, or at least as a related pairing of powers. The sea I take as the literal sea. Death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire, robbed of their power. The lake of fire is described as the second death. It is a realm of torment and exclusion. Everyone who does not belong to the Lamb, whose name is not written in his book, will be cast into it. A question to consider. How might considering ourselves as living in the millennium of Revelation chapter 20 change the way that we view our situation as Christians?

