

The Thousand-Year Reign

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Revelation 20:1-15

There are only a few chapters left for us to look at in the book of Revelation. Chapter 20 is the fulfillment of the prayer we have each week. In the Lord's Prayer we say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." By the end of the chapter, Death and evil are finally destroyed and the scene is set for God's kingdom on earth. As in other parts of Revelation a pattern of strong contrasts between good and evil continues in this chapter. The 1,000-year reign of Christ is a strong contrast to the judgment on Satan. Earlier, in Revelation, we read how Satan was thrown out of heaven, down to earth. In today's chapter, we now have the final judgment on Satan. He is thrown into a lake of fire, along with Death and Hades (Hades was understood as the place where dead people go). All the evil is taken care of, purified in the lake of fire. In other words, they are all destroyed, never to return. This is preparation for God's kingdom to be established on earth.

Along with contrasts between good and evil, we see contrasts with time. In various parts of Revelation, we read about the suffering of the faithful. If you remember, the times used to describe this suffering are relatively short. (3 ½ days, 5 months, 42 months...). In contrast to this, the reign of Christ is symbolized as 1,000 years, in today's chapter. Human suffering is minimal compared with the reign of God and Christ.

Today's chapter is a challenging one because it includes the "Millennium," the thousand-year period where the devil is bound (or limited in power). And, there are many conflicting views on this. Let's look a little more closely at this period of time. To use an illustration from everyday life, have you ever heard the expression, "A picture is worth a thousand words"? Or, what about this reaction someone may have, "Never in a thousand years!" We know that these do not mean a literal 1,000 years. If we see a picture of something it doesn't literally mean there should be 1,000 words to describe it, no more no less. If someone says, "Never in a thousand years," it doesn't mean that maybe something would be possible in 1,001 years! These expressions just mean very, very much, or a very, very long time. I believe that, most likely, this is how John understood the 1,000 years, as well. We know there are many symbolic expressions in the Bible that use numbers. For example, Jesus tells Peter that he needs to forgive not just 7 times, but 70 times seven. Jesus wasn't suggesting that once you reach that number in forgiving someone, you can stop. He was suggesting that we should not put limits on our forgiveness. Anyway, looking at symbolic numbers, we've already seen many examples of this in the book of Revelation.

Regarding the 1,000-year reign of Christ, where Satan is limited in power, you can narrow down the various possible interpretations into three main views. The Postmillennialists believe Christ will come again after 1,000 years of the church having power in the world. Premillennialists insist that Christ will come again before a 1,000-year reign of the faithful near the end of time. They also believe in making the scenes of Revelation into a timeline for the future. On the other hand, Amillennialists believe that the 1,000 years is a spiritual image representing a period of time where the church has power over Satan... Many people argue about which view of the millennium is true, but the fact is there is evidence for each of the views. I believe a symbolic understanding fits best with most of Revelation as well as the rest of the Bible. We know that the culture in which John wrote Revelation often used symbols. Understanding the 1,000 years as being symbolic, we can see that when Jesus defeated Satan through his sacrifice on the cross, he began a 1,000-year (or long time) reign where Satan is limited in power. Our chapter begins with Satan being bound and sealed in a bottomless pit, "so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while." So the chapter talks about Satan being bound (for a long time). Many are likely curious as to why he must be let out for a while after the 1,000 years. One explanation could be that evil is strong and continues for a long time. Right now, because of Jesus, we have power over Satan, yet Satan can still deceive us. Even though Christ freed us from sin, we still tend to rebel against God

during this period in history. Satan is limited in power because of Jesus, but not yet destroyed. His final and complete destruction comes at the final judgment, after he is let out. He gathers the nations for battle against God and God's faithful people. Gog and Magog are references from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. They represent armies that gather to oppose God's people.

We read that the armies are consumed by fire from heaven, and Satan is thrown into the lake of fire. Death itself and Hades are also destroyed in the lake of fire. Even though Satan is a spirit, and Death does not have a body that can be burned, they are still thrown into the lake of fire. Why? The fire symbolizes purification as well as destruction of anything impure. The main point is that evil will be taken care of. It will no longer be a part of the world. I don't believe that God tortures people in flames. The lake of fire is likely symbolic of destruction and eternal separation from God.

Many people think the lake of fire is a place of torment in hell, but it is actually an image that comes from the Dead Sea. Due to volcanic activity below the lake, there was sometimes fire and smoke around it, so people sometimes saw it as a "lake of fire." As John wrote Revelation, he used these images, things that people of his day could see and understand. All of the things, images, and symbols in Revelation are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the culture of John's day.

There is a curious section in today's chapter that talks about a first resurrection, and a second death. We can understand there possibly being two deaths and two resurrections. The first death is physical, the time when we lose our lives on earth. The second death could be seen as a spiritual death. After the final judgment, it is determined if the person will be part of God's kingdom or if the person chooses eternal separation from God. This would be the second death, a spiritual death. On the other hand, if we look at the idea of resurrection, the first resurrection could be a spiritual one while the second resurrection a physical one. At Easter, when Christ was raised to life after his death on a cross, we celebrate a new era of resurrection. Because Christ was raised to life, we all have newness of life. We can now live with hope, knowing that death is not the end, knowing that God is in control even beyond death. The "1st resurrection" idea could symbolize this period of history where we live now. New believers experience this spiritual resurrection when they make the decision to give their lives to Jesus Christ. In the future, after we die, there will be a second resurrection, a physical one. Jesus was the first to experience this. But, that will be what is in store for all people. Death is not the end. We will all need to stand before God and Jesus Christ.

Near the end of the chapter, we have the scene of a great white throne symbolizing purity. This parallels the white horse that Jesus rode in an earlier part of Revelation. In the final judgment scene, even the earth and heaven flee from God's presence. All God's creation is affected by sin. Now is the time for renewal and nothing impure will be accepted. In this judgment, all people are judged. In verse 12, it says, "...the dead were judged according to their works as recorded in the books." But, more importantly, through the grace of Jesus Christ, people get their names written in the "book of life." Good works are the evidence of faith in Jesus. But, those who choose against God are thrown into the "lake of fire," which represents destruction of all impurity.

As we sort through the various images of judgment, we must remember that the purpose is not to give us a timeline of what will happen. Jesus, himself warns against trying to predict an end timeline. Acts 1:6-7: "...when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority..." And, the apostle Paul says, "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2). Whether we believe that Christ will come again before or after the 1,000 years, all the different perspectives agree that Christ could come anytime. Jesus is coming again, and all evil will be judged. We place our hope in our loving God and in the resurrection power shown through Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank-you that you are in control of history. Thank-you for the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Whatever we face in our lives, we know that you are stronger than even death. Thank-you that one day evil and death will be no more. May the power of the resurrection invigorate our lives. Sometimes the challenges around us are overwhelming. It's sometimes hard to imagine a bright future when things are going wrong. Thank-you that we are a part of a church family that can support and encourage each other in our journeys of faith. O Lord, you already have the victory over evil. May this knowledge shape our lives, through Christ our Lord, Amen.