

# Study 22: Revelation Chapter 20

## **Introduction**

*“...But when is the millennium? Does it follow hard on the heels of the events portrayed in the previous chapter? I don’t think so. We are seeing a new vision unfolding. We’ve wound back to the beginning of the video again. In a way we are seeing a repeat play-back of chapter 12, where we learnt of Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and the overthrow of our adversary...”*

## **Body of the Study**

### **Introduction**

### **The Thousand Years**

### **Vindication of the Martyrs**

### **The Final Judgment**

## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

*Re-read chapter 20*

*Read the notes as a review of the study*

*Read chapter 21 in preparation for the next study*

*How does this chapter help us to see life and death in a proper perspective?*

*Why does God allow Satan to re-appear after he had been bound for the thousand years?*

*vs 20 says that we are judged according to our works. How can this be, if we are saved by our faith, and by God’s grace?*

## Notes for study 22: Revelation Chapter 20

“...But when is the millennium? Does it follow hard on the heels of the events portrayed in the previous chapter? I don’t think so. We are seeing a new vision unfolding. We’ve wound back to the beginning of the video again. In a way we are seeing a repeat play-back of chapter 12, where we learnt of Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and the overthrow of our adversary<sup>1</sup>...”

### Introduction

Revelation chapter 20 is the most difficult chapter in the most difficult book of the New Testament. It has been the source of much false doctrine over the years. That is not to say that we cannot understand it – but rather that it is not a simple and straightforward passage.

How the passage is interpreted will depend on the view taken of the whole book. Are we seeing the same events previously presented but from a different perspective, or is this a different event?

### The Thousand Years

The chapter begins a new section with “And I saw” “...And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain...” (20:1 NIV). The one coming from heaven was not Christ, but an angel. The Abyss had previously been opened, with a fallen angel releasing a scourge of locusts (9:1-3). Now the angel has the key, and has with him a great chain. The key *opens the door*, and the chain *binds or restrains*. This time, Satan is bound and thrown into the Abyss. “...He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...” (20:2 NIV). John gives four descriptions of Satan, which show different sides to his character. Hailey notes<sup>2</sup>:

As a dragon, he is strong and ferocious; as the old serpent, he is the cunning deceiver, who from Eden has beguiled with his craftiness (II Cor. 11:3); as the devil, he has been the accuser and slanderer, the malignant enemy of God and man; and as Satan, he is the adversary, opponent and antagonist of all that is good.

The idea of binding Satan is to restrain him. He is not powerless – but has limited power. It’s like a ferocious dog on a chain. He is restrained and out of the way, but if you go within reach, he will devour you! In the same way, Satan has been bound with a chain.

The period of 1000 years is the subject of much conjecture. Hailey notes<sup>3</sup>:

The thousand years during which Satan is bound must be interpreted symbolically, as are other numbers in the book. The number is a complete number which stands for an indetermined but full period of time (cf. Job 9:3; 33:23; Ps. 50:10; 90:4; Eccles. 6:6, 7:28; II Peter 3:8).

So, for a full (and “long”) period of time Satan is restrained, and is unable to exercise his control over the nations like he did over the Roman Empire. “...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...” (20:3 NIV). John is specific about the intent of the restraint – *to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore*. The Abyss was a restraint to prevent Satan from deceiving the nations. His punishment comes later (20:10), but before that he will *be set free for a short time*. John has previously talked (repeatedly) about the three and a half years that various things were to happen (11:2,3; 12:6,14; 13:5), which was

---

<sup>1</sup> Bewes, p. 134

<sup>2</sup> Hailey, p. 391

<sup>3</sup> Hailey, p. 391

considered to be the period of the Roman persecution. Hailey notes (The last point is important, and John builds on it later (20:7-8)).<sup>4</sup>:

These expressions of a period of time, the three and a half years of persecution, the “little time” of the martyrs, and “the short time” of Satan are the same and are now fulfilled. The Roman persecution as it backed paganism is at an end; the devil is cast into the Abyss, no longer to deceive the nations as once he did; the saints’ death for the word of God is avenged and vindicated as they now sit upon thrones, reigning with Christ (vv. 4-6). This leads to the conclusion that the thousand years symbolizes that period of victory beginning with Constantine, when Roman persecution ended, and continuing until some time before the Lord’s return when Satan will be loosed from his present restraint.

### ***Vindication of the Martyrs***

The next section of the vision continues – although he has not finished with the thousand years yet. The context is set by to the previous chapter, where the vision returned to God’s Throne room, and is viewed from heaven’s perspective. “...*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...*” (20:4 NIV). We are not told who it was that sat on the thrones, and what judgment they made. We could speculate that the two statements are repetitive – ie that those on the thrones are those beheaded because of the gospel. If that is true, then the judgment is the vindication made on their behalf against Satan and his envoy – Rome.

It should be noted that John saw the *souls* of the martyrs, not their *bodies*. This helps us understand when these things will (or have) come to pass – and many false doctrines are made by implying that what John saw was their bodies, and hence it had to have occurred after the resurrection. It is not exclusively the martyrs (those who have lost their lives because of the gospel) that John saw, but also those who somehow escaped death and *had not worshipped the beast or his image ...* The Christians shared with Christ’s rule and victory for the thousand years – the period in which Satan was bound.

The vision portrays the victory of the martyrs under the altar (6:9). John also addresses the wicked servants of Satan “...*(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection...*” (20:5 NIV). Harkrider notes<sup>5</sup>:

In contrast with the saints described on thrones, the **rest of the dead** refers to the wicked servants of the beast killed with the sword of Christ (19:21). Their cause which had been advanced through the beast and the false prophet does not prevail until the thousand years are finished. Then they shall experience a resurrection (figuratively) in Satan’s revived effort as described in 20:7-9. ... The victory of martyred souls is the first resurrection. These conquerors now reign with Christ in the millennium. Just as the first part of this verse speaks of a figurative resurrection of the cause of Satan at the end of the thousand years, John now describes a figurative resurrection of the cause of Christ. ... The first resurrection is not a bodily resurrection of the dead, but figuratively it describes the saints’ triumph over Satan.

John pronounces another (the fifth of seven) beatitudes “blesseds” “...*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...*” (20:6 NIV). The Christians who have “overcome” (John’s favourite term for martyrdom) are those who are reigning with Christ (for the thousand years – the period when Satan is bound), and will not suffer

---

<sup>4</sup> Hailey, p. 392

<sup>5</sup> Harkrider, p. 230

the second death. Whilst John specifically has in mind those Christians who face martyrdom under the persecution of *the beast*, the same applies to us – we who have been raised to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4-5) – the second death has no power over us!

Satan's binding will not be permanent, and at some point he will again arise to cause trouble "...*When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison<sup>8</sup> 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...*" (20:7-8 NIV). Whilst Satan's envoys – Rome (Babylon the great) have been destroyed, yet the time will come when he will arise with new allies, which John calls Gog and Magog. Hailey notes<sup>6</sup>:

God through Ezekiel explains who the Gog and Magog are. "Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Art thou he whom I spake in old time by my servants the prophets of Israel, that prophesied in those days for many years that I would bring thee against them?" (38:17). God said that He had spoken of Gog's coming, but no prophet ever named Gog or Magog. Yet the prophets foretold over and over of the heathen enemies who would come against Israel and who would be defeated and destroyed by His hand. Therefore we conclude that Gog of the land of Magog symbolized all the heathen enemies of God's people from the time of the prophets to the Roman Empire, all who sought to thwart His purpose and to destroy His king. The seer now prophesies that toward the end of time there would be a horde gathered and led by Satan in a final furious effort to destroy the church.

Far from a physical conflict, this battle will be a moral and spiritual one. Satan's Gog and Magog symbolize such forces and agencies as atheism, humanism, communism, materialism, astrology, and all manner of false and perverted religions. Gog and Magog also represent such forces as anarchy (rebellion against all principles and standards of truth); corruption in government and business; immorality with its decay of home, lack of natural affection and devotion to children; sodomy; alcoholism; and total abandonment to a base and sordid life of the flesh. ... Gog and Magog do not gather around a conference table and offer themselves to the devil in a nefarious pact; but being deceived, they are drawn to him as were the kings of old.

In this final battle, Satan's envoys will work against God's people (the church), and will attack them on every side. "...*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...*" (20:9 NIV). However, it's time for the final showdown – Armageddon – when God finally throws Satan out of action. Here we have the final assurance that God will fight for His people and give them the victory over Satan. In the end, Satan is finally destroyed "...*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...*" (20:10 NIV). This is the third time that God has dealt with Satan. First he was thrown down to the earth (12:9), then into the Abyss (20:3), and now finally into the lake of fire. His ultimate end has come, and he shares the domain with his helpers (19:20).

### ***The Final Judgment***

A new section of the prophecy is introduced with the expression "*And I saw*" and this time, the vision returns to the Throne room. "...*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...*" (20:11 NIV). The *great white throne*, is a different description than the other thrones in the book. He does not reveal who is on the Throne – the Father, or the Lamb, but both are one (Jn 14:10). Hailey notes<sup>7</sup>:

---

<sup>6</sup> Hailey, p. 396

<sup>7</sup> Hailey, p. 400

Jesus said that the Father had given all judgment unto the Son (John 5:22, 27), and that it was He who would sit on the throne at the final judgment (Matt. 25:31 ff.). ... Later Paul taught that God's judgment would be carried out through Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16). The judgment seat is "the judgment seat of God" (Rom. 14:10, ASV) and it is "the judgment seat of Christ" (II Cor. 5:10). ... It may be suggested that as Christ went forth on a white horse to conquer (6:2), and to make war against His enemies (19:11), so now He is on the white throne to judge all men.

Previously, the islands had vanished away when the seventh bowl of wrath was poured out (16:20), but this time the earth and the heavens disappear – for there is no longer any use for them. Peter wrote "...the day of the Lord will come as a thief on the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up..." (2 Pet 3:10 NKJV).

As the earth (and the sky – the first heavens; and stars – the second heavens) disappear, the judgment scene unfolds. "...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..." (20:12 NIV). Although not stated, the resurrection must have occurred, because all of the dead are now standing before the throne. All who have ever lived will be there. You and I **WILL** be there. Both the righteous and the unrighteous will be there. Jesus told about the judgment scene and said "...and these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life..." (Matt 25:46 NKJV). Hailey notes<sup>8</sup>:

"And the books were opened" is reminiscent of Daniel 7:10, where "the books [plural] were opened" in the judgment of the fourth great beast who was judged, slain, and burned. This suggests that the books contained records of the beast's character and deeds.

In contrast, another (singular) book is opened – the Lamb's book of life. Of course, these are not literal books, but are the complete revelation of God concerning our lives, our character, and our deeds. This is God's roll of the faithful.

It is not just the living or the righteous dead who will be there "...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..." (20:13 NIV). The judgment is complete, and none will escape it. Whether they were buried in land, or perished in the sea. All of the dead will be assembled. Whilst their bodies are in the "graves" their spirits are in Hades – the unseen place of the dead. Their bodies will be re-united with their spirits (although we are not told how, it will not be a problem for an all-powerful creator who made all things out of nothing in the first place).

Finally, there is no further use for death and Hades "...Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death..." (20:14 NIV). Paul wrote "...for He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet, and the last enemy that will be destroyed is death..." (1 Cor 15:25-26). Whilst the first death is temporary, the second death is permanent, and it is the lake of fire, where Satan and his allies are cast. Someone wrote:

"Born once: die twice; Born twice: die once"

Those who do not belong to Christ – whose names are not found in the Lamb's book of life – will also be cast into the lake of fire. "...If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire..." (20:15 NIV). Hailey notes<sup>9</sup>:

There remains only one group to be dealt with: those not found written in the book of life. These would be "the rest" who had fought with the beast and false prophet against the Lord. ... The defeat of Satan and his forces against God and truth is total – complete and final.

---

<sup>8</sup> Hailey, p. 401

<sup>9</sup> Hailey, p. 403



*Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it , from whose face the earth and heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and the books were opened...*



*...and the books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Lamb's book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.*

*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.*



The grotesque figures depicting Gog and Magog in the Royal Arcade, Melbourne. The plaque says they “...symbolise the conflict between the ancient Britons and the Trojan invaders. Mythology tells of the giants Gog and Magog (also known as Corineus and Gogmagog) having been captured in battle by the Trojans and made to serve as porters at the gateway of an ancient palace on a site later occupied by the Guildhall. It is traditional for Gog to stand to the north and Magog to the South.”



The following discussion is from the New International Version Bible Commentary, and outlines the various positions regarding the millennium (the thousand year reign). Whilst I do not agree with the conclusions, it is widely accepted in religious circles.

---

*Binding of Satan and the Millennium (20:1-6)*

This passage on the Millennium is a constant source of insurmountable difficulty for the exegete. The Millennium itself is one of the most controversial questions of eschatology (the doctrine of the last things). While the OT and later Jewish literature point forward to a time when the kingdom of God will be manifest in the world, nowhere is the time of the reign of the Messiah stated to be a thousand years.

My exegesis of the passage leads me to a premillennial interpretation. It should be recognized, however, that there are problems with this view of 20:1-6, just as there are problems with other views of this difficult portion of the book; responsible Christian scholars vary in its interpretation according to their convictions and presuppositions.

For the moment the question of the duration of the reign of Christ (which is equal to the duration of the binding of Satan) may be delayed. The main problem concerns whether the reference to a Millennium indicates an earthly historical reign of peace that will manifest itself at the close of this present age or the whole passage symbolizes some present experience of Christians or some future nonhistorical reality.

The ancient church down to the time of Augustine (354-430) (though not without minor exceptions) unquestionably held to the teaching of an earthly, historical reign of peace that was to follow the defeat of Antichrist and the physical resurrection of the saints but precede both the judgment and the new creation. To be sure, there were various positions as to the material nature of the Millennium (see comments on v. 4), but the true conception of the thousand years was a balance between the worldly aspects of the kingdom and its spiritual aspects as a reign with Christ.

The break with this earlier position came with the views of the late fourth-century interpreter Tyconius, who developed a view of the Millennium based on the recapitulation method of interpretation of Origen. He viewed Revelation as containing a number of different visions that repeated basic themes throughout the book. Though his original work is not available, his exegesis of the Apocalypse can be largely reconstructed through Augustine, as well as Tyconius's many Roman Catholic followers. In ch. 20, he interpreted the thousand years in nonliteral terms and understood it as the church age, the time between the first and second advents of Christ. Tyconius interpreted the first resurrection as the resurrection of the soul from spiritual death to the new life, while the second resurrection was the resurrection of the body at the end of history. The binding of Satan had already taken place in that the devil cannot seduce the church during the present age. Moreover, the reign of the saints and their "thrones of judgment" had already begun in the church and its rulers. Augustine adopted this same view against the expectation of a literal millennial kingdom for a thousand years. This interpretation is the first main option in modern nonmillennial (or amillennial) interpretations of Rev 20.

Augustine's approach, however, was not to remain unchallenged. Joachim of Floris (c. 1135-1202) saw in Revelation a prophecy of the events of Western history from the time of Christ till the end. He thought the Millennium was still future in his time but soon to begin. The Franciscans, who followed Joachim, identified Babylon with ecclesiastical Rome and the Antichrist with the papacy. The Reformers followed suit.

During Reformation times, still another type of interpretation developed, expounded by a Jesuit scholar named Ribera (1537-91). He held that almost all the events described in Revelation are future and apply to the end times rather than to the history of the world or contemporary Rome and the papacy. He still, however, held to Augustine's view of the Millennium as the period between the first and second advents of Christ. But at one important point he changed Augustine's view. Instead of the Millennium taking place on earth between the advents, Ribera saw it as

taking place in heaven. It is a reward for faithfulness. When the saints at any time in history are martyred, they do not perish but live and reign with Christ in heaven in the intermediate state before the final resurrection. This is the second main option today for amillennialists. John's basic message in ch. 20, according to this viewpoint, is pastoral. If Christians face the prospect of suffering death for Jesus, they should be encouraged because if they are killed, they will go to reign with him in heaven.

The Augustinian view of Rev 20 and its variant espoused by Joachim cannot be harmonized with a serious exegesis of this chapter on two important counts. (1) It founders on the statements concerning the binding of Satan (vv. 1-3); (2) it must handle in an absurd fashion the statements about the coming to life of the martyrs, which cannot be exegetically understood as anything other than physical resurrection without seriously tampering with the sense of the words (cf. discussion on vv. 1-4). While it is popular among certain amillennialists to view vv. 1-6 as a symbolic description of the reward to be granted the martyrs on their entrance into heaven, this variation of the Augustinian exegesis, while removing the criticism that the passage refers to the present rule of Christ in the church age, fails to deal seriously with the binding of Satan and other details of the text.

There is yet another view that, though not free of problems, does more justice to the book of Revelation as a whole and to the exegesis of ch. 20 in particular. This view rejects both the Augustinian interpretation that the Millennium is the rule of Christ during this dispensation and the variant of Joachim that locates the resurrection and the reign of the martyrs in heaven for an interim period before their bodily resurrection and the return of Christ. It likewise rejects the variation of Augustine's view known as postmillennialism, which teaches that the forces of Antichrist will gradually be put down and the gospel will permeate and transform the world into an interim of the reign of peace before the return of Christ.

Any view of the Millennium must account for how the reality of the divine kingdom of God has actually invaded history in Jesus Christ. The view espoused in this commentary argues that the Millennium is in history and on the earth as an eschatological reality. Much in the same manner as the kingdom of God was present in the life and ministry of Jesus--present, yet still future--so the Millennium is at once the final historical event of this age *and* the beginning of the eschatological kingdom of Christ in eternity. Christ's lordship is the larger concept, which begins now and extends into eternity. The thousand-year reign, on the other hand, belongs temporally as the final act of Christ's lordship, the act that begins with his return.

This view is called the "end-historical" view. It follows the same chronological sequence as the early church's position, i.e., Parousia--defeat of Antichrist--binding of Satan--resurrection--Millennium--the release of Satan--final judgment--new heavens and earth. It differs slightly from earlier millennialism in viewing the Millennium as an end-historical event that at the same time is the beginning of the eternal reign of Christ and the saints.

The problem as to the limits of the description of the Millennium in chs. 20-22 is a more difficult question. Some expositors believe that 21:9-22:5, 14-15 belong with 20:1-10 as a further description of the millennial reign, whereas 21:1-5 refers to the eternal state, which follows the final judgment of the dead. This approach attempts to harmonize a literal understanding of certain statements in 21:9ff. with the assumed conditions during the eternal state. References to "nations" and "kings" seem to describe an earthly kingdom better than the eternal condition (21:24, 26); references to leaves "healing" the nations (22:2) seem more likely to describe an imperfect condition than the perfected eternal state; and the blessing pronounced on those who come and eat the tree of life and a curse resting on those outside the city (22:14-15) suggest the thousand years rather than the eternal state when the wicked are in the lake of fire.

Admittedly, this solution has the advantage of giving more descriptive content to the millennial reign, but it suffers from two serious criticisms. (1) Though it rightly assigns 21:1-5 to the postmillennial New Jerusalem in the context of the new heaven and earth, it arbitrarily assigns 21:9ff. to the millennial New Jerusalem without the slightest hint from the text. Thus, there is an eternal state New Jerusalem followed immediately by a millennial New Jerusalem, both bearing the same title. This is hardly plausible. (2) This view strongly argues for historical progression in 19:11-20:15: Parousia--defeat of Antichrist--binding of Satan--the first resurrection--Millennium--



-the release of Satan--last judgment--new heavens and earth--and then argues for recapitulation in 21:9ff.

It seems best, therefore, to regard the sequence begun at 19:11 as running chronologically through 22:6, thus placing all the material in 21:1ff. after the Millennium. At this point, a suggestion is offered. If the Millennium is a true eschatological, historical event like the person, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus, may not 21:1ff. be viewed as the full manifestation of the kingdom of God, a partial manifestation of which will be realized in the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints, during which time Christ will defeat all his enemies, including death (1Co 15:23-28)? Some of the same conditions described in 21:1ff. would then, at least in part, characterize the Millennium.

Finally, why the Millennium? There are at least four answers to this question: (1) During the Millennium, Christ will openly manifest his kingdom in world history; it will provide an actual demonstration of the truthfulness of the divine witness borne by Christ and his followers during his life on earth. It will be a time of the fulfillment of all God's covenant promises to his people.

(2) The Millennium will reveal that humanity's rebellion against God lies deep in one's own heart, not in the devil's deception. Even when Satan is bound and righteousness prevails in the world, some people will still rebel against God. The final release of Satan will openly draw out this hidden evil.

(3) The release of Satan after the Millennium shows the invulnerability of the city of God and the extent of the authority of Christ, since the devil is immediately defeated and cast into the lake of fire forever.

(4) The Millennium will serve as a long period required to do the "house-cleaning" needed after the preceding ages of sin.