

Series Revelation

Scripture # 31 Revelation 20:1-15

We are nearing the end of our long journey through the book of Revelation and our study of “The Victory of Jesus and His Followers Over Satan and His Helpers.” Perhaps a quick review about the victories we have recently thought about is in order. In chapters 17 and 18 we learned about the judgment and destruction of Babylon, which represents the world system which is opposed to the ways of God. In the second part of chapter 19 we learned about the appearance of Jesus with His armies to confront the Antichrist and the False Prophet. They were captured and “thrown alive in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” The assembled armies which had gathered together “were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of Jesus,” after which “all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.” This judgment was identified as “the great supper of God.” It was a grim contrast to “the wedding supper of the Lamb.”

This means that, at this point in our study, the destruction of four of the enemies of Jesus have been described: Babylon, the Antichrist, the False Prophet, and all those military units who had the mark of the beast. Satan is the next enemy to be destroyed, and that is one of the topics we will focus on today. We will also learn what will happen to faithful believers.

Read Revelation 20:1-15

In this vision John saw an angel come down out of heaven, seize the dragon, cast him into the Abyss, lock and seal the opening. There is no doubt about the identity of the dragon: he is “the ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan.” There are some questions about the identity of the Abyss. It is described in Scripture as a shaft into the earth, a bottomless pit, the place of demons (*see Revelation 9:1*). However, we must not think of the Abyss as a literal physical location. It is part of the unseen spiritual realm. Satan is “locked up” in this place for a period of time in order “to keep him from deceiving the nations.”

The period of “one thousand years” is often referred to by evangelicals as the “Millennium.” The phrase “one thousand years” occurs four times in the first part of this chapter, and nowhere else in Scripture. These four uses of the term inform us what happens during the thousand years: 1) Satan is bound; 2) the nations are no longer deceived; 3) martyrs will be resurrected; and 4) these resurrected martyrs will be priests of God and will reign with Christ.

At the end of the “one thousand years,” we are informed that “Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to once again deceive all the nations of earth,” and, in particular, he will gather them together for battle against “the camp of God’s people.” It is at this point that the devil will be captured and “thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where he will join the Antichrist and the False Prophet.”

The interpretation of the six verses at the beginning of chapter 20 are among the most debated parts of the book. The opinions of commentators generally fall into one of three methods of interpretation, depending on which theological system they adhere to, and there are numerous variations within the theological systems. In my explanations of chapter 20, I will adhere to the pattern and structure which I have presented throughout the book; namely, that the material is presented in a series of “sweeps” describing the Church age. These “sweeps” describe the conflict between the Church and its adversary, Satan, from different viewpoints. The most significant characteristic of these “sweeps” is that they all end at the same point in time with the outpouring of God’s wrath and the return of Jesus. The Church age will end with “The Victory of Christ and His Church over Satan and his helpers.”

With that explanation in mind, I draw two conclusions from this passage: First, that the battle which will occur at the end of the one thousand years is the same as that of chapter 19, in which “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gather together to make war against the Rider on the white horse and the armies of heaven.” The context of the two passages, in chapters 19 and 20, is similar, and both of these passages fit neatly with the description of chapter 16, which describes the gathering of kings at Armageddon, the collapse of the city of Babylon, and the cry from the throne in heaven that “It is done!” (*Revelation 16:16-21*). As I understand it, there will be only one battle at the end of the age, and the outcome of that battle is that the Antichrist, the False Prophet, and Satan all end up in the “lake of fire.” The visions which explain their defeat were given to John at different times and written in different chapters, but it is one event.

My second conclusion is that the “one thousand year” period is descriptive of the Church Age, the period of time between the incarnation of Jesus and His return in power and glory. I assume that the number “one thousand” is symbolic and should not be taken literally. I also assume that the first six verses of chapter 20 are another “sweep” of history giving us background information about this present age. Let me explain my conclusions.

Satan has known about his ultimate fate since the beginning of human history. You will recall that immediately after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God stated, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (*Genesis 3:15*).

The fulfillment of that prediction began to unfold at the birth of Jesus. In chapter 12 we learned that the dragon positioned himself “to devour the woman’s child the moment it was born,” but Jesus was supernaturally protected. Then, during His years on earth Jesus proved His authority over Satan by resisting temptations, demonstrating His power over demons and disease and death, and by satisfying the righteousness and justice of the Father by offering Himself as atonement for the sins of humanity, and by being raised from the grave and lifted up to heaven to His throne.

These were significant steps in the defeat of Satan. The final step in this series of defeats was the gift of the indwelling power of God to those who place their faith in Jesus, thus making it possible for the followers of Jesus to resist temptation and overcome the influences of evil. Believers are granted new life through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Their citizenship is in heaven. They are “raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms (*Ephesians 2:6*).

As a result, Satan’s power has been limited since Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on believers. As it is explained in verses 1 through 3 of the reading, he has been bound and locked in the Abyss so that he cannot “deceive the nations” as he once could in Old Testament times. In this age the devil is dethroned and disarmed (*see Ephesians 1:20-23 and Colossians 2:9-10, 13-15*). This has made possible the expansion of the Church throughout the world.

Beginning with Pentecost, the truth of the gospel has been replacing the deceptive lies of the devil. The testimony of Jesus has gone out to most areas of earth. Jesus has been drawing people from every nation to Himself (*see Revelation 5:9*). The elect, from all parts of the world, are being led from spiritual darkness into spiritual light; from death to life. Jesus announced that the Holy Spirit would empower His followers to be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (*Acts 1:8*). He told His disciples that “the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations” before the end will come (*Matthew 24:14*). He gave them His authority to “overcome all the power of the enemy” (*Luke 10:19*). The proclamation of the Gospel has been possible because the power of Satan has been curtailed.

Let me expand on this thought of binding and hindering the influence of Satan. On one occasion Jesus asked, “How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man?” (*Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27*). In Luke, the words are different but express the same thought, “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils” (*Luke 11:21-22*).

From the context of those statements, we know that Jesus was explaining what had already happened to Satan. Revelation chapter 12 explains that the binding of Satan began at the incarnation. The fulfillment is presented again in vision form in chapter 20. Jesus and His followers have been able and are able to carry the Gospel to the nations because Satan is tied up and unable to deceive the nations. When we reflect on the expansion of the Church since the First Century, we realize that there has been an amazing ingathering of the nations into God’s kingdom.

Now here I need to clarify an important point: Satan is not bound in every sense. He is not completely incapacitated. According to verse 3, his influence is curtailed in only one significant way: he cannot “deceive the nations during this age.” This does not prevent him from throwing up barriers and obstacles in other ways. The Apostle Peter warned his readers that the devil “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (*I Peter 5:8-9*). Satan is not able to deceive as He was able to do previously, but he still “is filled with fury” and “makes war against ... those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (*Revelation 12:12, 17*).

After the “thousand year” period of worldwide evangelization Satan will be released from his prison and he will resume his activities as a deceiver of the nations. As we have learned throughout this book, there will be a great increase in end time persecution and martyrdom.¹ Specifically, Satan will gather the nations from the entire earth — from “the four corners of the earth” — to battle Jesus and His followers.

This cataclysmic battle has been described in previous chapters. It is the same as the gathering at Armageddon in chapter 16, in which the “kings of the whole world” are assembled for “the great day of God the Almighty” (*Revelation 16:14-16*). It is the same gathering described in chapter 17 when the kings “will give their power and authority to the beast in order to make war against the Lamb” (*Revelation 17:12-14*), and it is the same as the gathering described in chapter 19, when the “beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gather together to make war against the rider on the white horse and his army” (*Revelation 19:17-21*). These are varied descriptions of the same event, the last battle of history.

The references to “Gog and Magog” are from the writings of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. (*See Ezekiel chapters 38-48.*) The description in Ezekiel helps us to understand in general terms the circumstances of the end of the age, but there isn’t time in this message to explain the similarities and details.

Notice that in this battle in chapter 20 there is no clash of swords or roar of machines. The battle will be as much a non-event as the one in chapter 19. In that chapter the cause of destruction was the sharp sword which came out of the mouth of the Rider on the white horse. Here we read that “fire came down from heaven and devoured everyone.” Satan was thrown into the “lake of burning sulfur” where the Antichrist and the False Prophet had also been thrown.

Now we need to return to verses 4 through 6. Throughout the book of Revelation, John has been given visions of both the judgments of evildoers and the blessings provided to the faithful followers of Jesus. Verses 4 through 6 explain the status of these faithful believers.

John saw thrones on which were seated those who “had been given authority to judge.” Back in chapters 2 and 3, when Jesus was speaking to the church fellowships, He promised rewards to those who would be “overcomers.” He said that overcomers would be “given the right to sit with Him on His throne” (*Revelation 3:21*).

These verses in chapter 20 are about those overcomers who had been faithful unto death. While on the earth they “had been given the authority of Jesus” to be His witnesses. Jesus had “freed them from their sins and made them kings and priests in order that they might serve God the Father” during this Church age (*Revelation 1:6; also see I Corinthians 6:2-3*). They had been killed “because of their testimony for Jesus.” While on earth, they “had not worshiped the beast and had not received the mark of the beast on their bodies.” These believers, who had been faithful unto death, were raised in the “first resurrection.”

I understand this resurrection to not be from the grave. I find no solid evidence in Scripture that there will be more than one resurrection of believers, that is, one for those who are killed during the Church age and another at the return of Jesus at the end of the age. It is my opinion that the reference to the “first resurrection” in verse 5 is synonymous with the experience of “new birth,” which is described in the New Testament as the passing from death to life. See *John 5:24; Romans 6:5-11; Ephesians 2:1-5; Colossians 3:3; and I John 5:11-12*. Those who had been witnesses for Jesus, who had been faithful unto death, had the life of Jesus in the person of the Holy Spirit within them. They had been raised from death to newness of life while in their physical bodies.

Special note: the sentence at the end of verse 4 is incorrect in many translations. The statement that “They came to life” is misleading. The sentence should read, “They lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years;” that is, “They lived and reigned with Christ throughout the Church age.”

The “first resurrection” is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the granting of spiritual life to individuals who are physically alive. The resurrection mentioned in verse 5 is the bodily resurrection of people who have physically died. This is a general resurrection which will include believers as well as non-believers. Jesus made reference to His role in this general resurrection during one of His interactions with the religious Jews: “The Father has given the Son authority to judge ... a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and some out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (*John 5:27-29*).

Note that those who are faithful unto death are identified as “blessed and holy,” and the “the second death has no power over them.”

Now we come to the third section of chapter 20. In verse 11, John “saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.” John does not announce the name of the One on the throne, but there is no doubt that He is Jesus Christ, the sovereign Lord. In chapter 19 He was the conquering “King of kings and Lord of lords.” In chapter 20 He is the Judge.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus stated, “the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (*John 5:22*). The Apostle Paul repeated this truth several times, for example, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (*II Corinthians 5:10*; see also *Romans 14:10*), and in another letter, Paul urged one of his young assistants to live and minister “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead” (*II Timothy 4:1*).

The presence of Jesus on the throne will be so awesome that “earth and the heavens flee away, and there is no place for them.” This present creation is contaminated with evil. It is in bondage to the evil with which it was infected at the time of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. The Apostle Peter quite dramatically wrote that “the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (*II Peter 3:10*). Such is the impact Jesus will have on the physical creation when He appears as Judge.

John “saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne.” This gathering will include all individuals who ever lived on earth. This is the one and only general resurrection mentioned in Scripture, and it includes all those who had died physically, both believers and evildoers. These “dead” come from “the sea,” and from “death and Hades.”

These terms, “sea,” “death,” and “Hades,” are synonyms; they personify the realm of physically dead people. “The grave” is often used as a substitute word for “Hades.” None of these words refer to “hell,” the place of torment. Rather, they represent the circumstances of people between physical death and resurrection.

As far as people are concerned, the important information in these verses has to do with the basis of their judgment. The “books were opened,” and “the dead were judged according to what they had done.” When John wrote that “the dead were judged according to what they had done,” he did not mean that people can be justified by their good works. The Scriptures are very clear that sinners are justified only by God’s grace through faith in the atoning death of Jesus. Two very well known verses make this explicit: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, ... it is a gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast” (*Ephesians 2:8-9*). Verses 12 and 15 explain the only basis for justification.

During His time on earth Jesus taught His disciples about the connection between His kingship and His judging. He said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (*Matthew 25:31-32*). That is what these verses in Revelation 20 are all about.

Friends, it is of paramount importance that our names are in “the book of life.” Let me explain why, and how this system of judgment might work. When I was in elementary school (a long, long time ago!), my family did most of the grocery shopping at a small “mom and pop” store two blocks from where we lived. Many times I bicycled down the street to pick up bread or milk or other items. I never had to carry money. You see, back in the days when there were no computers or even cash registers, the method of accounting required big ledger books. Whenever I picked up groceries, the store clerk wrote down each item with my name. Once a month, the manager would total up the cost of all the items and send my father a bill.

When my father stopped by the store to settle the family’s account, the manager did not look up and cross off every entry in the big ledger. Instead he pulled a small book off the shelf, entered my father’s name, the amount of money he received, and the date. And then he would write beside this information, “Paid in full.”

From this illustration, I hope you get the picture of these verses in chapter 20. God has many large ledgers in which He keeps accounts of everyone's behavior — the "works" of everyone, whether good or bad. There is also this smaller "book of life," which belongs to Jesus. What is written in this book is what is most important. If, beside our names is written the words, "Paid in full," it means our debt has been covered by our faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. If this is the case, then nothing in the big ledger books can ever legally be held against us.

As verse 15 states, "If anyone's name is not found in the book of life, he or she will be thrown into the lake of fire." Each one of us will stand before the Judge some day in order to give an account of our lives. It will be an overwhelming experience for evildoers, but for believers, there will be nothing to fear. Our debts will be "paid in full." We will be safe in our relationship with Jesus. He will be our surety at the judgment.

¹The beasts from the sea and from the earth are raised up by Satan to assist in the end time persecution. The Apostle Paul wrote about the "man of lawlessness" who would be revealed when the power which is presently restraining him is removed. Without the restraining power, the world will once again be subjected to the activities of Satan (*II Thessalonians 2:6-10*).