

## Revelation Ch. 20: The Reign and Judgment

Jeff Randolph  
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The previous chapter depicted the glorified church, fully built up (cf. 15:8; 19:7), and avenged after the fall of Jerusalem (18:20; 19:2). It then pictured the ultimate defeat of the persecuting Roman beasts (19:20). We now view the binding of Satan, and then project beyond the first century to the end of time (20:10-15). Just as Jerusalem was punished for her sins, so also will all the wicked pay the price for their deeds, and for rejecting the Son of God.

### Verses 1-3

**Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.**

The bottomless pit has been previously interpreted as the source and abode of evil, perhaps signifying the Hadean realm (9:1; cf. 2 Pet. 2:4). The key to the pit represents the authority given to the angel to unleash its contents, or to lock things within (cf. 1:18). The angel that was mentioned earlier as being given this key was possibly Satan (9:1, 11), whereas this angel clearly is not, showing that Satan's authority regarding the events described in that section was limited.

The great chain symbolizes restraint (cf. Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4), as Satan is bound up and restrained from deceiving the nations for a period of time (20:7). Notice that the devil was not completely restrained from all evil, but in his work of “deceiving the nations.” The seal placed on him is not one of protection (cf. 7:1-3), but of God's approval and unchanging purpose concerning him being bound (cf. Dan. 6:17).

Satan is chained and bound today because Christ has rendered him powerless (12:9; Gen. 3:15; Matt. 12:29; Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:8; cf. Jn. 10:27-30), and all can resist him (Jas. 4:7; Rom. 8:37-39; Eph. 4:14). His power to deceive is limited to those who allow it to happen (1 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 4:27). Like a chained up dog (or lion; 1 Pet. 5:8), he can only (spiritually) harm those who enter his sphere of influence.

Though he persecutes through his followers (12:17), throwing out his “fiery darts” (Eph. 6:16), let us always keep in mind that God is in control, the church abides forever (Matt. 16:18), and that trials and tribulations brought on by the devil can serve to strengthen our faith (2:10; Jas. 1:1-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-9). Nothing he does can ever harm our souls, unless we allow it (1 Cor. 10:13), because Christ has “bound the strong man and plundered his goods” (Matt. 12:29; Mk. 3:27).

The devil was given a “short time” in the trials and tribulations of the first century (12:12), but his power was diminished even further as the gospel was preached to every creature (Matt. 24:14; Col. 1:23), and the church was being built up (cf. Eph. 4:12-14; Rev. 10:7; 15:8; 19:7). Now that the gospel message is complete (cf. 10:7), everyone can open their eyes, see the light of Christ, and turn from Satan's deceptive works of darkness (Acts 26:16-18; Rom. 8:37-39; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:10-17).

One thousand is a high power of ten, symbolizing the complete power God exercises over the devil in

restraining him from deceiving the nations. It is not a literal number, and a literal interpretation is not supported by the Scriptures, since these one thousand years are not mentioned elsewhere but in this highly symbolic context. More will be said about this symbol in the following section.

The “little while” in which he is released may represent a period of time in which the gospel is no longer heard (cf. Gen. 6:1-12), much like what happened in the first century when all who would obey Christ from that first generation had done so prior to the fall of Jerusalem (7:1-4; 15:8; 22:11; cf. Acts 2:39). It could be that something similar will happen near the end of time. Whatever the case, it is during this period that Satan is able to deceive the nations once more, and gather them against the church (20:7-9).

#### **Verse 4**

**And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.**

These verses are some of the most misunderstood in the Bible. Many have interpreted these to mean a literal thousand year reign on the earth when Jesus returns. As noted above, these thousand years are mentioned nowhere else in the Scriptures but in this symbolic passage. Additionally, if the binding of Satan took place in the past and is continuing today (see above), so also is the case with Christ's reign. Let us examine each of the facts to arrive at a reasonable interpretation.

The thrones symbolize victory, and those sitting upon them had ultimately overcome the troubles and persecutions of the world (3:21; 4:4). They also symbolize authority and judgment (Matt. 19:28; cf. Heb. 1:8; Rev. 4-5; 6:16; 16:17; 20:11). In this case, judgment was committed to those sitting upon the thrones, and while it does not say who “they” are, it likely refers to those who had petitioned their case before God to judge and avenge their blood (cf. 6:9-11). They were under the altar, but had now risen to thrones. They appeared defeated, but now had victory. God had now avenged His people on the wicked (11:18; 15:4; 16:5; 18:20; 19:2). Though the primary focus of this book is the judgment on Jerusalem, we can be assured that He will avenge His people over all enemies that arise against them (17:14; 19:11-16; 20:10-15; 1 Cor. 15:25).

Not only does John here see those slain before the death of Christ (cf. 6:9-11), but also those persecuted and slain afterward, who had not bowed down to the beast (6:11; cf. 1:9; 12:17; 13:15; 15:2). The fact that they were “beheaded” likely signifies martyrdom in general, and may be used here in reference to the name of God on their foreheads (14:1), further denoting the reason why they were persecuted and killed.

It is important to recognize that Christ gained the victory for all mankind, the faithful who lived both before and after His death (cf. Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:9; 10:11, 12). Those who overcome are able to reign with Him for a thousand years (cf. 3:21), a symbol of the complete power (10 times 10 times 10) of the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords (17:14; 19:16; cf. Lk. 1:33; Dan. 2:44). The actual length of time represented by these thousand years is unknown. This number was likely chosen simply for its symbolic significance, but perhaps also to show that things spiritual will outlast anything physical (the oldest human recorded in the Bible is Methuselah, aged 969 years; Gen. 5:27).

There is no basis for interpreting a future “millennium” in which Christ reigns on the earth with His

people, because the kingdom of God is a *present reality* (1:6, 9; 2:26; 5:10; Eph. 2:6; Col. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:12; Mk. 9:1). It is not a physical kingdom to be established in the future (Jn. 18:36; Lk. 17:20, 21), but a spiritual one established when He ascended to the throne (1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 3:21).

Overall, this is a picture of life after death for the faithful (2:10). These are reigning in Paradise (Lk. 23:43), awaiting the bodily resurrection (Jn. 5:27-29; Acts 24:15; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thes. 4:14-18; Rev. 20:13). While the picture of life after death is the primary focus of this scene, this concept also applies to the faithful living on earth (Jn. 5:25; Eph. 2:6), as these reign with Christ in complete power over their enemies (Rom. 8:37-39; cf. Rev. 2:26; 3:21).

### **Verses 5-6**

**But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.**

There is a contrast between those living and reigning with Christ, and the “rest of the dead.” Though all abide after death, the state of the wicked can hardly be called “living,” whereas the righteous rest in bliss (Lk. 16:22-25; cf. Rev. 6:11).

The first resurrection is that in which the righteous live and reign with Christ, and so the bodily resurrection, when all the dead will live again, could be deemed the “second” resurrection (Jn. 5:27-29; Acts 24:15; 1 Cor. 15; Rev. 20:13).

It was stated earlier that those who overcome will not be hurt by the second death (2:11), connecting the idea of overcoming with this first resurrection. Just as there are two resurrections, so also are there two deaths. The second death, spiritual death, has no power over those who have part in the first resurrection, the spiritual resurrection.

In general, resurrection is a symbol of a new life, victory, and hope, as pictured by Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, discussing the raising up of Israel from captivity (Ezek. 37:11-14), and extending the imagery to the new life brought forth through Christ (Ezek. 37:24-28). We see here this spiritual resurrection being applied to the victory of those who had physically died, yet were still living on (cf. Jn. 11:25, 26; Heb. 11:35), yet this renewed hope begins when one “dies” to sin, and rises to live a new life in Christ (Rom. 6:3-11; Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:12, 13; 3:1; cf. Jn. 5:24, 25; Dan. 12:2, 3). It is “victory in Jesus” in every sense of the word (Rom. 8:37; 1 Cor. 15:57), and is meant to bring out the contrast in this book between the righteous who rise up in victory, and the wicked who fall in defeat.

Those who continue in this new spiritual life and die faithfully in the Lord (2:10; 14:13) will escape the lake of fire, which is the second death, spiritual separation from God (20:14; 21:8; Jn. 8:24; 2 Thes. 1:9). If and only if we continue to walk in the light of God's word (1 Jn. 1:7) will we never again be deemed spiritually dead, but live with Him for all eternity (Jn. 8:51; 11:25, 26; Rom. 6:23; 1 Thes. 4:17; cf. Ezek. 37:24-28; Dan. 12:2; Rev. 21:3, 4).

This is a picture of a kingdom of priests, as the righteous have been described elsewhere (1:6; 5:10; 1 Pet. 2:9; Isa. 66:21). Christians are priests because no other mediator between them and God is needed, but Jesus Christ, the High Priest (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:1).

It should be clear that the thousand years are not meant to be taken literally, but symbolize the present reign of Christ in His kingdom, where Satan's works of darkness are restrained by its light (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9; 1 Jn. 2:8). These should provide words of comfort to Christians of any era enduring hard times.

### **Verses 7-9**

**Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them.**

The kingdom of Christ endures forever (Dan. 2:44; 7:27; Lk. 1:33), so the sense in which this indefinite period of time *expires* may have to do with lack of receptivity to the gospel. Because of this, Satan's restraint comes to an end, and he is released for a "little while" (20:3), and is able to deceive the nations once more, in such a way as to gather followers together for (spiritual) battle (persecution) against the church.

The four corners of the earth represent the wicked coming from the ends of the earth to try to destroy God's people (cf. Rev. 7:1). The symbols of Gog and Magog come from Ezekiel, in which Gog was a wicked prince from the land of Magog, and was identified as a foreign threat against a peaceful nation (Ezek. 38:1-3, 10-12). We read that Gog is ultimately destroyed by God (Ezek. 38:18-23), as the Lord demonstrates His glory and judgment for all to see (Ezek. 39:21-29). The reference is probably mentioned to contrast with the fact that the Romans, enemies of God's people, came against Jerusalem and prevailed, yet such a thing will never happen to the beloved city, New Jerusalem (21:9, 10).

Regardless of what this means exactly, we know that God will defeat the devil and his followers before they can destroy the church (cf. 11:15; Matt. 16:18).

### **Verse 10**

**The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.**

Like the beast and false prophet, Satan himself is utterly defeated (19:20). As observed, the lake of fire symbolizes the ultimate defeat of the enemies of God. It is the second death, in which the wicked will be eternally punished, and separated from the blessings of God (20:14; 21:8; Matt. 25:41, 46; 2 Thes. 1:9; Jude 5-7). This is the fate of all who continue to oppose God, both spiritual and physical beings alike (Matt. 25:41; cf. Jude 5-7; 2 Pet. 2:4).

This pictures all rule and authority and power being put to an end (1 Cor. 15:24, 25), which will usher in the final judgment.

*Note: Some writers who advocate the first century fulfillment of the book of Revelation also attribute the following section to the judgment on Jerusalem and/or pagan Rome, rather than the final judgment. The majority who take this position advocate that the Judgment Day is in fact the judgment on Jerusalem, there is no future resurrection of the dead, and the Second Coming of Christ occurred when He came in judgment on Jerusalem. According to this theory, the New Testament does not even project beyond the events of 70 AD. However, there is a minority that hold the traditional view of the end of time, while still applying this chapter entirely to the first century (See Foy E. Wallace, The Book of*

Revelation). Some passages to consider along these lines are Isaiah 28:14-18; 31:9; 66:24; Ezekiel 22:18-22.

*That said, taking these varying views into consideration, this writer currently believes that a final judgment interpretation of verses 10-15 is still the best approach, especially given the mention of the ultimate defeat of Death, which is said elsewhere to be the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:25, 26). The end of time is therefore implied, but is not the focus of the vision. The focus is judgment.*

### **Verses 11-12**

**Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.**

This is a picture of judgment, symbolized by the throne (4:2-6; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Matt. 27:19; Jn. 19:13; Acts 18:12). The white color represents victory, but also the purity and wisdom of the One sitting upon it (1:14; cf. Dan. 7:9, 10).

The purpose of this section is not to summarize what will happen at the end of time, but to draw a parallel between the final judgment and the national judgment that took place in 70 AD. Earth and heaven are pictured as fleeing away, because just as the Jewish age passed away in Christ's coming to judge Jerusalem (1:7; 6:14; 11:18; 16:5, 6; 18:6; 21:1; 22:12; Matt. 24:30; Heb. 8:13; cf. Isa. 13:13; 34:4), so also will things present pass away at His coming to judge the world.

At the return of Jesus to judge the world (Jn. 12:48; Acts 1:11; 17:31; Heb. 9:27, 28), the earth as we know it will cease to exist (Heb. 1:10-12; 2 Pet. 3:7-13), and the dead will rise to receive either a great reward (1 Cor. 15:51-58; 1 Thes. 4:16-18), or terrible punishment (Matt. 25:46; Jn. 5:29; cf. Rom. 2:5-10). At this time the Shepherd will once and for all divide His "sheep" from the "goats" (Matt. 25:31-41).

We will be judged according to our works (Matt. 12:36; 2 Cor. 5:10), implying degrees of reward and punishment (Matt. 11:21-24; Lk. 12:42-48; Jas. 3:1; 2 Pet. 2:20, 21). While we are in a sense judged when we die, which determines where we will reside until this "second" resurrection (20:13), the final judgment can be likened to our eternal sentencing. After death, our destiny is fixed, but the reward (good or bad) is not fully realized until the end of time (cf. Lk. 16:26; Heb. 9:27).

The books represent both the records of our deeds, in which God knows all things (Heb. 4:13; cf. Mal. 3:16; Dan. 7:10, 11), and also the standard by which we are measured, the word of God (Jn. 12:48). The Book of Life symbolizes those who are faithful to God (cf. 2 Tim. 2:19), and are found worthy to abide in heaven with Him (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27; 22:19; Phi. 4:3; Heb. 12:23).

### **Verse 13**

**The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.**

This tells how all of the dead ended up standing before God, they were resurrected (cf. 20:5). Death and Hades are always grouped together (1:18; 6:8), and are pictured as giving up dead bodies (Death) and spirits (Hades) to be united once more. Read Jn. 5:27-29; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thes. 4:13-18.

If the sea here pictures society (cf. 13:1; 17:15), the dead from the sea could represent those who were still living, yet were spiritually dead (cf. 1 Pet. 4:6; Rev. 11:18). This could also just be emphasizing the fact that nobody can hide from God (Amos 9:3; cf. Heb. 4:13).

#### **Verses 14-15**

**Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.**

Once these things occur, death will be no more (1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55). Though Christ defeated death when He was resurrected (Rom. 6:9; Heb. 2:14), this pictures the ultimate triumph over death for His people, those found written in the Book of Life. Neither physical death nor spiritual death can affect the servants of God (2:11; 14:13; 20:6; Rom. 8:37-39).

The second death is the lake of fire (21:8), a picture of utter defeat, spiritual death, and ultimately eternal separation from God (cf. Rom. 5:12; Isa. 59:2). In the end, Death and Hades serve no purpose in the heavenly realm (cf. 21:4), while Satan and the wicked will suffer eternal punishment in hell for the evil they have done (19:20; 20:10; Matt. 25:41, 46; Mk. 9:43-48; 2 Thes. 1:8, 9; Jude 5-7).

The judgment on Jerusalem was a foreshadow of the fate that awaits those who rebel against God, and trample underfoot His Son (Heb. 2:2, 3; 10:29-31; cf. Mk. 16:16; Jn. 8:24; Isa. 66:24).

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