

## Revelation — Lesson 23

19:4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” 5 And from the throne came a voice crying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.” 6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

God was the one king who was able to stop the military might of Rome. God reigned then, God reigns now, God has always reigned, and God will always reign. God reigned prior to the fall of the Rome, and God reigns after the fall of Rome.

The word “Hallelujah” in the New Testament occurs only here in verses 1, 3, 4, and 6. It is a translation of the Hebrew phrase, “Praise ye Jah [Jehovah],” and is being used here by the 24 elders and the four living creatures in the very presence of God. The word “Hallelujah” is a beautiful word, but sadly it is used more often than not today with no thought of God. “Hallelujah” includes within it the very name Jehovah, and his church should treat that word accordingly even if the world persists in using it in vain.

In verse 6, we have yet another reminder that what John is seeing and hearing is a vision. “And I heard, **as** it were, the voice of a great multi-

tude, **as** the sound of many waters and **as** the sound of mighty thunders.” John is reminding us that he is describing a vision, and it an important reminder, particularly for the closing chapters of the book.

The word “Almighty” in verse 6 occurs 10 times in the New Testament — once in 2 Corinthians 6:18 in a quotation from the Old Testament and nine times in Revelation. The term denotes God’s sovereignty over all of creation. Rome believed that it was almighty, but it was vert badly mistaken. Almighty God created the universe, and Almighty God reigns over the universe — including Rome! That is a vital lesson for nation builders in any age! “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” (Psalm 127:1)

In verse 7 we meet a third woman — the wife of the Lamb — to go along with the radiant woman we met in Chapter 12 and the harlot we met in Chapter 17. The harlot, however, is no more. And now that the harlot — that great enemy and rival of the church — is gone, it is time for a wedding. It is time for rejoicing. The phrase “rejoice and be exceeding glad” occurs only one other place in the Bible. In Matthew 5:12, Jesus said, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. **Rejoice and be exceedingly glad**, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” The images in this chapter are a beautiful illustration of that statement by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

But did the martyrs go to Heaven when they died? Didn’t they go to bosom of Abraham as Lazarus did in Luke 16:22? Don’t they have to wait until the end of time to begin enjoying their heavenly reward? I don’t think so. It is true that Lazarus went to the bosom of Abraham with a great gulf fixed, but it is equally true that Lazarus died before the cross. The Bible teaches that faithful children of God who die *after* the cross go to Heaven when they die. That was certainly the Apostle Paul’s expectation who, writing under inspiration, said in Philippians 1:23-24 — “For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.” Paul didn’t mention Abraham’s bosom in those verses. Instead, when Paul departed this life he expected to be with Christ in Heaven. Is someone really going to sug-

gest he was wrong? After all, this side of the cross, what remains to keep us from the presence of God? Hebrews 10:19-22 answers that question: Nothing! —

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

In the Old Testament, the relation of God to his people was often referred to as a husband and wife relationship. (See Hosea 2 and Ezekiel 16, for example.) It was natural then for the relation between Christ and his church to be described that way in the New Testament, and that is what we find, for example, in Ephesians 5 and Romans 7. We also find that here in Chapter 19, where there is a marriage between Christ the Lamb and a woman who can be none other than the radiant woman of Chapter 12 who fled into the wilderness to escape the dragon. At that point on the timeline, that woman in Chapter 12 represented the church. Earlier on the timeline that woman represented the faithful remnant under the Old Covenant who brought forth the son of God according to the flesh, but under the New Covenant that woman represents the church, the bride of Christ.

But verse 7 tells us that the marriage of the Lamb has come. What does that mean? To help us answer that question, let's first consider another question: What exactly does this marriage symbolize? Well, what would we expect it to symbolize? What has just happened? What have the people of God just been commanded to do? Look at 18:20 — "Rejoice over her, O heaven, O saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" They have been commanded to rejoice, and that is exactly what we see them doing. The marriage and the marriage feast are used to illustrate the joy of God's people in Chapter 19 just as the joyous feast of the tabernacles was used for that same purpose in Chapter 7.

So what then does verse 7 mean when it says that “the marriage of the Lamb *has come*”? Let’s start with what it does *not* mean. We know that Paul often described Jesus’ love for his church as the relationship between a husband and a wife, and many commentators have used the closing chapters of Revelation to develop elaborate theories about Christ’s marriage to the church.

Max King, whom we discussed in our introductory lessons, teaches that Jesus was married to literal Israel until the church appeared, at which point Jesus was betrothed to the church while still married to Israel. But when Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, Christ was divorced from Israel and married to the church. That theory sounds more like a soap opera than Scripture! King’s theory is baseless and, in fact, is contradicted by Paul’s pre-A.D. 70 descriptions of Jesus’ relation to the church in such passages as Ephesians 5:23-32 and Romans 7:4-6.

In fact, the church is described sometimes as being married to Christ and other times as being betrothed to Christ. Ephesians 5 describes the relation between Christ and the church as “one flesh,” which is more than a betrothal. (Recall Matthew 1:18 — “After His mother Mary was **betrothed** to Joseph, **before they came together**, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.”) And remember also Romans 7:4 — “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, **that we should bear fruit to God.**” That, too, is more than a betrothal.

But in 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul wrote, “For I have **betrothed** you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Is the church married to Christ or just betrothed to Christ? Is there a contradiction? Of course not. **Neither is literally true, but both are figuratively true.** Just as in the Old Testament, these descriptions of the church being married to Christ or betrothed to Christ are illustrations intended to show the love of Christ for his church. Sometimes that love is shown as a marriage, while other times it is shown as a betrothal with the marriage yet to come.

In fact, Paul used marriage in various ways to describe the church. In Ephesians 5, for example, he used marriage both to describe Jesus' love for the church and to emphasize the need for purity in the church. In Romans 7, he used marriage to describe not the relation of the entire church to Christ but instead the relation of an individual Christian to church. Romans 6 and 7, studied together, describe baptism as a wedding ceremony in which we enter a covenant relationship with Jesus. In short, even outside of Revelation, the symbol of marriage is used to describe different aspects of the church and of a Christian's relationship with Christ. Here in Revelation 19 we see yet another aspect — the joy of the church in its victory over Rome.

A central theme of this book is that Jesus loves his church and is intimately concerned with its welfare. How better to illustrate that love and concern than with a marriage? How better to illustrate the great joy of the church than with a marriage and a marriage feast? The context here is unrestrained joy, and a marriage is used to symbolize that joy.

As for the elaborate theories that have been developed based on these closing chapters, I like what Jim McGuiggan has to say on that subject:

It's not out of place here to say a word or two about using figures to build doctrines on. If the doctrine is not clearly taught in other plain sections of scripture, it's a foolish man indeed who founds a school on a figure! Haven't we seen enough of this in the world? We've had men fill us with their types, double applications, and allegories.

The fine linen, bright and pure, that the bride is wearing in verse 8 is a sharp contrast to the worldly apparel that the harlot was wearing. The bride of the Lamb, as Ephesians 5:27 tells us, is without "spot or wrinkle or any such thing," but is "holy and without blemish."

And isn't there a lesson there for us? We are the bride of Christ without spot or blemish, and we must always give Christ our very best. After all that this book of Revelation has told us so far about Christ and his church (and the most beautiful descriptions are yet to come!),

how could his church possibly fail to give him its very best? But do we? I fear sometimes that the modern church has settled into a bed of comfortable but deadly mediocrity (if we even reach that high!) — mediocre discipleship, mediocre evangelism, mediocre preaching, mediocre teaching, mediocre singing, mediocre obedience. Jesus deserves and demands our very best. God sent his very best into this world to die for us — how can we respond with less than our own best? Remember Malachi 1:6-13 —

A son honors his father, And a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' "You offer defiled food on My altar, But say, "In what way have we defiled You?" By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible.' And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, Is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, Is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" Says the LORD of hosts. ... You also say, "Oh, what a weariness!" And you sneer at it," Says the LORD of hosts. "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; Thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" Says the LORD.

That was God's response in the Old Testament when his people brought him something less than their best. Do we really think he responds differently today when his people do the same thing?

**9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."**

What is the main point of this marriage symbol — the marriage itself or the joy that accompanies it? Look at verse 9. The angel says that those who are invited to the marriage supper are blessed — that is, the

*guests* are blessed. Why? Because they are able to share the joy of the event. The context is joy, and the marriage is a beautiful symbol for that joy.

But who are these guests? If the church is the bride, then who is left to be blessed? These guests are those who are called by the gospel and who heed that call in obedience to Christ. Even here, at the joyous wedding feast celebrating the victory over Rome, the church is pictured as continuing its work to proclaim the gospel to those who are lost. Earlier we saw the church doing its work while being persecuted, and here we see the church doing its work while celebrating. The church has a mission, and nothing can stand in the way of that mission. We must continue working until that last great day. And the fact that we see the work of the church continuing here in verse 9 is further evidence that what is being described in this chapter is not that last great day! There will be no “guests” on that day!

10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

John falls down to worship the angel but is told that such worship is improper. (This same thing will happen again in 22:8.) Why did John try to worship this angel? Some argue that John was confused as to the identity of the speaker and perhaps thought it was Christ himself, but others respond that John knew Christ very well and was able to recognize him elsewhere in the book. Others argue that John was perhaps so overwhelmed at what he was seeing that he impulsively fell at the feet of the angel — something he would never have done in ordinary circumstances (assuming that one could meet an angel in ordinary circumstances!). I favor this latter view, which also explains why it happens again in 22:8. Can you imagine what it must have been like to actually witness the visions in this book? I’m surprised he didn’t fall down more often!

In any event, God uses John's reaction as an opportunity to drive home a central theme in this book: God alone is worthy of worship. No *creature* — be it an angel or an emperor — is to be worshiped. And if it is improper to worship this wondrous angelic being, then how much more so must it be to worship a perverted pagan emperor!

There is a stark contrast in this event with another event recorded by John. In John 9:38, John described the reaction of the man blind from birth after Jesus gave him his sight — “And he worshipped him.” Unlike this angel, Jesus accepted the worship of men. Unlike this *created* angel, Jesus is the eternal *creator*. Jesus is the great I Am! (John 8:58) Jesus is God! How else can we reconcile John 9:38 with what Jesus told Satan in Matthew 4:10? “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him *only* shalt thou serve.”

What is meant by the phrase “for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” in verse 10? Some hold that this testimony is our testimony about Jesus from his Word, while others hold that it is Jesus' testimony to us through his Word. Either could be the the intended meaning. The Word is the testimony of Jesus, and the Word is the spirit of prophecy. Barclay suggests that John may have intended the passage to carry this double meaning.

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. 13 He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

There have been many openings in Revelation. In 4:1 a door was opened in heaven. In 11:19 the temple of God in heaven was opened. In 15:5 the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony was opened. In verse 11 heaven itself is opened.



The first seal in Chapter 6 showed a rider on a white horse who wore a crown and went out conquering and to conquer. Here again we see a rider on a white horse. But, as we discussed in Chapter 6, this rider is different. The rider here is called Faithful and True, and his name is The Word of God. This rider is Jesus Christ, the conqueror of Rome and the righteous judge.

Think for a moment about who it is who is seeing this incredible image of Christ! John likely grew up with Jesus and was the special apostle “whom Jesus loved.” John was with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry even up to the foot of the cross. He was Jesus’ cousin and had seen Jesus in many different settings and circumstances both before his death and after his resurrection. He had witnessed the transfiguration. And yet here he was — old, alone, persecuted, and exiled. Perhaps Jesus had just forgotten about poor old John. Hardly! John sees him once again — as a rider on a white horse, with eyes like a flame of fire, with many diadems on his head, clad in a robe dipped in blood, and wearing the very name that John had used to open his gospel account, The Word of God. Aside from the comfort this book provided to the church, just imagine the comfort this vision provided to John!

Satan wore seven diadems and the beast from the sea wore 10, but Jesus wears “many” diadems. He is the King of kings!

We are told that the rider “has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself,” yet in the very next verse we read that “the name by which he is called is The Word of God.” How can it be true that no one knows a name that is given for all to see in the next verse?

Names in the Bible are often used to denote a person’s status. When one’s status changed, his name was often changed. We are reminded, for example, of Abram, Jacob, and Saul. To have a name that no one else can know means that you have a status that no one else can share. That is certainly true of Jesus — only he can be called The Word of God. Only he has that status.

His robe is dipped in blood. Whose blood? Some argue it is Christ’s own blood, pointing again to the image of Christ as the lamb that was

slain. Others argue it is the blood of the martyrs, shown as a reminder of why Rome, the bloody city, was being judged. Those views are possibilities, but a more likely answer is that the blood is the blood of Jesus' *past* enemies. The picture of Christ shown here is one of a warrior going out to conquer the enemies of his people. The ability of this warrior to conquer is emphasized by showing him drenched in the blood of those he has previously conquered — and Revelation is full of reminders of his past victories over the enemies of God's people. We are reminded of the description of God in Isaiah 63:3 —

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment.

Finally, although we will see next that Christ rides with an army, we will also see that he alone does all of the work. Jesus doesn't need an army to take care of Rome!

14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. 15 From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

The armies of heaven are the armies that are allied with Christ. They are the ones who conquer with Christ. They are the ones who overcome Rome with their faithful endurance. They are not the armies of those who dwell on earth — they are the armies of Heaven.

Who are the soldiers in this army of heaven? They are arrayed in fine linen, and they are white and pure. Who else could this possibly be but the church? Christians are conquerors!

- **Romans 8:37** No, in all these things we are **more than conquerors** through him who loved us.

- **Revelation 2:7** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. **To him who conquers** I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'
- **Revelation 2:26** **He who conquers** and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations,
- **Revelation 3:5** **He who conquers** shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.
- **Revelation 3:21** **He who conquers**, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Who stood with Christ when he conquered Rome? Who was allied with Christ in that great battle? Who overcame the Roman empire through Christ's power? The church!

So is this the battle at the end of time? What battle at the end of time? Where in the Bible are we told that there will be a battle at the end of time? Where is there a battle in 1 Corinthians 15:52 —

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Where is there a battle in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 —

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

On that last great day we will rise to meet Jesus in the air. There will be no great battle on earth because there will be no one here to fight it, including Jesus. We will meet Jesus in the air; Jesus will not return to this earth. That day will be a day of judgment and sentencing, not a

day of fighting. We are at war *now*. On that last great day we will lay our weapons down; we won't pick them up.

So what battle is being described here? It is the same battle at Armageddon that was introduced but not described in Chapter 16. It is the great battle that depicts the warfare between Jesus and Rome over the fate of the church.

The sword out of Jesus' mouth reminds us of 2:16 — “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” The weapon used against faithless compromisers in the church would also be used against the godless Romans.

The rod of iron reminds us of the Messianic Psalm 2, verse 9 — “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” And it also reminds us of Isaiah 11:4 — “He shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.”

And Jesus treads the wine press. We have discussed this symbol of judgment before. Jesus is preparing the wine of wrath that Rome must drink. He will tread Rome as one treads grapes, and Rome's blood will flow as does wine from the press.

### 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Did Jesus become King of kings and Lord of lords because he defeated Rome in this great battle? No. Here (and elsewhere) Jesus is called King of kings and Lord of lords before the battle even begins. Jesus had all authority when this book started, and Jesus has all authority when it ends.

That was true when Jesus conquered Rome — and that was true when Jesus conquered us! We did not make Jesus lord or king when we obeyed him. We obeyed him because he already had King of kings and Lord of lords inscribed on his robe and on his thigh! We no more crowned Jesus king than we wrote King of kings on his robe and on

his thigh. The only crown that man ever placed on Jesus' head was a crown of thorns.

A central theme of this book is that Jesus **is** King of kings and Lord of lords. (See also 1 Timothy 6:15, and be wary of anyone who would attempt to change the tense of that verb!) That is something that the first century church needed to hear as they were suffering at the hands of godless Roman kings. And that is something we need to hear today. The church of Christ is the eternal kingdom made without human hands, and our king is the sovereign of the entire universe — the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Is that how we view the church? It should be! That is what the church *is*.

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great."

The same image found here is also found in Isaiah 34:6, Jeremiah 46:10, and Ezekiel 39:17-20, where it used for a similar purpose. This gruesome feast is intended to stand in stark contrast to the marriage supper of the Lamb that we saw in verse 9.

An angel invites the birds of the air to come and feast on the flesh of all who stand with the army arrayed against God. Does this angel have any doubt as to the outcome of this battle? No, and his message to the church is that they should not have any doubts either.

Remember that when this book was written the persecution against the church was about to begin again with renewed strength under Domitian. A central purpose of this book was to assure the church that their ultimate victory was certain and that, no matter how it may have seemed, Rome would not and could not defeat them so long as the church remained faithful to Christ. We have not mentioned it in awhile, but it bears repeating: The message of this book is one of

comfort and reassurance directed toward its first century readers, and if our interpretation of this book provides no comfort to that initial audience, then our interpretation is wrong.

But what about all of the **neutral** people in Rome? What about all of the bystanders who weren't on either side? If you're looking for a modern day lesson from this book of Revelation, here's one: **There are no neutral people! No one is neutral when it comes to Jesus and his church!** There is no middle ground. Everyone is either on one side or the other. "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." (Matthew 12:30) Either you are a child of God who dwells in heaven or you are a child of the devil who dwells on earth. There is no other place for you to dwell, and there is no other one for you to serve.

19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. 21 And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Who is arrayed against God? The two beasts (one of whom is now called the false prophet) and the kings of the earth, all of whom we have already met. The beast is the beast from the sea who represents the civil persecuting side of Rome. The kings of the earth lead the armies of the earth that are composed of those who dwell upon the earth. They stand in contrast to the armies of Heaven that are composed of those who dwell not on earth but in Heaven. The false prophet is the beast from the earth who represents the false religious

side of Rome. Notice that the focus is still on Rome! This book has not changed its focus, and neither should we.

In verses 19-20, we see a war waged and we see that these two beasts are thrown into the lake of fire. This event was shown in 14:9-11, but here we see some additional details. But although we see more details, we still do not find a description of the battle itself. Instead all we see is the outcome of that battle.

As for the lake of fire, in John 15:6 we are told that a similar fate awaits all who oppose Christ. "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." That same image is used here to describe the fate of this great enemy of God. Rome is utterly defeated and cast into the lake of fire to join all the others who have died in opposition to God.

Why is Rome, represented by the two beasts, cast in to the lake of fire *alive*? Rome was judged and sentenced while it was still very powerful and very much alive. This book reminds us four times that the events it describes were to come to pass soon, and this judgment of Rome was no exception. Rome's judgment did not happen at the end of its life. Rome's judgment happened at the height of its powers. Rome was cast in alive.

Is this the final judgment at the end of all time? No, it is not. To argue otherwise is to lift these verses right of their theological and historical context. It would require us to ignore or twist the time frame of the book, stated twice at the beginning and twice at the end — the events in this book were to come to pass soon. It would also make us wonder why similar language used throughout the Old Testament to describe past judgments against the enemies of God could not be used here in the New Testament for precisely that same reason.

Will there be a last great day of judgment when the righteous hear the words "Well done" and the wicked hear the words "Depart from me"? Absolutely! Could that last great day be described using the same language of judgment we find here about Rome and that we find in the Old Testament about Babylon, Edom, Tyre, etc.? Absolutely! But that

great day is described *elsewhere* in the Bible. It is not the focus here, just as it was not the focus in the Old Testament parallels we have seen over and over during our studies.

What happens next? Those who follow the beasts are slain and become food for the birds, as was foretold at the beginning of the battle.

Notice that even here we get the clear message that vengeance belongs to God alone. The followers of the beast are not killed by the armies of heaven but rather by the sword of the one on the white horse — that is, by Jesus, the righteous judge. Jesus marches with an army to fight Rome, but Jesus doesn't need an army to defeat Rome. He destroys the armies of the earth by the sword that issues from his mouth.

What is that sword? That sword is the word of Christ, which as John 12:48 tells us will be used to judge all who reject Christ. "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."

## Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 is one of the most hotly debated chapters in the Bible. The false doctrine of premillennialism is based on this chapter, and sadly it has permeated much of the denominational world. We looked at some of the consequences of premillennialism during our introductory lessons, and we will not repeat all of that here.

But we should pause to consider one important point — it does make a difference what we believe about premillennialism. Premillennialism is *not* something about which we can just agree to disagree! The false premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel. Premillennialism belittles the church and belittles the sufficiency of Christ's perfect sacrifice. At the heart of premillennialism is the notion that the church of Christ is a mistake



that came about because of a failure by Jesus to accomplish what he intended. Can you think of any doctrine more perverted 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 with the first of those two events, while Chapter 21 will deal with the second.

Chapters 20-22 are the climax of the book! We have carefully considered the context in our interpretation of the first 19 chapters. Let's not disregard that context 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 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. Remember that Revelation begins and ends with clear statements that what it talks about would happen shortly after it was written.

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 by looking at those symbols alone. Instead, we must study the context and timeframe of the judgment, as we have been doing.

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him

into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while.

In verse 1 we see an angel from heaven who comes down with the key of the bottomless pit. We learn two important things from this description. First, Satan has now been defeated. He possessed this key in Chapter 9, but now he seems to have lost it. Second, this scene is being observed from earth. That is, John sees the angel come down from heaven. What that tells us is that the scene we are about to see is being viewed from an earthly vantage point.

How has Satan been defeated? Does this defeat refer to Satan's defeat at the cross or to Satan's defeat at the end of the world? I don't think it refers to either. Once again, let's remember the context and the time frame. The first 19 chapters of this book have focused on the conflict between Rome and the church. Satan's plan to destroy the church through Rome has been completely stopped and totally defeated. That is the defeat 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 — and yet Satan failed! How would you expect such a tremendous defeat to be described?

Verse 2 pictures the defeat by showing Satan being bound for 1000 years. What does that picture mean? Remember that in apocalyptic language periods of time generally depict a state of affairs or a condition. Recall, for example, the period of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  (a broken 7) that we have seen many times in this book used to depict a state of temporary persecution. So what does 1000 years depict? We know that the number 10 represents completeness, and we know that numbers are sometimes raised to powers to emphasize their meanings. (Recall the symbol 144,000, which is 12 squared times 10 cubed, that was used to depict *all* the church.) If the number 10 represents completeness, then the number 1000 represents "complete completeness!"

This use of 1000 is a common symbol even outside of the apocalyptic books. Psalm 50:10 tells us that God owns cattle on 1000 hills, which means that his ownership is complete. Deuteronomy 7:9 tells us that God keeps his covenant to 1000 generations, which means that his faithfulness is complete. Satan is bound for 1000 years, which means his defeat is complete.

Being bound for 1000 years means that, with regard to Rome, Satan has been completely bound and completely defeated. There will be no parole with regard to Rome. Satan is not going to be released for good behavior with regard to Rome.

But after the 1000 years, Satan is loosed for a little while. What does this mean? The first thing it means is that the 1000 year binding could not be describing Satan's defeat at the end of the world. Why? Because when that defeat happens Satan is not going to ever be released again.

So what then does the "little while" denote? Just as the 1000 years referred to a state of affairs rather than to a period of time, so does this "little while" refer to a state of affairs rather than to a period of time. But to what state of affairs does it refer? What is the context? Although Satan has 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 he protected it from Rome.

The "little while" 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. Thus, they are depicted as lasting only a little while.

By saying Satan will return for only a little while, God is saying that Satan's future attacks are nothing to worry about. Satan had at his disposal an evil, blood thirsty empire that ruled the world, and yet he

was not able to defeat the church in its infancy with such a weapon. Why should the church fear future attacks?

And this is an important message for us! 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.

Is our modern age somewhere in this book of Revelation? Yes! We are living right there in the “little while.” 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.