

The Millennium: Who Rules Earth?

Revelation 20

Turn to Revelation 20 please. I have preached through Revelation a few times before, but I have never preached on the thousand years in Rev 20. I studied it but did not know what to make of it, so I left it alone. This time Rev 20 made sense to me.

Who rules earth? Rev 20 wants to answer that. Who governs earth? The 1,000 years describe a time when there a great change in who influences and shapes people on earth. The dragon can no longer deceive the nations. Instead, the souls of those who have been faithful to Christ and have died are now seated on thrones with Christ, and they reign with Christ for a 1,000 years.

Revelation 20 - *And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.*

⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They 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 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 are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

⁷ When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹ They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were

thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

What pattern have we seen in Revelation so far? We have seen what's called "recapitulation," that is, visions that go over the same time period repeatedly. Through the seals, the great crowd in Rev 7, the trumpets, Holy War in 12-14, and the bowl judgements, in each of these Revelation has covered the whole time from Christ's first coming, 2000 years ago, to his second coming.

So we'll start by assuming that the 1000 years are doing this again. And if Rev 20 is covering the same time we've heard about before, we should see things that in some ways look familiar to us.

Have we seen God's angels conquer the dragon before in Revelation?

Yes, in Rev 12 God's angels won a great victory over the dragon and threw him down. The details are different, but that much we have seen. And Satan is named in Rev 20 much exactly as in Rev 12, not anywhere else: the dragon, the ancient serpent, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the nations (12:9; 20:2). When we read that in Rev 20 we're to remember Rev 12.

So we will assume that the angel binding Satan the deceiver, in Rev 20, is a different picture of the same spiritual event as the angels expelling Satan the deceiver from heaven in Rev 12.

Do any other place in the NT mention binding Satan?

Yes, several places mention Christ conquering Satan at his first coming. The most similar is in Mark 3. Jewish leaders accused Jesus of casting out demons by Satan's power, casting out demons by the prince of demons. Jesus told them that they knew very well that made no sense.

Then Jesus explained how you steal what is in a strong man's house. First, you go into the house and you bind the strong man. Then, after you have bound him, you take what you want from his house. Jesus is explaining how it is that he casts out demons so effectively.

Jesus can take what he wants from the strong man's house because he first bound Satan. We his followers also plunder the strong man's house, not because we bind him, but because Christ already bound him. In different details, this is the angel binding and locking up Satan.

Jesus bound Satan 2000 years ago. He defeated Satan and his angels. In particular, Satan's freedom to deceive the nations was severely cut back. The nations are more open to God and the gospel than they would be otherwise. This means the 1000 years are the present time.

Three times in Rev 20:1-10 it speaks of the dragon deceiving the nations. Not all Satan's activity is shut down, but one activity is very much reduced: his ability to deceive the nations.

Who rules earth? Who governs earth? Whose influence shapes earth? Not the dragon, whoever it is, it is not him.

Do we see in Revelation another picture of the souls of those who have been killed because of their witness and because of the word of God (20:4)?

We see this in the 1000 years. Do we see it anywhere else? Yes, we see it in the fifth seal, very similar words. There John saw, at the incense altar, the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and because of their witness (Rev 6:9). Here in Rev 20, the souls have been beheaded instead of just slain, but otherwise it is the same souls.

In the fifth seal, what are those souls of faithful believers doing? They are praying to God, and asking him for justice on earth, and God listens and tells them he will do it. The next seal is God answering their prayer.

So, do the souls of departed believers influence God's actions on earth? Yes, in Rev 6 they do, they pray to God for justice on earth, and God answers them.

How is this pictured in the 1000 years? These souls are on thrones, and twice it says that they reigned with Christ for a 1000 years.

Who rules the earth? In the fifth seal, Rev 6, the souls of dead saints are alive, and they pray to God for justice, and he listens. In the 1000 years, the souls of the faithful are alive, that's the first resurrection, and they sit on thrones and they rule with Christ. That is, the fifth seal, God answering their prayers, and the 1000 years, they rule with Christ, show much the same thing.

By the time we've gotten to the end of 20:6, it's clear that it is not just the martyrs who are on thrones and ruling with Christ, it is every believer who was faithful to him until the end of their lives, everyone who did not worship the beast or worship his image is included in this.

So, during the 1000 years, who rules earth? Who governs earth? Whose influence guides earth? Not the dragon, we already know that, he is not free to deceive the nations. Who replaces him? The dead in Christ. They live with Christ, they pray to God and he answers, they sit on thrones and it repeats that they reign with Christ. This is the first resurrection.

Our text mentions the 1st resurrection and the 2nd death. 1st resurrection confuses us; we thought there was only the resurrection of our bodies. The 2nd death is clear: spiritual death. So the 1st death must be physical death. From our text, the 1st resurrection must be spiritual, the souls of the faithful alive with the Lord. So the 1st resurrection is spiritual, and the 2nd resurrection is physical, the reverse order of the two deaths.

You and I have gotten used to complaining about how things are on earth. It is a Christian thing to do, if we are loyal believers, to see sin and corruption everywhere. Rev 20 does not much like that. A huge dark influence on earth has been closed up, a terrible voice has been muzzled, and the voice of the dead in Christ has much influence for good.

Who Rules Earth? The dead in Christ have taken the dragon's place as the voice in heaven that shapes events on earth. That is the central point of the 1000 years.

The dead in Christ have taken the dragon's place as the voice in heaven that shapes events on earth. And that is why the gospel so often enjoys peace, and why there is as much openness to Christ as there is, and that's why there is as much justice as there is.

Do other places in the NT speak of this? Yes, and the clearest parallel is this from 2Tim2: *If we die, we will live with him; if we endure, we will reign with him. If we die, we will live with him.* That's the first resurrection. The second resurrection is physical, the resurrection of our bodies, dead in Christ rise first. The first resurrection is our souls / spirits, the second is our bodies.

If we die, we will live with him; if we endure, we will reign with him. If we endure, we will reign with him. That is the souls of the faithful, those who endured, reigning with Christ for a 1000 yrs.

Think about Bill. This week it will be a year since the Lord took Bill. What do you think Bill has been doing for year? *If we die, we will live with him; if we endure, we will reign with him.*

The fifth seal makes it clear that the souls of the faithful are passionate about what's right and what's wrong with earth. God listens to us, and he also listens to them, Bill included.

Who Rules Earth? The dead in Christ have taken the dragon's place as the voice in heaven that shapes events on earth. The accuser, who accused our brothers and sisters day and night, has been thrown dead, and the dead in Christ are on thrones. That is the message of the 1000 years. The dead in Christ have replaced the dragon as the voice in heaven that shapes events on earth.

What happens with the 1000 years are over? Satan is released, and he immediately goes out and deceives all the nations, and they line up for the battle. They all gather to war against the camp of the saints, which is the beloved city, which is God's woman, the bride, which is the church.

Do other Scriptures speak of a final worldwide battle that begins with a deception of Satan?

Yes, in Rev 19:19, everyone gathered for "the battle." Not all your translations will have it that way, but in 20:8 and 19:19 it is "the battle" in Greek. And in 19:20 it says people were deceived by signs done in front of them. They were deceived, so they gathered for the battle against the one on the white horse and his army, that would be Christ and us.

Back a bit farther, the 6th bowl judgement in Rev 16, evil spirits come out of the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, and they perform demonic signs and miracles. And because of these false signs, the whole world gathers for "the battle" (16:14). And then God shows up.

And if you read 2Thess 2:1-12, you will see many parallels. Paul writes about the same events.

During the 1000 years, Satan's deceiving is bound, that is, God blocks deception. The gospel goes out, and the Spirit is always out there convicting the world of its sin. By the influence of the saints, the right thing often happens.

But in spite of this, a lot of people do not want God. In Paul's words, *people refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie. So all will be condemned who did not believe the truth.* 2Th2:10-12.

All these good and kind people in the world, our enjoyable neighbours, will not bow to Christ and so be saved, but still seem like such nice people. So here is how it works: they do not want the truth God offered, they sort of want to be good, but they do not want God's truth or Christ.

In the Bible, people who reject the gospel are described in strong terms. They are the wicked, aimed toward sin and evil. Our unbelieving neighbours and loved ones don't seem that bad. We have trouble putting together the Bible's strong language about unbelievers, and how decent they actually seem to be. But when Satan is free to deceive again, we'll see a different side of them.

That is a very scary place to be. They refuse to love the truth and be saved, so God will send them the lie, and they will believe the lie. So all will be condemned who do not believe the truth.

But the lie will be a particular lie: the lie, the deceiving of the dragon, will convince them that believers are the enemies of humanity, followers of Christ must be totally eliminated. The lie they believe will make them God's passionate enemies, and kind people and even our unbelieving family members will seek to kill us. Jesus predicted this too.

And it will look very bad for God's people, the camp of the saints, the city God loves. And then what happens? Fire comes out of heaven and devours the lot of them, and the devil who deceived them will be thrown into the lake of fire. That's the real Day of the Lord.

We are obviously getting a symbolic picture, because that final scene is described several ways in different places in the Bible. But it will be the day that ends human history as we know it.

And after that comes the final judgment before God, every human stands before God, but this sermon is long enough so we'll leave that alone.

Two main encouragements here from God. One, there is a lot of good happening in this age, because Christ defeated Satan, and because believers who died now live and rule with Christ.

Two, the Lord's followers who have gone ahead are enjoying an honourable place with the Lord. They are on thrones, and they rule with him.

Amen.

Is Final Judgement Based on Works or on Christ's Death for Us (20:11-15)?

In 20:11-15, the great white Throne judgment, all the dead before Christ, twice it says that everyone is judged according to their works, which are recorded in “books” that were opened. And twice in these verses we read about the book of life, which is apparently one of these books, and whoever is not named the book of life is thrown into the lake of fire.

So, which is it? Is it our works? Or is it our name in the book of life? In Revelation, that is obviously the wrong question. In Revelation, the books that record works and the book of life that names the Lamb's followers all say the same thing. Those whose names are in the book of life will have evidence in the books of works that they follow the Lamb.

One of the reasons this gives us anxiety is that the evangelical gospel message is a bit twisted. Let's be clear on this: no one earns salvation, no one deserves it, ever. God never says, “Because you did good things, I will forgive your sins and give you the Holy Spirit and eternal life.” This never happens.

BUT, the gospel changes our lives. We live differently after we've come to God. We are not perfect, we still regularly need God's forgiveness, but we live very differently than if we did not love God.

We have been taught that if our works, our obedience, is involved in salvation at all, then we must be earning it from God. That is NOT what the Bible says, but some have been taught to think that way.

Peter puts this together best: *You were not redeemed from your empty way of life by such things as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.* 1 Peter 1:18-19, ENV. That is, the blood of Christ redeemed us not only from guilt but also from a way of living.

Rev 1:5 says, *To him who lives us and freed us from our sins by his blood.* By God's mercy, the blood of Christ frees us from our sins in two ways. One, through the blood of Christ our sins were forgiven. Two, the blood of Christ bought us out of an empty way of living. This is all God's kindness and God's power.

Rev 7:14 says that the saints praising God before his throne, after Christ has returned, *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.* But the white robe is the righteous acts of the saints (19:8). So which is it? Does the blood of Christ whiten our robes, or do our righteous acts whiten our robes?

It is both. The blood of Christ cleanses us and also changes how we live. *We were redeemed from an empty way of life [get that!] redeemed out of a dark way of living, by the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.* We were bought out of one way of living, and set down in a different way of living. We were bound to sin, now we are free to obey.

Remember always that the faithful, the righteous, still pray the Lord's prayer, Father forgive us our sins. Lives can be greatly changed and still far from perfect. That's normal in the kingdom.

There is a warning here. There are people who say they have faith, and are attached to the church, but their lives are not changed. That's a problem. In Rev 2-3 Jesus was much concerned about those in the church who were not overcoming. There was not much actual change in their lives. He urged them to repent.

So: Is final judgement based on works, or on Christ's death for us? Revelation, and the whole Bible for that matter, does not like that question. It is a false division. People like you, who love the Lord and are much changed, should not be nervous about this, but you are nervous, because our consciences are too introspective, and we've been given a twisted gospel. The blood of Christ both cleanses us and changes us.

For this reason, the book of life and the books of works are saying the same thing. Amen.