



## Part 40 – The Thousand Years

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### Revelation 20:1-3

Revelation chapter 20 is one of the most contested and challenging passages in the entire book. That is saying something considering how many challenging passages there are in Revelation. People have interpreted chapter 20 in ways that have led to very different views of history and the end times. Without embracing doctrinal indifference, we should, however, not break fellowship with or villainize those whose views on the millennium differ from our own so long as we agree that Christ is King, that he is returning to judge the living and the dead, and that he will take his people home, there to live in his blessed presence.

**Historic Pre-Millennialism** – This view holds that Christ will return *pre*, or before, the millennium. Along with Amillennialism, this is one of the oldest views held by the church. This view holds that the 1,000 years can be either literal or symbolic. Either way, this view holds that during his kingdom, Christ will physically and politically reign on the earth. After this earthly reign of Christ for a thousand years (literal or symbolic), there will then be a final decisive battle on the earth and then the final judgment.

**Dispensational Pre-Millennialism** – Dispensationalism is a framework for understanding the Bible which is a newcomer on the scene of history. It was conceived in the U.K. in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but did not gain popularity until it was introduced in Canada and the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It adds a number of new elements to historic pre-millennialism such as a secret pre-tribulation rapture of the church, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, and an earthly political reign of Christ from the city of Jerusalem for 1,000 years. At the end of Christ's earthly reign, Satan will be released, gather a vast army of fallen humanity, and engage in a final battle against Jesus in the Valley of Megiddo in which Satan will be defeated and cast into hell. This is the theology popularized through the *Scofield* and *Ryrie* Study Bibles, Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the *Left Behind* series of novels.

**Post-Millennialism** – This view holds that Christ's return and the final judgment will follow (*post*) an earthly reign which will last (literally or symbolically) for a thousand years. The earthly reign of Christ will be characterized by the Christianization of entire nations and a massive worldwide Christian awakening during which time most of the world's population will believe in Christ. Following this earthly golden age, Christ will return to judge the living and dead and inaugurate the new creation.

**Amillennialism** – Contrary to what the name suggests (the prefix "a" meaning "no"), amillennialism fully affirms Christ's millennial reign. However, contra pre-millennialism, it holds that Christ's reign on earth is not a strict 1,000 years and that it began with his first advent, his death and resurrection, his heavenly session, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Also, Christ's kingdom unfolds progressively throughout the church age as the gospel advances around the world. Satan is bound like a dog on a leash but is still able to harm and harass the church even as she gains territory in places and nations once entirely deceived by Satan. The knowledge of the Lord *does* cover the earth as the waters cover the sea in the sense that one can find Christians everywhere in the world. Not only that, wherever the gospel goes you often find peace between men, a peace beautifully depicted as a lion lying down with the lamb.

Amillennialism is sometimes referred to as "realized eschatology," or "realized millennium," because it holds that Christ is reigning at this present moment, something he proclaimed throughout his ministry. Christ frequently told his disciples and the crowds who gathered to hear him that in him the kingdom had arrived.

One key to interpreting the Book of Revelation is understanding that John's vision does not present a series of events in strict chronological order. Rather, by way of *recapitulation* (sometimes called "progressive parallelism"), the period of time between Christ's two advents is presented several times from different vantage points or perspectives. That is why, for instance, the final judgment and the end of the age is depicted numerous times in Revelation including 16:13-16, 19:17-21, 20:7-15.

As I wrote in my introduction to our study, the Book of Revelation may be divided into seven distinct sections. The first three sections describe events between Christ's two advents as they transpire on earth. The following four sections describe the time between Christ's two advents as they transpire in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Sections 1-3 – The view from earth:

- Christ dwells among his church (chapters 1-3)
- The church suffers trials and persecution (chapters 4-7)
- The church is ultimately vindicated by Christ (chapters 8-11)

Sections 4-7 – The view from heaven:

- Christ opposed by the dragon and his accomplices (chapters 12-14)
- God's wrath poured out upon the unbelieving and impenitent (chapters 15-16)
- The fall of Babylon and the two beasts (chapters 17-19)
- The final defeat of Satan and the inauguration of the new creation (chapters 20-22)

As the Book of Revelation moves along, "it progressively emphasizes events that lie upon the furthest horizon of history, just prior to the end of the present age. For this reason, the book concludes with a grand vision of the state of consummation, the new heavens and the new earth."<sup>2</sup> John's vision accomplishes this by recapitulating (*progressive parallelism*) events in order that those events may be understood in both earthly and heavenly perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

In this final section of Revelation (chapters 20-22) the reign of Christ and his saints (20:1-10) and the final judgement is depicted in both negative (20:11-15) and positive aspects (21:1-8).<sup>4</sup>

"This final cycle wraps up the course of history by dealing with several issues of justice. God vindicates the saints, giving an answer for their past suffering and martyrdom (20:4-6). He executes final judgment on Satan, the source of evil, thus eliminating the last of the three evil scourges in the world (The Prostitute was eliminated in 17:1-19:10, and the Beast and the False Prophet were eliminated in 19:11-21). He pronounces comprehensive judgment; nothing escapes his attention (20:11-15). He creates a new world free from the evils, suffering, and rebellion of the old world (21:1-8)."<sup>5</sup>

### **Two Questions that arise from Revelation 20:1-3...**

- 1. When will the thousand years take place?**
- 2. What does it mean for Satan to be bound?**

*We will try to answer both of these questions together as they are so closely intertwined with one another.*

In the Pre-millennial view, Christ's reign is inaugurated after his second coming and prior to the final judgment. However, as we look at the whole structure of the book (and the arc of redemptive history) it seems best to take 20:1-15 as part of the seventh and final cycle of judgments, each leading to Christ's return rather than as a depiction of events following what is described in chapter 19. In other words, 20:1-15 is a recapitulation of 19:11-21. Here are few reasons why that makes sense:

- The final battle described in 20:7-10 seems to be the same as that which is described in 16:14, 16; 17:14; 19:11-21.
- The various battles use the same sort of language used in Ezekiel 38-39 which points to the final judgment.
- In 20:10, the judgment upon Satan parallels the judgment upon Babylon (chapters 17-18) and the Beast and False Prophet (19:11-21). These visions depict their destruction thematically rather than chronologically.
- In 20:11-15 there are certain features which correspond directly to earlier descriptions of Christ's return (16:14; 11:18).

<sup>1</sup> Cornelis P Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) p. 306ff

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 307

<sup>3</sup> You will find this view affirmed by the weight of evangelical scholars such as Beale, Hendriksen, Mounce, Caird, Storms, Osborne, Poythress, Johnson, Fesko, Hoekema, Schreiner, Duvall, Morris, Ian Paul, Kelley, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Vern Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 200) pp. 177ff

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 177

- Significantly, all of Christ's enemies are destroyed in 19:11-21. If 20:1-6 is referring to later events there would be no one left for Satan to deceive.

It seems best, therefore, to take the period of time described in 20:1-15 as referring to that period which leads up to Christ's return rather than occurring after his return.

- As we lean into the passage, remember these principles of biblical interpretation – 1) Interpret Scripture with Scripture, 2) the clearer passages help interpret the harder passages, and 3) the many Scriptures help interpret the few. Let us apply these principles of interpretation to John's words in the present passage...

**Vs. 1** – “Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.”

- The “then” does not indicate chronology as in “these events happen after the events I previously described.” Rather it simply means that one vision was followed by another. We see this same use of “then,” throughout John's vision. He is given one vantage point of events and then is given another vantage point.
- Once again John's vision is introduced by him seeing an angel. The angel represents the authority of God. The key represents the limited access to the abyss. The chain represents God's constraining power over Satan.

**Vs. 2** – “And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...”

- This is not the first time John describes Satan as “that ancient serpent” (vs. 2). In chapter 12, the same four names (dragon, ancient serpent, the devil, and Satan) are used here again in chapter 20 which suggests that the same event is in view but now from a different vantage point.
- The term “thousand years,” is mentioned six times in verses 2-7.
- Remember that Revelation uses numbers in a symbolic way just as we often see in the Scriptures. The number 10 is one of those numbers which indicate completeness or perfection. When the writer wishes to underscore that meaning the numbers will often be rendered in multiples. The number 1,000 is 10 times 10 times 10 thus emphasizing completeness. We see this symbolic use of 1,000 elsewhere. For instance, in Psalm 50 we are told that God owns the cattle on “a thousand hills.” We know this is symbolic for we do not worry that beyond 1,000 hills the Lord's ownership ends. Also, when the Lord promises to keep his covenant to “a thousand generations,” he is not saying that beyond that he will no longer keep his word (Deuteronomy 7:9). Or in Psalm 84 where we are told that one day in the courts of the Lord “are better than a thousand elsewhere” we are not intended to conclude that 1001 days elsewhere are better.

**Vv. 2c-3** – “...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.”

- Referring to Satan as “that ancient serpent” takes us all the way back to Genesis 3 when he deceived Adam and Eve and brought sin, death, and misery into the world. But God's response was to go on the offensive. In that moment he declared war upon the serpent and cursed him to certain defeat. God promised that from the seed of the woman a descendent would come who, though struck, would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). This is “the mother promise of the Bible.” The rest of redemptive history proceeds from that point till the return of Christ.
- During the days described in the Old Testament, God goes about fulfilling that promise through Abraham and the people who would make up the house of Israel. The other nations were cut off in their sin and unbelief; blinded by Satan. Indeed, in the Old Testament the words “nations” and “pagans” are synonymous. Nevertheless, the Lord promised his chosen Servant would be “a light for the nations” (Isaiah 42:6) and that his gracious salvation would reach to “the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). In other words, when the Christ arrives, the ancient serpent's hold upon the nations would be broken. In this way, Satan will be “bound,” his power over the nations broken.
- What John sees in this part of his vision is the breaking of Satan's stranglehold upon the pagan nations. Certainly, Satan has not yet been cast into the lake of fire. His power to blind entire nations has been

taken away from him because Christ has come to reign (a reign which is progressively revealed and will be fully inaugurated at the final judgment). As Hendriksen observes:

“A dog bound with a long and heavy chain can do great damage within the circle of his imprisonment. Outside that circle however the animal can do no damage and hurt no one.”<sup>6</sup>

- The New Testament tells us that we are currently living in the days of Christ’s earthly reign. Jesus proclaimed repeatedly that in him the kingdom of God had come (*present tense*). One of the many examples of this comes from **Matthew 12** when Jesus delivered a man possessed of demons. The Pharisees accused him of using the power of Satan. Jesus responded: “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” (vs. 29). Here Jesus tells us that he has entered Satan’s house and bound him. The word Jesus uses for “binds” is the same root word as is used here in Revelation 20:2.
- Another example comes from **John 12**. Some Greek men requested a meeting with Jesus (quite extraordinary in and of itself!). When the disciples told Jesus about the request, he began speaking about his coming death as judgment upon Satan: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (vv. 31-32). The same word Jesus uses for “cast out,” comes from the same root as the word used in Revelation 20:3 for Satan being cast into the pit.
- Or think of Jesus’ Great Commission from **Matthew 28**. As he was about to ascend to his throne in glory he said to his disciples:  
And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (vv. 18-20).
- These words only make sense if Satan will now be bound from keeping the nations in spiritual darkness. Indeed, Jesus claims all authority and promises a harvest from all the nations and his powerful presence “to the end of the age.” He is referring to the reality of his kingdom on the earth.
- Or think of Jesus words in **Matthew 24**: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (vs. 14). Once the gospel goes throughout the world to the Lord’s satisfaction, Jesus will return and bring an end to this age. This will happen because Satan has been bound, because we are currently living during the days of Christ’s progressively advancing kingdom.
- The last 2,000 years testify to this in the extraordinary advance of the gospel throughout the world. There are more Christians in China than there are in the United States. There are more Presbyterians in South Korea than in the United States. Places once bound in darkness have seen the light of Christ. Whereas once the light was confined to one people (Israel), now that light has gone worldwide. This is characteristic of Christ’s present reign.

“The visions of the thousand years...put our present suffering into perspective: the dragon is still bound, unable to gather his global conspiracy against God’s beloved. Persecution is bad now, but it will get worse then, just before the end. Yet even when Satan is unleashed to work his worst, it only will be for ‘a short time,’ and the outcome of the conflict is certain to be the defeat and destruction of the dragon, beast, false prophet, and all who worship and obey them.”<sup>7</sup>

#### **For Further Reading:**

The Millennial Maze: Sorting out the Evangelical Options by Stanley Grenz

Triumph of the Lamb by Dennis Johnson

The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation by Vern Poythress

More Than Conquerors by William Hendriksen

The Promise of the Future by Cornelis Venema

The Bible and the Future by Anthony Hoekema

A Case for Amillennialism by Kim Riddlebarger

Kingdom Come by Sam Storms

<sup>6</sup> William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) p. 125

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 300