

Sermon 55: Revelation 20:1-6: The Millennium

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INTRODUCTION

Babylon is defeated, the beast and the false prophet are defeated, the armies that arranged themselves against the church are defeated, but what about the devil the great enemy of the church? God answers this question and more in this section. He tells us about how the devil is bound, and more what the destiny of the saint is who dies under the devil's rampaging. The devil is symbolized in the picture of a dragon and serpent, but the church is spoken of as martyrs. The book of revelation has revealed the satanic conspiracy by the devil to unite the world to overcome the church but we will see in this section that he will never be able to fully do this. He will be bound from deceiving the nations to wage this war, and when he does finally unite everyone Christ will come and quickly end it all. Meanwhile God pulls back the curtain on the intermediate state and shows us the life of the Christian in heaven as he awaits the final ending and the New Creation. We will be reigning in Christ's authority in blessing and peace. Any victory for the devil is actually only apparent, and victory will finally be Christ's. This section is full of controversy so we will have to burden this extremely encouraging text with argumentation in order to try and answer the many questions which clutter our thinking on this text. We will be seeking to more closely prove the Amillennial understanding as the true one.

Contextual considerations:

The parallel structure of Revelation:

The book of Revelation is made up of parallel perspectives, the implications of this for Revelation 20 are that the reading of chapters 19 and 20 are not a case of following a chronology but repeat perspectives of the same events from different camera angles. We have shown the reasons why 20 is a parallel and not a follow on from 19. The reasons stated so far are:

Firstly, the words, 'I saw' which are said by Premills to be chronological markers need not mark chronological but merely logical flow.

Secondly, the similarity in borrowed capital and linguistics in the description of the final battle argue for parallel accounts not a chronological one.

Thirdly, a single end times battle and cosmic reshuffle harmonises better with verses like Heb. 12:26-28 which tells us that God is only going to shake the heavens and the earth once more not twice.

These and other factors which support a parallel reading which will become apparent as we go through the text set us up to see a devil oriented perspective.

Chiastic structure:

Vern Poythress has spent much time looking at the various structural aspects of Revelation and one of the most apparent structures is the chiastic structure of the unveiling of the enemies of God's people and how their destruction is unveiled in the opposite order.

'Symbolic personages are introduced into the drama one by one, and then their destinies are assigned in the reverse order, as follows:

- A. The people of God depicted with the imagery of light and creation 12:1-2
- B. The Dragon, Satan 12:3-6
- C. The Beast and the False Prophet 13:1-18
- D. The Bride: The people of God in the imagery of sexual purity 14:1-5
- E. Babylon the prostitute 17:1-6
- E. Babylon destroyed 17:15-18:24
- D. The Bride is blessed with marriage 19:1-10
- C. The Beast and the False Prophet are destroyed 19:11-21
- B. The Dragon is destroyed 20:1-10
- A. The people of God in the imagery of light and creation 21:1-22:5'

This chiastic structure accounts for the reason why the devil is separated from the beasts, and the harlot from the beasts, although we understand all of these enemies to be finally defeated in one final battle. This deliberate structural approach forces us to realise that the chapters that speak of the defeat of the enemies of the church are not intended as chronological. God singles each one out for special mention and emphasizes their defeat for the comfort of His people and their assurance of ultimate triumph. The concern is not strict chronology but the detailed and certain defeat of all our enemies.

V1-3

'Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to 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, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.'

The angel in 20:1 has been the object of much speculation. His coming down from heaven would indicate that He comes from God with His authorizing and empowering. An interesting connection and possibility is that the angel is Michael. Now this is not specified as 65 other times angels are not identified. However, if the angel is Michael and this is also the 'restrainer' of 2 Thess. 2:7, and we then link this with the fact that Michael is the defender of God's people in Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1, this could also suggest that Revelation 20 is speaking of the present and not the future.

We come to the controversial part with the key, bottomless pit, chain and dragon. G. R. Beasley Murray argues that satan is reduced to impotence, emphasizing that is 'bound up, locked down and sealed over.' Wayne Grudem too sees Rev. 20 as describing a 'total removal from influence on the earth.' The question we want to answer is, in what regard is satan bound? It would appear from the text that a universal exclusion of all activity is not the intended meaning of the text. We see in v3 the stated purpose, 'so that he might not deceive the nations any longer.' And in v8 we see the end of that purpose when he is released, 'to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war.' It is not stressing that the devil has been secured that he might not persecute the church, for he does indeed continue to prowl around like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), nor that he does not disrupt church unity (2 Cor. 2:11), nor that he is bound in order not to appear as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14, or throw darts at Christians (Eph. 6:16), or be a thorn in Paul's side (1 Thess. 2:18). The purpose which satan is hindered in is the purpose of deceiving the nations in order to mobilise them in a united force to overrun the church. Storms writes, 'And the language John employs in 20:1-3 makes it clear that there is no possible way for satan to do so during the 1,000 years. The restriction on this particular aspect of his sinister ministry is absolute and invincible. *The intent of the devil is to incite a premature eschatological conflict, to provoke Armageddon before its, that is to say, before God's time. But the exalted Christ, through the agency of an angelic being, has temporarily stripped satan of his ability to orchestrate the nations of the earth for the final battle.*'¹ The final battle can only come when this restriction is lifted. When this restriction is lifted, it is then that we will see the devil's demon hordes go and gather the kings of the earth for battle (Rev. 16:14). Although there is much satan is permitted to do, this thing of rallying all the nations to crush the church he will not be able to do until Christ permits, and even then it will not bear fruit because Christ Himself will then come and end it all.

Traditionally other Amillennial interpreters would give a broader definition of the binding of satan. Hoekema and Hendriksen both argue that the form of deception with which the devil deceived the nations in the OT has changed. In the OT the Jews had light and nearly no one else did, now God has extended His truth to all nations through Gospel preaching. There is a sense in which all nations except Israel were deceived. This new liberty in preaching is the result of Christ's victory in His first coming. Verses such as Acts 26:16-18 affirm this new reality, 'But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles---to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'" The Gentiles can now be saved from satan and be a part of God's people. Hendriksen puts it this way: 'In Rev. 20:1-3 the binding of satan and the fact that he is hurled into the abyss to remain there for a thousand years indicates that throughout this present gospel age, which begins with Christ's first coming and extends nearly to the second coming, the devil's influence on

1 Storms, p439.

earth is curtailed so that he is unable to prevent the extension of the church among the nations by means of an active missionary program. During this entire period he is prevented from causing the nations—the world in general—to destroy the church as a mighty, missionary institution.... By means of the preaching of the word as applied by the Holy Spirit, the elect, from all parts of the world, are brought from darkness to light. In that sense the church conquers the nations, and the nations do not conquer the church.² It has often been felt that Christ's words in Matt. 12:28-29 capture the truth that satan is bound with regard to not being able to stop the advance of the gospel, 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.' This notion of the Kingdom come and Christ having taken His throne seems to be the clear indication of the claim that all authority is His in the Great Commission, Matt. 28:18-20, 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" These two views can be combined.

Answering a Premillennial protest

The protest is that Rev. 12 has the image of satan cast down, and that this does not square with Rev. 20 of satan being bound. How can satan be cast down to the earth and into the abyss? Storms responds however that the Premillennialist is using a literal hermeneutic and seeing the two spatial references as clashing. For the devil cannot be both thrown down to earth and into the abyss if we are looking at it literally. And if this is the assumption then we too would have to agree, but approaching Rev. 20 with a literal hermeneutic is problematic. Storms writes:

'Must we believe that the angel who came down from heaven was physically holding a literal key that literally could lock and unlock a pit? What kind of door was on this pit? What kind of lock held it fast? I suppose then that there was only one way of entry into this pit and that it was sealed all around to prevent escape. It must have been something other than a physical pit because satan is a spiritual being and could not be held by mere material bonds. Must we also believe that the angel was holding a literal chain, one with physically material links that could be measured as perhaps 10 feet long or even a 100 feet long, a chain that could literally restrain a spiritual being like satan? And did this angel literally 'seize' the devil, i.e., grab him and take hold of him and somehow wrestle him into submission so that he could be incarcerated in the pit?

I suppose the premillennialist must also believe that satan was a literal, physical serpent, as he is called in verse 2. But of course no premillennialist believes that. They believe that this is symbolic imagery. But must we not assume that the premillennialist is forced to believe that the 'pit' or abyss into which satan was thrown was literally shut and sealed, somehow with a door that could be locked or a wall or stone or something to secure him within it.

2 Ibid., p441.

My point is that I think most, if not all, premillennialists would readily acknowledge that all of this is symbolic imagery designed to teach a very real and, yes, even literal spiritual and theological truth. The point of talking about an 'abyss' and a 'chain' and 'a key' and 'sealing' and 'shutting' up within this abyss who is a serpent is to emphasize that satan is or will be restrained from some particular activity for the duration of what is called the Millennium. But to argue that satan cannot be cast down to earth in Revelation 12 and also be incarcerated in the abyss, both as a result of the work of Christ in the first century, is to press this sort of imagery beyond the breaking point and well outside the bounds of what the nature of this sort of language is designed to accomplish.

The singular point of Revelation 20 is simply to portray in graphic terms the spiritual restraint placed on satan to assure the saints who are suffering that his design for deceiving the nations during the time of the millennium cannot be obtained.³

The use of numbers in Revelation is also symbolic and not literal. The reference to the 7 Spirits of God cannot be literal or we deny the Trinity, the 144000 male virgin Jewish evangelists is a symbolic representation. Likewise 1000 is a number used in Scripture to speak of a large amount, not a precise amount. Gen. 24:60, Ex. 20:6, Ex. 34:7, Lev. 26:8, Deut. 1:11, 5:10, 7:9, 32:30, Josh 23:10, 1 Sam. 18:7, Ps. 50:10, 84:10, 90:4, 91:7, 105:8, Ecc. 6:6, 7:28, etc.

Amillennialists argue that the various visions namely 12 and 20 are giving various perspectives on the victory of Christ and how it affects satan. He has lost his ability to accuse God's people, this loss of legal grounds to accuse is portrayed as being thrown out of heaven and having no access to the courtroom of the King. Rev. 20 portrays the truths that God has restricted satan's ability to limit the gospel and to raise a rebellion to crush the church. We need to remember the nature of symbolic language and not expect it to conform to other standards.

Another reason to see the binding of satan preceding the final battle of Armageddon is that in the final battle in 19:11-21, we see that the birds are called to feast on flesh of all men v18. Satan does not need to be bound after this battle because there is no one left to deceive. This point has been put to the Premill position in asking, 'who will make the babies in the millennium if Christians are glorified and do not marry or are given in marriage?' They answer that there are nations that did not enter the battle, or only the armies that entered the battle were killed 19:21. However, in any discussions of this Premills have failed to answer 19:18 with its emphasis on 'all flesh', this emphasis being echoed in 13:16, 'Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead.'

V4-6

'Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus

³ Ibid., p442-3.

and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.'

Verses 4-6 constitute another vision. It begins by focusing on thrones, the authority associated with them, and then those who will sit upon them. The premill position argues that the thrones are on earth, but the amill interpretation sees Daniel 7:9-10, 22 as the background, Johnson argues that the wording of Dan. 7:22 in the LXX is nearly identical to Rev. 20:4. Further support to a heavenly scene is found in the reference to the souls of the beheaded. These martyrs are spoken in Revelation 6:9 in the same way, 'When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.' These are those in the intermediate state.

The fact that John is talking about the intermediate state in Rev. 20:4-6 becomes obvious when the connection to Rev. 6:9-11 is made.

6:9, 'and...I saw'; 20:4, 'and I saw'

6:9, 'the souls of those who had been slain'; 20:4, 'the souls of those who had been beheaded.'

6:9, 'because of the word of God'; 20:4, 'because of the word of God.'

6:9, 'and because of the testimony which they had maintained'; 20:4, 'because of the testimony of Jesus.'

'That John is describing the same scene, namely, that of the blessedness of the intermediate state, seems beyond reasonable doubt. The key is that John, in both instances, is describing the experience of disembodied 'souls' (psuchas) who had been martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ.⁴

V5 presents the next difference for interpretation, specifically the meaning of the 'first resurrection.' The premillennial position argues that the first resurrection is a physical resurrection at Christ's second coming, and that glorified saints in sinless bodies will dwell in a curse-subdued creation where the effects of the fall will not be completely reversed but only partially suppressed so long life and good health will result. The postmillennial view sees this as regeneration and the thrones indicate the effect of the gospel on society to bring about a golden era.

The amillennial perspective is that the adjective 'first' in 'first resurrection' establishes certain theological contrasts in the text which support the view that Rev. 20 is describing saints in the intermediate state. Firstly, note that the reference to 'first' implies that something will come second and supercede it. In Rev. 21:1-5 we see that the new heavens and earth are what come after the first heavens and earth. The new comes after the first. The 'former

4 Ibid., p458.

things' of v4 in the ESV should read the 'first things'. We also see that in reference to the death that will be eternal in contrast to the death of this present age, it is described as the 'second' death and corresponds to the 'new' creation and belongs to the age to come. That which is first is temporary and fading along with this age, it is not the second or new and permanent state of affairs of the age to come. What is the significance of this for establishing that the first resurrection is speaking of the intermediate state?

Well, a first resurrection and second death indicate the existence of a second resurrection and first death, namely a resurrection that will be permanent and not temporary and which we know to be bodily; and a death which is part of this age, namely our physical deaths. The Premill believes that the first resurrection is a glorification where we receive our new creation bodies. This however does not square with the contrast between first and second which correspond to temporary and eternal, of this age and of the next. First does not indicate first in order but a qualitative difference. This is further strengthened by the fact that John does not describe the resurrection of the unbeliever as a second resurrection, but as a second death because death is the permanent state to which they are raised. He avoids the word 'resurrection' when describing the unbeliever, and he avoids the word 'death' when describing the believing martyrs.

'The believer DIES PHYSICALLY but experiences SPIRITUAL RESURRECTION!

The unbeliever is RESURRECTED PHYSICALLY but experiences SPIRITUAL DEATH!⁵

Our first death is in Christ a first resurrection into the intermediate state and when He returns we will experience our second resurrection which is our glorification. The unbeliever because he is not in Christ when he dies he experiences his first death and his resurrection is not a resurrection to life but judgement and is called a second death. In both instances the firsts are temporary, but the seconds are eternal.

We would add that if 1 Corinthians 15:25-26, 50-54 claims that the last enemy to be destroyed at Christ's coming is death, the moment when we are changed into the twinkling of an eye. This implies that the first resurrection which will be followed by death cannot be that which happens at Christ's second coming and must be explained as something else.

Enough argument, what is the significance? To the little persecuted church of the first century the assurance was great. Satan cannot and will not crush you He is restrained by God. Secondly, it is not death to die! It is victory, and we share in His judgement v4.

5 Ibid., p465.