

Lesson 46

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 is one of the most hotly debated chapters in the Bible, but there is no reason for that. I suspect much of the confusion is caused by commentators who start with Chapter 20 rather than with Chapter 1!

The false doctrine of premillennialism is based entirely on this chapter, and sadly it has permeated much of the denominational world. A premillennialist would deny that premillennialism is based entirely on Chapter 20, but in response I would ask them this question — where else in the Bible would they point to as a source for the thousand year time period that gives premillennialism its name? If Chapter 20 did not exist, would this false doctrine exist? No, it would not. It is based entirely on their false view of one verse in this one chapter.

We looked at some of the teachings of premillennialism during our introductory lessons, and we will not repeat all of that here. But we should pause to consider a very important point — premillennialism is a matter of **doctrine**; it is not a matter of opinion. Premillennialism is **not** something about which we can just agree to disagree and be faithful to God!

The false premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel. Premillennialism **belittles the church** by calling it a temporary measure rather than an eternal kingdom, and premillennialism **belittles the sufficiency of Christ's perfect sacrifice** by arguing that the old law will return and once again be in force. At the heart of premillennialism is the notion that **the church is a mistake** that came about because of a failure by Jesus to accomplish what he intended to do. Can anyone think of another doctrine more perverse than that?

Here are some things we should keep in mind as we begin our study of Chapters 20 and 21. The book of Revelation is focused on **two primary events**, which are really just two sides of the same coin — the judgment of Rome and the victory of the church. Chapter 20 deals primarily with the first of those two events, the judgment of Rome, and Chapter 21 deals primarily with the

second, the victory of the church. We have carefully considered the context and the time frame in our interpretation of the first nineteen chapters. We need to keep doing that now that we have reached the final three chapters!

And what is our goal? Our goal is **not** just to come up with an explanation. That task is much too easy! Instead, our goal is to find an explanation that fits the historical context of the book, that agrees with the time frame of the book, and that would have had a meaning for its original readers that was relevant to their current crisis. In short, our goal is to find the **right** explanation.

Remember that Revelation begins and ends with clear statements that what it talks about would happen **shortly** after it was written. Every commentator on this book faces one of three choices when it comes to those clear statements about the book's time frame: **accept** them, **ignore** them, or **twist** them. Let's **accept** them!

And one more reminder: Similarity of language does **not** mean identity of subject! We are going to see images that could be used to describe the final judgment at the end of time, but those same images have been used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other past judgments by God that are not the final judgment at the end of all time. Judgments in the Bible are generally described using very similar symbols, and so we cannot determine which judgment is being discussed just by looking at those symbols. Instead, we must study the context and time frame of the judgment, as we have been doing. Maybe we will find the end of the world in these final chapters — I'm not saying we will not — but we must not just automatically assume that is what we are seeing. We haven't seen the end of the world so far in the first nineteen chapters, and maybe we won't see it in the final three chapters either.

Revelation 20:1-2

1 And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. 2 And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years,

In verse 1 we see an angel from heaven who comes down from heaven with the key of the bottomless pit. We learn something very important from that description — we learn that Satan has now been defeated. How do we know that from this description? We know that because Satan possessed this key to the bottomless pit back in Chapter 9, but now he has lost it.

How has Satan been defeated? Does this defeat refer to Satan's defeat at the cross? Does this defeat refer to Satan's defeat at the end of the world? I don't think this defeat refers to either of those two defeats (but it certainly **good news** that we are having to sort through all of Satan's defeats here!). Once again, let's remember the context and the time frame. The first nineteen chapters of this book have been focused on the conflict between Rome and the church. Satan's plan to destroy the church through Rome has now been completely stopped and totally defeated. I think we will see that that defeat is the defeat being pictured here.

Think for a moment about the **enormity** of that defeat! Satan had the most powerful weapon imaginable (the mighty Roman empire) with which to attack the church in its infancy when the church was seemingly at its weakest and in its most vulnerable position. Remember Revelation 12:4 — “the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.” How could Satan possibly fail with such a weapon aimed at a little child? **And yet Satan failed! Satan failed completely!** How would we expect such a tremendous defeat to be described? I think we are seeing that defeat described right here in Chapter 20. And what does that defeat tell us about Satan's **later** attempts to destroy the church? We will also see that question addressed in this chapter.

Verse 2 pictures that great defeat by showing Satan being bound for a thousand years, presumably with the great chain from verse 1. **What does that picture mean?**

First, should we get out our watches? Should we mark dates on our calendar? No. What we are seeing here are **symbols**, just as we have seen symbols all throughout this book. Numbers are used figuratively, and periods of time depict a state of affairs or a condition. Recall, for example, the period of three and a half years (a broken seven) that we have seen used many times to depict a state of **temporary** persecution.

So what does the thousand years in verse 2 depict? First, what would we **expect** it to depict? What would we expect this book to be telling us right now about Satan? Satan has tried to destroy the church with the most powerful

weapon imaginable, and Satan has failed. Wouldn't we expect to see some **gloating** here? Wouldn't we expect to see a description of just how badly Satan had failed? That is just what we see here in verses 1-3.

We know that the number ten represents completeness, and we know that numbers are sometimes raised to powers to emphasize their meanings. We saw that with the symbolic number 144,000, which is twelve squared times ten cubed. Within that symbol of 144,000, the number one thousand is used to depict **all** of God's people, with no one left out. If the number ten represents completeness, then the number one thousand represents "**complete completeness!**"

This use of the number one thousand is a common symbol even outside of apocalyptic books. Psalm 50:10 tells us that God owns cattle on a thousand hills, which means that God's ownership is **complete**. Deuteronomy 7:9 tells us that God keeps his covenant to a thousand generations, which means that God's faithfulness is **complete**. Does God own the cattle on **hill one thousand and one**? We know that he does. Will God be faithful to **generation one thousand and one**? We know that he will.

***Psalm 105:8** — He hath remembered his covenant **for ever**, the word which he commanded to **a thousand generations**.*

Which is it? Forever or just a thousand generations? Isn't our common sense alone enough to know that when God says a thousand generations in the second half of that verse he means exactly what he said in the first half of that verse, **forever**? "He hath remembered his covenant **for ever**, the word which he commanded to **a thousand generations**." God's faithfulness is complete!

Satan is bound for a thousand years, which means that Satan's defeat is **complete**.

So I guess that means that Satan was no longer a problem after the first century? Of course it does not mean that! We know it does not mean that! How do we know that? At least three reasons.

First, we know that Satan would remain a problem for the church because the rest of the Bible tells us that Satan would remain a problem for the church.

Second, we know that Satan would remain a problem for the church because verse 3, which we will study in just a moment, tells us that Satan would remain a problem for the church.

Third, we know that Satan would remain a problem for the church because we can with our own eyes see Satan making problems for the church today.

James 4:7 — Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

1 Peter 5:8 — Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

Did Christians still need to resist Satan after the judgment of Rome? Were people devoured by Satan after the judgment of Rome? Yes, and it is still happening today! Satan is still walking about like a roaring lion, and we still need to heed that warning from scripture. Earlier we talked quite a bit about the whole armor of God. Do we still need that armor today? Must we still equip ourselves with that armor today? Why? Because Satan is still active.

Ephesians 6:11 — Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

And when we select elders, one of the requirements is that they have a good report of them which are without. Why? Because Satan is still active.

1 Timothy 3:7 — Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

If Satan is bound in a pit today and not walking about like a lion, then why is 1 Timothy 3:7 still a requirement for elders? Why are we still wearing the whole armor of God? We know from the rest of the Bible that, whatever these verses in Revelation 20 mean, they do not mean that Satan is not at work in this world today and still trying to destroy the church! Yes, Satan is a loser, but he is a **persistent** loser! He is still active today.

Some people, even some in the church, have erred badly by creating doctrines about Satan based on these figurative descriptions that disagree with plain teachings about Satan found elsewhere in the Bible. Some have argued that the thousand years here is the entire Christian era, and that Satan is bound during the Christian era. To get there you have to make at least **three mistakes** — you have to ignore the context of this book, you have to ignore the time frame of this book, and you have to ignore what the rest of the Bible has to say about Satan and his activities during the Christian era.

But then how can we say that Satan has been **completely** defeated if Satan remains a problem? Satan was completely defeated in what Satan was trying to do with Rome, but that does not mean that Satan won't try something else. **In fact, a central message of this book is that if Satan couldn't defeat the church in its infancy using the mighty Roman empire as a weapon, then Satan will never be able to feat the church.** Yes, Satan will try, but Satan is doomed to failure. Jesus Christ himself built that church, and not even the gates of hell can prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Do we find this defeat of Satan discussed elsewhere in the Bible? Yes. Paul told us that Satan was behind the persecution by the emperor Domitian.

2 Thessalonians 2:9 — Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders.

And Paul also told us how that would turn out for Satan.

Romans 16:20 — And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.

In fact, Paul said in the first century that it would happen **shortly**. That's the same Greek word we saw in the opening verse of this book: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must **shortly** come to pass."

But if Satan was completely defeated, how can Satan remain a problem. **Question:** Was Satan completely defeated at the cross? Did Satan remain a problem after the cross? Yes and yes.

*Hebrews 2:14-15 — Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; **that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.***

Satan was completely defeated in what he was trying to do. Satan tried to derail Jesus from his mission to bless the entire world and establish his promised eternal kingdom, but Satan completely failed. Later, Satan tried to obliterate that eternal kingdom using the most powerful empire the world had ever seen, and once again Satan completely failed.

But how do we know for sure that the focus here is on Satan's use of Rome rather than just on Satan in general? We know that because of how Satan was described back in Revelation 12:3. Satan was described as "a great red dragon, **having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.**" That was the first appearance of the dragon in this book — and when he appeared he was clothed in Rome and in the Roman emperors! He had Rome's seven heads, Rome's ten horns, and Rome's seven crowns. **We cannot separate Satan from Rome in that description.**

Yes, Satan will try again. He will use a new weapon, and he will try a different approach. But do we really think he will fare any better? **He will not**, and that is message of the next verse, verse 3.

Revelation 20:3

3 And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season.

There are a lot of very complicated theories about verse 3. Commentators in and out of the church have spun off in many different directions when it comes to this verse. How can we wade through all of that? First, let's keep our time frame and context front and center — neither has changed. We are still looking at the conflict between Rome and the church in the first century. But second, let's look first for the simplest explanation. If we can find a simple explanation that fits all of the facts and that remains faithful to the context and the time frame, then why do we need to look for a more complicated explanation?

So is there a simple explanation that fits all of the facts? Yes. What we see in this figure is Satan cast into a pit for a thousand years so that he cannot deceive the nations any more, but then he is let loose for "a little season." We have already talked about the first half of that image. Satan being cast into a pit for a thousand years depicts Satan's complete defeat as to Rome and as to Satan's plans to destroy the church using Rome as a weapon.

If we had any doubts about that, they should go away with verse 3. Why? Because verse 3 specifies what Satan had been doing before he was defeated — he had been deceiving the nations. Where have we seen that before?

Revelation 12:9 — *And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, **which deceiveth the whole world:** he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*

Revelation 13:11,14 — *And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon. ... **And deceiveth them that dwell on the earth** by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast; saying to them that dwell on the earth, that they should make an image to the beast, which had the wound by a sword, and did live.*

Revelation 18:23 — *And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; **for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived.***

Revelation 19:20 — *And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, **with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast,** and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.*

What those verses are telling us is that Satan was the great deceiver, and Satan used Rome to deceive the whole world. And that is not something we see only in the book of Revelation.

2 John 1:7 — *For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. **This is a deceiver** and an antichrist.*

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 — *Let no man deceive you by **any means:** for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be re-*

vealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

Satan tried to deceive the whole world with Rome, and Satan failed. Satan tried to deceive the church into worshipping Caesar rather than Christ, and Satan failed. Yes, Satan failed at the cross, but that is not the failure we are looking at here. This failure is Satan's failure to deceive the world with Rome.

That's the simplest and I think best explanation for the first half of verse 3, but what about the end of verse 3? What does it mean that after the thousand years, Satan "must be loosed a little season"?

Here is the simplest and I think best explanation of that part of verse 3: Yes, Satan tried and failed to defeat the church using Rome, but Satan will try again. Satan did not give up his attacks against the church after he failed to destroy the church using Rome. Yes, that was a complete defeat for Satan as to that weapon, but Satan will try again using a different weapon.

But here is the wonderful message — if Satan could not destroy the church when the church was the most vulnerable and when Satan had the greatest empire the world had ever seen to use as a weapon against the church, **does anyone really think Satan will fare any better with some other weapon?** If I can't kill an ant with a bazooka, then do I really think the problem is that I just need a bigger weapon? Perhaps, instead, the problem is that what I see as an ant is, in reality, much, much stronger than it appears and has very powerful friends! Perhaps things are not what they seem! That is the position Satan is in with regard to his attacks against the church, and that is the message these verses are intended to convey.

So what then does the "little season" in verse 3 denote? Just as the thousand years referred to a state of affairs rather than to a specific period of time, so does this "little season" refer to a state of affairs rather than to a period of time. But to what state of affairs does it refer? If the thousand years refers to Satan's complete defeat after his attack on the church using Rome, then the "little season" refers to Satan's subsequent attacks against the church using other weapons.

Why are Satan's subsequent attacks called a "little season"? To denote their **futility**. They are doomed to failure, just as Satan's attack using Rome was a failure. The "little season" refers to Satan's inability to defeat the Church now

or ever. Satan did the worst he could do through Rome, and he failed completely. Although Satan will gather his strength and try again, his future attacks will be **insignificant** compared to what he did and tried to do through Rome. That is why they are shown as lasting only a little season.

By saying Satan will return for only a little season, God is saying that Satan's future attacks are nothing to be anxious about. Satan had at his disposal an evil, blood thirsty empire that ruled the world, and yet Satan was not able to defeat the church in its infancy with such a weapon. Why should the church fear future attacks?

Although Satan had been defeated with regard to Rome, the church must have wondered if Satan might not attack again later and perhaps be more successful next time. God assures them in this chapter that, although Satan will attack again, Satan will never be able to defeat the church. God will continue to protect the church in the future just as God protected the church from Rome.

That was something the suffering first century church really needed to hear, and it is something we really need to hear today as well! It is easy to become discouraged these days, but the book of Revelation should give us courage just as it did to its first century audience.

Yes, Satan is real. Yes, Satan is active. Yes, Satan has us in his sights. Yes, Satan is once again trying to deceive us. But the eternal, unshakable, immovable kingdom of God is more powerful than Satan! "If God be for us, who can be against us" (Romans 8:31)?

Is our modern age somewhere in this book of Revelation? Yes! We are living right there in the "little season" — not as in a period of time, but rather as in a state of affairs. That promise that Satan will not defeat the eternal kingdom of Christ is just as much a promise for us as it was for those first century Christians. And we are not ignoring our time frame in saying that because verse 3 contains a promise that was made in the first century but that applies to future generations of Christians. There is no expiration date when it comes to God's love for his church and to God's promises of victory for his church.

Revelation 20:4

**4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them,
and judgment was given unto them: and I saw**

the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Verse 4 is considered a very controversial and difficult verse, but is it really that hard to understand? Yes, if we took our scissors and sliced that verse out of its context and its time frame, then maybe we would have some trouble understanding it. But when we read verse 4 in light of the previous chapters and verses in this book, is it really all that hard to understand?

If Satan was completely defeated with regard to Rome (as we saw with the thousand year binding of Satan), then what would we expect to be on the other side of that coin? Wouldn't we expect a word or two about the complete victory of Christ and his church with regard to Rome? And if the complete defeat is described as a thousand year binding, then might not the complete victory also be described using a thousand years — perhaps as a thousand year reign of the church with Christ?

People miss so much when they get to verses 3 and 4 and whip out their calendars to start counting off a literal one thousand years. Oh, but we must take it all literally! Really? Is the key in verse 1 literal? Is the bottomless pit in verse 1 literal? Is the great chain in verse 1 literal? Is the dragon in verse 2 literal? Is the seal in verse 3 literal? Those who argue that one thousand is literal are not being consistent.

Again, the simplest answer is the best answer. Verse 4 is just describing the other side of the coin from verse 3. In verse 3, we see the complete defeat of Satan and Rome. In verse 4, we see the complete victory of Christ and his church. In each verse, the notion of completeness is depicted using a very common symbol for completeness — the number one thousand. That God is faithful to a thousand generations and God owns the cattle on a thousand hills means that God's faithfulness is complete and God's ownership is complete.

Oh, but some will say that verse 4 must be describing the end of the world. Really? Aren't we still operating under the time frame given to us in the very first verse of the book? In fact, we will see that time frame again in the closing

verses of the book. And who is that beast mentioned there in verse 4? Isn't that Rome? Haven't we seen that image for Rome used all throughout these chapters? And don't we see the martyrs beheaded by Rome? In fact, tradition tells us that the apostle Paul was beheaded by Rome.

Verse 4 is a first century verse! And isn't that exactly what we would expect? This entire book has been building toward the climax in these final three chapters. Do we really expect God to suddenly change the subject now that we have reached the grand finale?

Who are sitting on the thrones in verse 4? We have four clues: First, they are sitting on thrones. Second, judgment was given to them. Third, they **include** the martyrs who were slain because they refused to worship the beast. Fourth, they live and reign with Christ a thousand years.

A note on that third point is that a careful reading of verse 4 says that the group on the thrones includes those who were beheaded by Rome. We do not have to conclude that the group on the thrones consists only of those beheaded by Rome. I think the best way to see those on the thrones is to see them as those who were beheaded by Rome and those who were ready to be beheaded by Rome — those faithful Christians who had died for Christ and also those faithful Christians who were willing to die for Christ. And, of course, when you put those two groups together you have the church.

This group must be the church! Remember Christ's earlier statements to the church in Chapter 3.

***Revelation 3:11** — Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.*

The church is a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). We reign in life by Jesus Christ (Romans 5:17). Rome was a false royal priesthood. The church is the true royal priesthood.

This was also something we studied in Daniel. We spent a great deal of time discussing Daniel 7 and its relation to Revelation 17.

***Daniel 7:20-21** — And of the ten horns that were in his head, and of the other which came up, and before whom three fell; even of that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spake very great things, whose look was more stout than his fellows. I beheld, and the same horn made war with the saints, and prevailed against them.*

As we saw, that eleventh horn in Daniel 7:20 was the eleventh emperor of Rome, Domitian. What does the very next verse in Daniel 7 say?

***Daniel 7:22** — Until the Ancient of days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom.*

Yes, Domitian would persecute the church and would prevail against them, but Domitian would not have a permanent victory. The permanent victory would belong to the church, and it is that permanent victory over Rome that we are seeing here in the closing chapters of Revelation. Daniel tells us that when Rome was judged, judgment would be given to the church and the church would possess the kingdom. Revelation 20:4 describes judgment being given to the church, and the church sitting on thrones and reigning with Christ. Daniel 7:22 and Revelation 20:4 are describing the same thing, and each gives us the same first century time frame.

What does it mean that the church is given judgment? What does it mean that the church is sitting on thrones and reigning with Christ? It means simply that the church is sharing the victory with Christ. It means that the judgment of Rome was prompted by the prayers of the saints and particularly of the same martyrs we see here in verse 4.

***Revelation 6:9-10** — And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?*

That prayer has now been answered. The church has been given the victory over Rome. Yes, the church had given up much in this life for Christ, some had even given up their lives for Christ. What would they have in return? They would be sit on thrones and would be given judgment. This is much like what the apostles were promised.

***Matthew 19:27-28** — Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have*

followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Although that promise is not the same as the one we see here in verse 4, the reason for the promise is the same. In each, Jesus is talking to those who had given up much, and he is assuring them that they will gain much more than they gave up. And isn't that something the early church needed to hear in Revelation 20 just as much as Peter needed to hear it in Matthew 19?

In verse 4 we see Christians who had been beheaded by Rome. As we said, tradition tells us that that group includes the Apostle Paul. Had these Christians beheaded by Rome been defeated by Rome? Hardly! Does verse 4 look like a defeat to anyone? Revelation rings throughout with the message that death is not a defeat for a Christian. Defeat would have occurred had a Christian renounced Jesus in order to live.

Matthew 16:25 — For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

The only Christians defeated by Rome were those Christians who compromised with Rome and fell away from grace as a result of the compromise.

So, yes the martyrs were victorious. They were not defeated. How does verse 4 describe the victory of these martyrs? "They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years." That's how! They experience a **complete** victory over Rome. The ESV is more clear: "They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." These martyrs are like the two witnesses we saw back in Chapter 11. They appeared to have been killed and defeated by Rome, but they came back to life. All was not as it seemed!

Is this resurrection of the martyrs in verse 4 a **literal** resurrection or a **figurative** resurrection? Everything we have seen so far has been focused on the spiritual rather than the physical. We have seen the spiritual judgment of Rome rather than the physical judgment of Rome, and we have seen the spiritual deliverance of the church rather than the physical deliverance of the church. I don't think this verse is any different. Yes, the martyrs died a physical death at the hands of Rome, but they awoke to spiritual life with Christ for all eternity!

And how anyone can take the thousand years as a literal thousand years is beyond me! Is that the message we think the church needed to hear? "Yes, you

will reign with me for a thousand years, but starting with year one thousand and one you will need to make other living arrangements! Yes, you are victorious, but you do need to keep an eye on that calendar over there because I have rented out your throne to someone else starting with year one thousand and one!” How ridiculous is that! It is just as ridiculous as saying that the cattle on hill number one thousand and one don't belong to God! What the church needed to hear is that their victory over Rome was **complete and forever**, and that is what verse 4 tells them.