

“They Came to Life and Reigned With Christ for a Thousand Years”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 28

Texts: Revelation 20:1-15; Ezekiel 39:1-8

For many Christians, the mere mention of the millennium (the thousand years of Revelation 20) brings to mind images of lions lying down with lambs, children safely playing with poisonous snakes and Jesus ruling over all the nations of the earth while seated on David’s throne in the city of Jerusalem. It is argued that Jesus’ rule guarantees a one thousand-year period of universal peace upon the earth. But is this really what we find in Revelation chapter 20? No, it is not.

The question of the millennial reign of Jesus Christ and the proper interpretation of Revelation 20 has been a divisive one almost from the beginning of the Christian church. In those churches in which I was raised, premillennialism was regarded as a test of orthodoxy and anyone who wasn’t premillennial was probably either a theological liberal or a Roman Catholic, neither of whom took the plain teaching of the Bible very seriously. Premillennialism, which is far and away the dominant view held by American evangelicals, teaches that in Revelation 20, John is describing that period of time *after* Jesus Christ returns to earth.

At first glance, the premillennial argument is iron-clad. If Revelation 19 describes Jesus Christ’s second coming, then what follows in Revelation 20 must describe what happens after Christ’s return. On this view, Christ’s return comes before the thousand years begin, hence his coming is “pre” millennial, or before the millennial age.

Premillennarians believe that when John speaks of a thousand years, he means a literal one thousand years. The first resurrection, mentioned by John in this passage, is thought to be a reference the bodily resurrection of believers at the end of the age when Christ returns. Premillennarians believe that when John speaks of the binding of Satan, which begins the thousand years, he must be referring to that period of time after our Lord returns when Satan is literally bound with a chain by an angel, placed in a pit, and thereby prevented from deceiving the nations while Christ is ruling on the earth. It is the binding of Satan which guarantees the thousand years of peace supposedly mentioned in this passage.

Having been taught premillennialism from my earliest youth, it came as a quite a shock when I learned that the historic Protestant position taught by all the Reformers, the Lutheran and Reformed churches which they founded, and expressed in all of the Reformed confessions, and which is still held by the vast majority of our theologians, is that known as amillennialism. Although amillennialism literally means “no millennium,” it is better to understand this as a *present* millennialism. Amillennarians believe that the millennial age refers to the present reign of Jesus Christ in heaven and that the thousand years is a symbolic reference to the entire period of time between Christ’s first coming and his second advent.

Despite its initial attractiveness, it is my contention that premillennialism makes very poor sense of this passage, and, if true, creates several very serious theological problems which cannot be easily dismissed. Suppose for the sake of argument that premillennialism is indeed the correct interpretation of Revelation 20. Four questions immediately arise. *First*, where in this passage does John describe universal peace on earth? *Second*, where does John speak of Jesus Christ ruling from the city of Jerusalem over the inhabitants of the earth? *Third*, if true, premillennialism teaches that many people somehow make it through the judgment associated with Christ’s second coming and live on in natural bodies to repopulate

the earth. How do these people escape the judgment to co-exist with the resurrected and glorified saints who have already been given their resurrection bodies? Where does John ever teach or imply that resurrected believers live on the earth together with unregenerate sinners? *Fourth*, premillennarians must deal with an even more serious problem. What happens at the end of the thousand years? Satan is released from the abyss, he then deceives the nations, orchestrating a world-wide revolt against Christ while he is ruling over the nations from Jerusalem. This leads to a massive apostasy on the part of those living under Christ's reign. Not only does this mean that there will be a second fall, of sorts, but what does it say about the character of Christ's millennial rule? Therefore, the presence of evil during the millennial reign is a very serious problem which premillennarians cannot be allowed to ignore.

Rather than attempt to refute premillennialism point by point, let me set forth as simply as I can, the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20. Not only does it make much better sense of the text, it avoids all of the serious problems just mentioned. Suffice to say, the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 builds upon that which has gone before. Therefore, what is described in this text does not at all follow after the events of Revelation 19 in any chronological sense. Revelation 20 depicts another vision, which like the others, describes the entire period of time between the first coming and second advent of Jesus Christ from yet a different theological camera angle, this time depicting the fate of the dragon.

Context is everything—especially with disputed texts like this one. Recall that Revelation 17-18 dealt with the destruction of the harlot. Revelation 19:1-10 described heaven's reaction to the news of God's judgment of the harlot, the occasion for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Then, Revelation 19:11-21 depicts the fate of the beast and the false prophet—who are caught alive and thrown into the lake of fire at time of Christ's return. If all of Christ's enemies are destroyed during the judgment described in Revelation 19, and the birds of prey feast upon the remains of all men, great and small, slave and free, then what follows in Revelation 20, must be a retelling of the final judgment from yet another perspective. If all people and nations are judged at Christ's return in Revelation 19, why do they immediately resurface in Revelation 20? This means that the relationship between these two chapters is not a chronological one. Building upon these previous visions, in Revelation 20 John now describes what happens to Satan beginning with the time he waged war in heaven and was cast down to earth (as described in Revelation 12:7-9), until the time of the end (depicted here in Revelation 20).

Recall that in Revelation 12:7-9, John records the following: *“And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”* At the time we covered this passage I made the point that this was not a reference to a literal war in heaven, but to the fact that when Jesus begins his messianic ministry and ushers in the kingdom of God, he overcomes all of Satan's efforts to prevent the seed of the woman—promised way back in Genesis 3:15—from ever being born. Not only does the Messiah usher in the kingdom of God, but when Satan orchestrates Jesus' crucifixion, ironically, he assures his own defeat. For when Jesus Christ dies upon the cross for our sins and then rises again from the dead, he crushes Satan under his feet, though his own heel be bruised.

Paul puts it this way: *“having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”* Therefore, Satan was defeated by Jesus Christ during his public ministry, something John describes in Revelation 12:7-9, using apocalyptic symbolism—i.e. a war in heaven with Satan losing and being cast down to the earth, and

here in Revelation 20 with the language of Satan being bound.

It is very important to notice the parallels between Revelation 12:7-9 and Revelation 20. In Revelation 20, Satan is said to be cast down to the abyss, bound by the preaching of the gospel. At the time of the end—which as John has already told us—we will see the rise of one last Satanically energized world empire, bent upon waging war on the church. Notice, too, that in Revelation 20, John speaks of Satan being released from the abyss, before orchestrating a final revolt against the beloved city, the camp of God’s people (the church) only to be cast into the lake of fire at the time of the end.

Therefore, in Revelation 20, John is not in any sense predicting a future millennium in which the earth is partially restored and when Jesus rules over the nations from Jerusalem. Rather, the thousand years is an apocalyptic symbol of Christ’s present reign in heaven, together with all those who come out of the great tribulation and who have suffered at the hands of the beast. Indeed, we will read that when the beast takes their lives, the saints now come to life and reign in heaven with Christ! Therefore, Revelation 20 is a description of the this present age, viewed from the perspective of the final fate of the dragon (Satan), which wraps up John’s vision depicting the fate of all the enemies of Jesus Christ, beginning with the harlot, moving on to the beast and the false prophet, and finally to the dragon.

As we turn to Revelation 20, I will set out the amillennial interpretation as best I can. But as I do so, I am asking you—especially if you know nothing but premillennialism—to pretend for the next few minutes that you have never heard an exposition of this passage before. Read carefully, see if it fits with the text and what has gone before, and look for three things.

First, where does the scene take place? In heaven or on earth?

Second, is John talking about the present or the future?

Third, is there, or is there not, a period of universal peace described anywhere in the passage?

Revelation 20 clearly begins a new vision—a theological replay of the same events which began in Revelation 16 with the sixth and seventh bowls—and which culminated in Revelation 19:11-21 with God’s final judgment upon all the peoples and the nations of the earth. In verse one we are tipped off to the fact this a new vision when John says, “*and I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain.*” Throughout the Book of Revelation, whenever John uses the word “*eidon*” (I saw) he is introducing a new vision, that which we have been describing as different camera angles of the same event.¹ In this vision, John sees an angel coming down from heaven holding the key to the abyss and a golden chain to frustrate the purposes of Satan.

The first thing we must remember is that this is apocalyptic symbolism. John never intends us to understand these things literally. How can an angel bind a spiritual being (Satan) with a real chain? How can a spiritual being be locked away in a pit. The second matter is the identification of this particular angel and the meaning of the symbolism of the key to the abyss and the chain. Keys have been mentioned throughout Revelation. In Revelation 1:18, Christ holds the keys of death and hades in his hand. In chapter 3, we read of the Holy One who has the key of David which opens and shuts. And then in Revelation 9:1-2 we read that “*the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen*

¹ Beale, Revelation, 975.

from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss.” Therefore we look back to see how these terms were used earlier in Revelation.

Given the symbolism of the keys prior to this text, we have the “key” (pun intended) to interpret correctly all of these things with some degree of certainty. The abyss is a reference to death and Hades—the realm with which Satan is most closely associated in this book. Having been cast out of heaven (according to Revelation 12:7-9), John now sees an angel (either Christ himself, or an angel exercising Christ’s authority) confining Satan to the realm of the dead since Satan has been cast from heaven where he had been making accusations against the saints. According to verses 2-3 the angel “*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.*” There are several issues which we need to tackle head on. We must be clear about what John is actually saying. Satan is bound to the abyss—the realm of death and hades—for a specified time (a thousand years), for a specific purpose (so that he is prevented from deceiving the nations), until the thousand years are over.

Therefore, the binding of Satan does not in sense mean that his evil activities completely cease during the thousand years. In fact, John has already told us in Revelation 12:12 that after Satan is cast out of heaven the earth is warned, “*woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.*” Like a sick or wounded animal sure to die, Satan is more dangerous now—even while being confined to the abyss—then he was when he had free access to heaven. He has been defeated by Christ’s death and resurrection. His doom is assured. The truth of the gospel exposes his lies for what they are. But nevertheless he has nothing to lose, hence he wages war on the saints, and at times, appears to overcome them. This is why Peter speaks of Satan as our enemy who “*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour,*” and while Paul can speak of him as “*the god of this age, who blinds the minds of unbelievers.*” Remember, you can put a vicious dog on a chain, but you sure don’t want to get within the radius of the chain or you’ll still get mauled!

John’s point is not that Satan ceases all activity during the thousand years—in fact the Scripture implies the Devil’s rage increases because he knows the end is coming. But Satan is prevented from deceiving the nations so as to organize them against the church until being released at the end of the thousand years. Isn’t this what John has been telling us from the very beginning of this book? The beast was already manifest in the Roman empire (the fourth empire of Daniel’s vision). But Christ has defeated Caesar, which is why we go to Rome today to look at the ruins of the Roman empire. Rome’s Antichrist emperors have come and gone, relegated to the annals of history. Indeed, beasts in many forms have come and gone throughout the age, persecuting the church for a time, only to be overcome by the testimony of the saints and the blood of the Lamb. Hitler’s thousand year Reich lasted less than fifteen years. Stalin’s great socialist republic collapsed before our eyes. Even though nations who persecute the church come and go, they are prevented from organizing against the church as a whole. And inevitably they come to an end—often times a bloody end brought about by the providential intervention of God.

But John now warns us that one day Satan will be released from the abyss, and then he will organize the nations against Jesus Christ and his church, only to be crushed by Jesus on the day of judgment.

As for the thousand years, John never intends us to understand this as a literal one-thousand year period of time. Recall that numbers are used symbolically throughout Revelation. Seven is the number of perfection and completion, four is the number of the earth, and so on. A thousand is the third power of

ten, and is, therefore, symbolic of a long period of time, perhaps an ideal period of time. Recall that in Revelation 2:10, the saints in Smyrna were forced to endure ten days of suffering, but were rewarded by reigning with Christ for a thousand years! Therefore, the intensification of ten days (a short time) to a thousand years (an ideal time) is intended to show that our momentary suffering is rewarded by great glory, even during this present age, prior to the eternal state.² Thus when John speaks of Satan being bound for a thousand years, he is talking about Satan being cast from heaven and confined to the realm of the dead until released.

Recall that in the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus sends seventy-two followers out to preach the gospel, two by two. They came back and reported to Jesus, "Master we saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Thus the confining of Satan to the abyss is somehow connected to the preaching of the gospel. And because his defeat is certain, Satan is furious, and attempts to wage war on the church in a final act of desperation. But since he is now bound by the preaching of Christ crucified, he is prevented from organizing the nations until released before the time of the end.

In verses 4-6 the scene now shifts to heaven. Says John, *"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."* Again, there are a number of important points here which we must address.

Throughout the Book of Revelation, thrones are always in heaven, not on the earth. Therefore, this scene is a heavenly one, not earthly. This is further supported by the fact the John sees "souls," not people. According to John, these souls are the disembodied spirits of those who were put to death for refusing to worship the beast or to take his blasphemous mark upon their bodies. These individuals held to their testimony for Jesus and his word, until taking their final breath. But when they die, John says, they immediately come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years! This is hardly a description of a future earthly millennium characterized by a time of universal peace. This is a time characterized by persecution and suffering. People are dying because they confess "Jesus is Lord," in the face of the persecution of the beast. Not only do these people come to life, but the second death—which is a reference to eternal judgment and the fires of hell—has no power over them. They come to life and reign with Christ in heaven until his return at the end of the age.

John calls this translation from earth at the time of death to the reign in heaven, the "first resurrection." Indeed "blessed and holy" are those who take part in it. This is not a reference to the bodily resurrection at the end of the age, but is instead a reference to a believer's regeneration, conversion, and entrance into heaven at death, a point confirmed by a number of New Testament passages, most notably John 5:24-25, where John quotes Jesus as saying, *"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."* In his gospel, John very clearly teaches that all those who come to faith in Jesus Christ, do so because they have already crossed over from death to life. Thus the first resurrection occurs

² Beale, Revelation, 995.

at the time of regeneration when we are born again, and is manifest when we leave this life and enter into the presence of Christ in heaven, where we will reign with Christ as priests until the thousand years are over.

But it is what happens at the end of the thousand years to which we should now direct our attention. According to verse 7, *“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.”* John’s focus shifts back to earth, to those days immediately before the return of Jesus Christ. Satan will be released from his prison in the abode of the dead. Through the agency of the last and greatest beast, the false prophet and the seductive efforts of the harlot, Satan will manage to deceive the nations for the express purpose of waging war upon the church of Jesus Christ. The “camp of God’s people,” and “the city that he loves,” are symbolic references to Israel wandering in the wilderness and to the New Jerusalem, which even now is coming down from heaven.

Notice too, that John mentions the mysterious Gog and Magog, who, as we saw in our Old Testament lesson in the 39th chapter of Ezekiel’s prophecy of the final judgment, are the leaders of the Gentile nations who attack the people of God. These two evil leaders, interestingly enough, appear in the very same prophecy we read last week of birds of prey who feast upon the inhabitants of the earth at the time of final judgment. This is yet another compelling piece of evidence that Revelation 19:11-21 and Revelation 20:7-10 are both referring to the same event, the final judgment.

Throughout the Book of Revelation, John has already referred to this final battle when the nations gather to make war on the church on at least three occasions. The most famous of these is the Battle of Armageddon, described in the sixth bowl judgment in Revelation 16:12-16. There is also the sixth seal judgment in Revelation 6:12-17, which describes the kings of the earth cowering in fear, hiding themselves in rocks, and crying out, *“Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”* And then according to Revelation 11:15, when the seventh trumpet sounds, *“there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’”*

Thus Revelation 20:1-6, is not a description of a future millennial reign of Christ upon the earth. It is a description of the present reign of the saints in heaven. And in heaven, those who have suffered at the hands of the beast are now protected from Satan’s assaults, for Satan no longer has access to heaven, having been cast down to earth and confined to the abode of the dead. Instead of suffering, the saints now rule and reign for a thousand years as priests of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Revelation 20:7-10 describes what happens when Jesus Christ returns to earth in judgment. Not only does Jesus come to rescue his church and deliver his people in their greatest hour of trial, consuming his enemies with fire from heaven, but Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented, forever and ever. He will suffer the same horrible fate as the harlot, the beast and the false prophet.

Therefore, in Revelation 20 John reminds a suffering a persecuted church, that despite all of Satan’s lies, deceit and rage, his end is certain—he will suffer eternal torment forever and ever. God has decreed it and it will come to pass.

All that remains then is the final judgment, described in verses 11-15. Says John, *“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.”*

With this, human history comes to an end and we now enter the eternal state, which is the subject of the final two chapters of Revelation. There is much here of great importance and we will discuss these verses in some detail next week, Lord willing. But it is important to at least read the passage in connection with Revelation 20:1-10, because it is clear from John’s description that once the harlot has been destroyed, once Christ has taken his bride, once the kings and nations have become nothing but food for birds of prey, once the beast and the false prophet have been caught alive and cast into the lake of fire, and once Satan has likewise been thrown into the same place to be tormented forever and ever, the day of judgment, when we all appear before God’s throne, has now come. The books will be opened, and all men and women will be judged according to what they have done. We have reached the final chapter of redemptive history, a chapter which never ends.

Thus when all is said and done, Revelation 20:1-10 is not describing a golden age upon the earth or future hope. The reign of Christ described in these verses is a present reality. This is also a text which should bring us great comfort. For when we die—either at the hand of the beast or because of the wages of sin—we immediately enter the presence of Christ and reign for a thousand years as priests, safe from Satan and delivered from our sins.

Because we who are Christ’s have *already been* made alive (the first resurrection), the second death (eternity in the lake of fire) has no power over us. It also means that all those whom we have loved, who have died in Christ have “come to life and are reigning with Christ for a thousand years.”

With this glorious scene before us, let us not fear death. Let us confess Jesus as Lord with great courage in the face of the beast. For we know how the story ends.

We are victorious because the Lamb has triumphed! For we will come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years! Amen.