

## **Revelation: The Hope of Glory**

What Ultimately Matters Regarding the Millennium

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October 21, 2012



### **WHAT ULTIMATELY MATTERS REGARDING THE MILLENNIUM Revelation 20**

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

*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 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. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 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.*

*And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:1-15)*

If you have Bible and I hope you do, turn with me to Revelation 20. Some of you may have heard or read the piece written by contemporary poet Taylor Mali entitled, "Totally like whatever, you know?" I'll try to say it like he has written it.

In case you hadn't realized,  
it has somehow become uncool  
to sound like you know what you're talking about?  
Or believe strongly in what you're, like, saying?  
Invisible question marks and parenthetical you know's and you know what  
I'm sayings  
have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences?  
Even when those sentences aren't, like, questions?  
Declarative sentences – so-called  
because they used to, like, DECLARE things to be true, ok  
as opposed to other things that are, like, totally, you know, not -  
they've been infected by a tragically cool  
and totally hip interrogative tone?  
As if I'm saying,  
don't think I'm a nerd just because I've, like, noticed this; ok  
I have nothing personally invested in my own opinions,  
I'm just, like, inviting you to join me on the band wagon of my own  
uncertainty?

What has happened to our conviction?  
Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?  
Have they been, like, chopped down  
with the rest of the rain forest? you know?  
Or do we have, like, nothing to say?  
Has society just become so filled with these conflicting feelings of 'nugh' . . .  
That we've just gotten to the point where we're the most aggressively  
inarticulate generation to come along since . . .  
you know, a long time ago!

This poem accurately reflects our approach to so many things today and particularly our approach to so many things that matter. Take the topic we are looking at today: heaven, hell, and the end of the world, including the end of our lives. It feels uncomfortably bold to declare that every person in this room and every person in the world who does not trust in Jesus Christ for salvation will spend eternity amidst everlasting torment in hell. We'd much rather attach an interrogative tone to that statement. Like, maybe, these people won't spend eternity in heaven, or something?

We shy away from conviction about fundamental biblical truth, and it affects not just our speech. It affects our lives. We're hesitant to speak with the authority of Jesus, and we're hesitant to live on the authority of Jesus.

So today I want to speak with hesitancy about some things I don't know. This passage of Scripture we just read is one of the most disputed parts of the book of Revelation, and there are so many questions here that we don't have certain answers for. At the same time, there are truths here that are absolutely certain which affect every single person's life in this room for all of eternity, and on these truths, I want to speak as clearly and as compellingly as possible. I want to urge you to bank your life on these truths, all over this room, and then to speak with conviction about these truths all over Birmingham and all around the world.

In the passage we just read, we heard about a particular 1000-year period of time that is connected with the end of the world. Over a span of six verses, John references this thousand years six different times. You might circle or underline them in your Bible.

*"And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 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.*

*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 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. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 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. And when the thousand years are ended..." (Rev. 20:2-7a).*

This thousand-year period of time has been referred to throughout Christian history as the millennium, and for 2000 years, Christians have debated and disagreed about exactly what the millennium means. Someone has said, "The millennium is 1000 years of peace that Christians like to fight about."

## **Where We Need To Start Today...**

So this is where we need to start today: with a very clear understanding of something we've talked about all throughout this series on Revelation. But I want to bring it to bear now, once again, on our understanding of the millennium, this thousand year binding of Satan and reign of Christians.

### **It is sanctifying to disagree about the millennium.**

It is sanctifying to disagree about the millennium. What I mean by that is that it's good to remember that none of us in this room has totally figured out the mysterious plans and purposes of the infinite God of this universe.

Now there are many things—essential things—on which God has been absolutely clear. God has so loved a sinful world that He has sent His Son, God in the flesh, to bear His wrath against sin on the cross and to show His power over sin in the resurrection, so that all who repent of sin and believe in Him will be redeemed and reconciled to God forever and ever. Of this we're sure. As Christians, we don't disagree about any of that. To be a Christian is to believe that.

But there are less important doctrines, more obscure passages in the Bible, that it's fine for us to disagree about. We know that one day, when all of this pans out in the end, and we are joined together with God in heaven, it will be clear exactly what was meant not only by the millennium, but we will likely understand much more about the mysteries of God that

baffle our minds today. So in the meantime, it's good to be reminded that we each have much to learn, and we all have much to learn from each other.

Throughout history, giants of the Christian faith have disagreed over the passage we are studying today. Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, Billy Graham, and John Piper have disagreed about the millennium. As a result, we should all approach this issue with a clear air of humility, knowing that none of us (including myself) is going to come on the scene of Christian history and solve this one for everybody else. Instead, we're going to learn from one another and respect one another in the body of Christ as we talk together about things that do matter pertaining to the end of the world.

### **It is sin to divide over the millennium.**

In the middle of those discussions—even disagreements—I hope it will be clear that it is sanctifying to disagree about the millennium. But brothers and sisters, it is sin to divide over the millennium. There are some in the church who would like to take this issue and make it a litmus test for fellowship together in the body of Christ, and I want to say as clearly as possible today that that is just plain wrong.

It is sinful, and it dishonors God to divide over issues that are not essential to our faith as Christians and not even essential to our mission and fellowship in a local church. Sadly, it's been said, even in this series on Revelation: "I just don't know if I can be a part of a church where the pastor teaches this or that view of the end times." And that is not good. It's not right. I appreciate so much the brothers and sisters in this body who, if you were teaching Revelation, you would take a different route in this particular text or that particular phrase in the book, but you have joyfully listened to every sermon in this series and you have grown in Christ in the middle of it all.

I was listening to a sermon by a preacher and theologian I respect greatly named Tom Schreiner. Dr. Schreiner has been so helpful to me, particularly in his writing, on many different doctrines. Not long ago, he was preaching through Revelation. And he preached Revelation from a particular theological perspective, with a particular view on the millennium, all the way through the first 19 chapters. Then, when he got to Revelation 20, he totally changed his mind about his view on the millennium.

So when he got to this text, this is how he opened his sermon. Schreiner said:

"Everything in God's Word is important. Yet good Christians have different views on the millennium. A month ago, and during this whole series, I would have said, 'I'm an Amillennialist.' But I've actually changed my mind as I studied this passage. So how much trust are you going to put in me tonight? Right? I'm not very stable on this issue. You know, that's a good thing to be reminded of, that our confidence is not in a preacher, but in God's Word. It's in the truth of God's Word. That's what matters; not my opinion towards something.

"I think we also learn from this to be charitable towards different views. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind, at least if you can be. But we must distinguish between central issues of the faith and issues which aren't central. Some people have a hard time doing that. Everything for them is of equal importance in the Bible. But that's not true. There are some things that are non-negotiable in our faith.

"The Trinity is non-negotiable. The authority of Scripture is non-negotiable. The substitutionary atonement, justification by faith alone, the deity of Christ, and, of course, I could mention other things. But there are less clear matters in the Bible as well; things like when the rapture will take place and what we're looking at today regarding the millennium.

"We must beware of being divisive, and schismatic, and inflexible on matters that are less important. That really shows, I think, a character flaw in us—something that God wants to work on in us. At the same time, we need to be aware of being namby-pamby. That's another problem, not to hold strong convictions. We want to speak the truth of the gospel in love. That's what's crucial. We need balance. I need balance that comes from the Holy Spirit. We all need that. We need the Holy Spirit to be our teacher."

Well said, from a brilliant theologian who is pretty unstable on this particular passage. We need the Holy Spirit to be our teacher, so I pray that the Holy Spirit will teach us today, even the amidst the uncertainty of what we don't know, that He will solidify our minds concerning what we do know.

## **What We Don't Know For Certain...**

With that basis, let's think about what we don't know for certain in this passage. Clearly, as we read it, we see Satan bound, thrown down, and sealed in a bottomless pit. For a thousand years, he is unable to deceive the nations. During that same period, either martyred or faithful Christians come to life and reign with Christ in what's called the "first resurrection." At the end of that time, Satan is released, he mounts a final assault against the church, and then he is overthrown and destroyed. The rest of the dead rise, and along with Satan, the beast, the false prophet, death, and Hades itself, they are judged before God. That's what happens here.

### **When?**

Simple, right? Well, not so simple because there are all kinds of questions surrounding this passage, and I've listed just a few of the main ones here. One question is when? When is what going to happen?

One of the big questions in this text (and really in all of Revelation) is: are these passages arranged chronologically or cyclically? In other words, with each passing verse, are we coming to new events that progress in time (chronologically), or are we recapitulating, recapping previous events that have already been described in Revelation, and they're just repeating here.

Some people read Revelation 19-20 and think, "Okay, this is clear. In Revelation 19 (which we read last week), Jesus returns. Then, Satan is bound after Jesus returns. Then, Christians reign with Christ in a 1000-year period. And then, after that, Satan is finally defeated, and we are all judged. It's as simple as that."

But others say that these passages are not arranged chronologically. Much like the rest of the book of Revelation, this is a picture of repeating cycles. They would say that what's happening here has already been described at other places in Revelation. For example, turn to Revelation 16 (and hold your place here in Revelation 20). Revelation 20:8 says that

Satan "will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth...to gather them for battle" (Rev. 20:8).

Well, you look at Chapter 16, verse 13:

*"And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty... And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon" (Rev. 16:13-14, 16).*

So some would say, "This is the same battle being described here in Revelation 20 that's already been described in Revelation 16." And then, even when you get to Chapter 19 (what we looked at last week), you see a similar battle being described there. Verse 19 says, *"And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army"* (Rev. 19:19). So some say that when you get to Revelation 20:8, this is repeating what we've already heard about in Chapter 16 and Chapter 19, which goes to show that this is not a chronological account of this happens, then this happens, then this happens. So that's the question: are these passages arranged chronologically or cyclically?

And based in part on how we answer that question, we're able to answer this question: is the millennium before Christ returns or after Christ returns? Does Jesus' return inaugurate this millennium, which is what we would conclude if these passages are arranged chronologically? Or does Jesus return at the end of this millennium, which is what some might conclude if these passages are arranged cyclically? And for all those who are thinking, "Who cares if all of this is in the future? We'll just see what happens when it happens," well, we need to realize that how we answer these questions actually sheds light on how we understand not just the future, but the present.

Because all of this affects our answer to the question: is the millennium present (happening now) or future (still to come)? Some believe we're in the millennium now, some believe the millennium is still to come in the future before Christ returns, and some believe the millennium is still to come in the future, after Christ returns.

So you have three different positions on the millennium based on these questions alone. Premillennialists say that Jesus will return before the millennium. Postmillennialists say that Jesus will return after the millennium, which is still something to come in the future. And amillennialists would say that the millennium is in the present, and Jesus will return at the end of the millennium. So are you confused yet? And that's just one set of questions.

### **How long?**

Then you have how long? Is the millennium literally 1000 years? Some people say, "There it is. The Bible says it, plain as day. This is 1000 years." Or is the millennium simply a planned, perfect, limited time? Others say, "John has used figurative numbers all throughout this book that are symbolic of certain things, and we've seen 1000 used as a number to refer to completion and perfection. So the point here is that the millennium is a complete, perfect, and limited amount of time that God has set, much like the number 144,000 isn't literally the total number of Christians. It's a symbol of a perfect, complete number of God's people, so the same thing is true here." And you have different people coming down on both sides of this question.

## **What and where?**

Then you have the questions of what and where? In Revelation 20, you have some people seated on thrones. You have souls coming to life and reigning with Christ in a first resurrection. So what does this mean?

Will the millennium involve a physical resurrection of Christians to reign on earth during the millennium? This is how many people interpret this passage—that Christians from throughout history will come to life and reign with Christ during a thousand year period on earth. Some would say that's clearly what this text is teaching.

So that's one option, or will the millennium involve a spiritual resurrection of Christians to reign in heaven during the millennium? Some would say that this reign of Christians is a reference to what happens when followers of Christ die—their souls are resurrected to heaven, where they reign with Christ now as they await the final judgment and the second resurrection, which is a resurrection of their bodies as God ushers in a new heaven and a new earth. So there are all kinds of discussion and debate and disagreement over what this "first resurrection" is, and how you understand that affects the way you understand the rest of the passage. Again, not just the future of the end of the world, but this even affects the way you might understand the present state of Christians who have died in the past.

These are just some of the questions in this one passage of Scripture. Then you combine it with other things we read in the New Testament, and it gets all the more interesting. When other parts of the New Testament talk about the end of the world, we read about things like the worldwide preaching of the gospel and the salvation of Israel and the great tribulation and the coming of the antichrist and the rapture and Christians meeting Jesus in the air upon His return. We think, "Well, how do all of those things fit in with this picture?" It's like a jigsaw puzzle with all these different pieces, and we're trying to figure out how they all come together. Right now, all kinds of Christians have all kinds of different pictures at the end of putting together this puzzle.

Now, some people (some of you!) might be tempted to just throw the puzzle pieces up in the air and say, "I give up! I don't care." But we don't want to do that, and here's why. Yes, there are all kinds of questions here and all kinds of things that we don't know for certain, but this is God's Word. He has spoken and He has given us minds to understand and He has given hearts that want to know Him, hearts that seek Him. As followers of Christ, we want to love God with all of our hearts and our souls and our minds, so it is an expression of our love for God to love His Word, to understand His Word, to wrestle with His truth, and to let it drive us into deeper dependence upon Him and His Spirit—even when we know, like we've talked about here, that there are some things we're not going to know for certain this side of heaven.

## **What I Think I Know For Now...**

So, with that, here's what I think I know for now. In other words, here's my take on this jigsaw puzzle. As I just said, I'm convinced it's important to believe certain things about how all this fits together, but to believe those things with a tenor of what I hope is humility and knowing that, Tom Schreiner (this brilliant theologian whom I greatly respect), after years of study in these things, has changed his mind on a couple of occasions.

So I humbly stress, this is what I think I know for now. And just so you know, the position Tom Schreiner used to hold is the one that I hold now, and he apparently is smart enough

to change that, but I'm crazy enough to stick with what he has left behind. No pun intended, by the way there, with "Left Behind." It was funny, there's a book that I've written that is coming out in February, and it's published by Tyndale, which also published the "Left Behind" series. And for anyone who has read the "Left Behind" series, you would know that I take a very different understanding of Revelation than the "Left Behind" series. And just the other day, the Tyndale folks were in town, and we had an interesting discussion about Revelation, to say the least!

So for what it's worth as a pastor in this faith family—and I even emphasize *a* pastor because I am only one of 30-plus pastors in this church, and we have many different takes on this whole thing. In fact, I don't have a clue where all of our other pastors/elders come down on this. I'm confident some of them would disagree with me, but again, it's just not a dividing issue. You can be encouraged. If you don't like where I land on this, talk to some other pastors here, and you'll probably find one who you do like where they land. And together you guys can just pray for me to get it right, and I'll be praying for you to get it right, and in the end, in Christ, I'm pretty confident we're all going to be happy with the way this plays out!

### **Christ has come once, and Satan has been bound.**

So here's what I think I know for now: Christ has come once, and Satan has been bound. This language of Satan being "bound" is only used by one another person in the New Testament, and it's by Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we read Jesus telling the crowds about his power over Satan, and this is the language he uses.

If you'll remember, those of you who were here in the spring when we studied Matthew 12, after Jesus had healed a demon-possessed man, Jesus was accused of himself being Satanic. Jesus looked back the crowds, and He said, "How can Satan cast out Satan? That makes no sense!" And then Jesus went on to say in Matthew 12:28, *"If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons"*—which is what Jesus is saying it is—*"then the kingdom of God has come upon you"* (Mt. 12:28). Then Jesus continues, *"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"* (Mt. 12:29).

And the whole picture there is Jesus saying, "The kingdom of God has come upon you, and I am binding the strong man (i.e., the god of this world, Satan), casting out demons, showing my authority over demons, and in the process, plundering his house, the place where he rules, this earth." The whole picture we have in the Gospels is Jesus doing exactly that—asserting His authority over this world, sin, suffering, and Satan—first in His life, and then in His death at the cross. And in His resurrection, Jesus defeated sin, suffering, death, and Satan, once and for all.

Colossians 2:15 says that *"He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open by shame, by triumphing over them"* (Col. 2:15). Hebrews 2:14 says that *"through death he [destroyed] the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil"* (Heb. 2:14). Christ has come once, and Satan has been bound.

And this is the theme of the entire book of Revelation—the gospel of Jesus Christ. This book is written to suffering saints to tell them over and over and over again, "You are not defeated. Even amidst the persecution and seduction of the Roman empire around you, stand firm. Christ has conquered sin and Christ has conquered Satan and in Him, you are a conqueror." The book of Revelation, going all the way back to Chapter 1, has not just shown us that one day in the future we will reign with Christ as conquerors. Instead, today, we reign with Christ as conquerors over sin and amidst suffering.



So let's understand John's words here at the end of the New Testament in light of Jesus' same words back in the beginning of the New Testament, and let's realize that Satan could not stop Christ. He was bound by Christ. That's why Christ came. And he who has been bound does not need to be bound again.

All that's left is for him to be destroyed, which is what we see happen later in Revelation 20. The beginning of Revelation 20 is yet another symbolic depiction of what happened at the cross and in the resurrection of Christ, in the same way that Revelation 12 showed us a similar symbolic picture, which we'll talk about more in just a second.

But the whole point of the book of Revelation seems to be that Satan could not stop Christ, and as a result of that Satan cannot stop Christians. He is bound! And we overcome him. That was the whole point of Revelation 12, right? When Satan was thrown down and a loud voice in heaven proclaimed, *"The salvation and power and kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down and they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony"* (Rev. 12:10-11a).

The scene there in Revelation 12 is eerily similar to the scene in Revelation 20. Both start with a heavenly setting, both describe or suppose an angelic battle against Satan, after which Satan is cast down, and Christians reign over him as they proclaim the gospel with their lives. This is not a future reign. This is a present reign, a reign inaugurated by Christ in His death and resurrection, and a reign that is now being experienced by Christians who conquer Satan by their testimony to Christ.

### **We are in the millennium.**

So then, it would be my conclusion that we are in the millennium. Satan has been bound, and we are reigning with Christ. Now that evokes all sorts of questions. How are we really reigning with Christ? And do you really think this picture of Satan bound in Revelation 20 accurately describes the state of the world today? Look around, Dave, don't you see? Can you really say that Satan is bound when there is so much sin and suffering abounding around us?

And to this I would say, "Absolutely. There's no question that sin and suffering are prevalent around us. This is the work of Satan, to be sure." However, Satan is bound. He is restrained. Practically, all across this earth, God restrains sin and Satan all the time. For all who have trusted in Christ, you are no longer under the control, power, or authority of sin. In the words of 1 Corinthians 10:13, *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it"* (1 Cor. 10:13). Sure, Satan is active, but his actions are restricted—particularly among God's people who have trusted in the conquering Christ. They are conquerors with Him.

Revelation 20 is not showing us a complete cessation of the devil's influence on earth. Some people read verse 3 that says Satan was thrown into a pit, where he was shut up and sealed for this thousand years and conclude that this means Satan is completely gone. But I would say that this is symbolic imagery just like we see all throughout this book that is not intended to be understood spatially. We're talking here, much like we are all over the book of Revelation, with spiritual realities that are represented by physical pictures, so this isn't a picture of Satan completely cast out. That's what happens later in this chapter. This is a picture of Satan bound, restricted from a particular task.

Did you see that task at the end of verse 3? The angel bound Satan for a thousand years *"so that he might not deceive the nations any longer"* (Rev. 20:3). What does that mean? Well, we know that Satan's ultimate weapon is deception, and this is how he has worked among the nations since Genesis 3.

As a result of sin and Satan's influence since Genesis 3, we have seen the nations as a whole blinded to the truth of God's grace, specifically God's grace in the people, or nation, of Israel. If you'll remember (and we talk about this all the time), the purpose of God's people, the nation of Israel, in the Old Testament was to display the grace and glory of God among all the nations of the earth. Yet over and over and over again, it seemed like Satan thwarted that purpose as the people of Israel went through cycle of disobedience after cycle of disobedience, and the nations remained in the dark concerning the grace of God in salvation.

But then Christ came, and He defeated the devil at the cross. Immediately after this happened, what did Jesus say? *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."* (Mt. 28:19). *"...That repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations..."* (Lk. 24:47). *"Be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8).

And that's exactly what happens. For the first time, as you see the book of Acts unfold, the gospel of God's grace begins to penetrate the Gentile world—the nations. The nations are coming to faith in Christ. The nations who for centuries and generations were living in darkness, deceived in darkness, now see a great light. Because of the coming of Christ, Satan has been bound, and this gospel is going forth, unhindered, to all peoples. That's the point!

Satan could not stop Christ, and now, today, Satan cannot stop Christians. Christians who are alive now reign with Christ on earth. Not, "We will be conquerors one day," but, *"We are now more than conquerors through Christ who loved us ..."* (Rom. 8:37).

And Satan cannot keep the church from proclaiming the gospel, and he cannot keep the nations from believing the gospel. He is bound. This message of a Jewish Messiah born into one nation is good news for all nations, and the message of Revelation is clear. This Lion of the tribe of Judah, this Passover Lamb of God—Jewish imagery, imagery of the nation of Israel—this Lion-like Lamb has *"purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation"* (Rev. 5:9). And one day soon, Revelation 7:9,

*"... a great multitude that no one [can] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, [is going to stand] before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes ... and [cry] out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"*  
(Rev. 7:9).

Satan is bound, and he cannot keep that from happening! So the Bible is saying through these visions to the apostle John, "Press on, people of God! Don't waver amidst the seduction of this world. And don't be silent amidst the persecution of this world. Take the gospel to the nations, no matter what it costs, knowing that even if you die—follow this—even if you die, you will conquer."

Christians who are alive now reign with Christ on earth, and Christians who have died now reign with Christ in heaven. This picture in Chapter 20 of souls who have been beheaded for their testimony to Christ, men and women who did not bow to the beast of this world,

where are they now? They are reigning with Christ, seated on thrones in heaven with him where they are worshiping God as priests while they rule with Christ as judge.

We've seen a scene similar to this already in Revelation 6, as saints surround the throne of God and cry out for His justice and vindication. There are numerous parallels between Revelation 6:9 and Revelation 20:4. Admittedly, there are many ways these phrases "came to life" and "first resurrection" could be interpreted. The picture I am convinced (at least for now!) that these phrases paint is of men and women who did not give in to the ways of this world, who trusted in the Word of God, who proclaimed it at the risk of their lives. They are now reigning with Christ in heaven, worshiping Him with resurrected lives that testify to His justice as they long for the consummation of redemption to come.

### **Christ will come again, and when He returns Satan will be obliterated.**

And it is coming. More specifically, He is coming back. Christ will come again, and when He returns, Satan will be obliterated. Christ has come once, and Satan has been bound. Christ will come again, and Satan will be obliterated.

Revelation 20 teaches us that after a final period of Satanic revolt, there will be a final point of Satanic defeat. Much like we've seen in the rest of the book of Revelation, there will be a time of particular tribulation and seeming defeat among God's people in the very end. You may remember in Revelation 11 where the witnesses proclaimed the gospel for three-and-a-half years, followed by three-and-a-half days of death and mockery and seeming defeat, a limited time for a little while, Revelation 20:3 says. And this binding that keeps Satan from deceiving will be let loose, and it will seem like all hell has broken out upon the earth, even to the extinction of the church. But rest assured, it will only be a little while.

Jesus spoke in Matthew 24 of a *"great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short"* (Mt. 24:21-22). And after a final period of Satanic revolt, there will be a final point of Satanic defeat.

Christ will return, He will enforce the victory He has already won at the cross, and He will destroy the Satan and all he has deceived. The return of Christ will usher in full and final judgment, once and for all. All men and women everywhere, along with Satan and all of his demons, will stand before God to give an account. This ultimate judgment scene will give way to eternal wrath in hell for all who have turned against Christ and everlasting life in a new heaven and a new earth for all who have trusted in Christ.

## **What We All Know Forever...**

That's my understanding of how the jigsaw puzzle pieces fit together. And yet, even amidst the uncertainty of what I think I know for now, it leads me inevitably to what we all know forever. Whatever position someone may take on the millennium or this or that portion of Revelation 20, I want to close with what is absolutely clear in God's Word. Five truths. Now I've moved from any kind of interrogative tone to a definite, declarative tone. We'll go through the first four really quickly because we really need to close with number five.

**God is sovereign.**

First, number one, God is sovereign. This line should just be a staple in pretty much every single sermon here because it's evident in every single text. You might think, "Dave, why do you say this over and over and over again?" Here's why.

Because I want you to be reminded—and the Bible seems to want to remind you—week in and week out, that no matter what is happening in this world, no matter what is happening in your world, God is in control. He is on the throne. Always. God is in control, and Satan is not.

**Satan is subordinate.**

God is sovereign, and Satan is subordinate. Regardless of what you might think about the specific interpretation and application of Revelation 20, we know from all of Scripture that Satan is limited and bound in at least some senses. He does not have free reign in this world, and he does not have free reign in your life. He is limited in what he can do by the sovereign and limitless power of God. And because Jesus has triumphed over him at the cross, there is nothing he can do to keep you from trusting in Christ today and following Christ today.

He is limited and bound, and he is doomed to be defeated. And he knows this! Do you remember in Matthew 8 when demons approach Jesus and ask him, "*Have you come to torment us before the appointed time?*" (Mt. 8:29). Before the appointed time! They know there's an appointed time for their defeat!

Revelation 12 said that the devil is filled with "*wrath because he knows his time is short*" (Rev. 12:12). The ultimate battle has already been fought, and Satan has lost. He is doomed to be defeated. This we know for certain!

**The gospel will advance through the church.**

God is sovereign, Satan is subordinate, and third, the gospel will advance through the church. "*This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come*" (Mt. 24:14). That's a guarantee from Jesus' mouth in Matthew 24! Men and women from all nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples will be represented around the throne of Christ one day. That's a guarantee from God's Word.

We have a team headed to North Africa today. We have church planting teams there and in East Asia and soon to be in Central Asia and in the Middle East. We have brothers and sisters we've sent out on church planting teams in the Northwest, the Midwest, and the Northeastern parts of the United States all because we know this gospel will advance through the church. And here in Birmingham, as well, where we've sent out church planting teams to East Lake and to Southside, and we're making disciples right here. Why?

**Jesus will return for the church.**

Because this gospel will advance through the church, and as it does, when it does (however you understand it all coming together), we know for certain that one day Jesus will return for the church. He is coming back! When and what happens before or after may be open for discussion, but His return is certain. We hope and long and look for His coming.

**At the end of history, every single one of us will be judged by God.**

God is sovereign, Satan is subordinate, the gospel will advance through the church, and Jesus will return for his church. The fifth truth we know for certain forever at the end of history, every single one of us will be judged by God. The dead, great and small, all of us

will stand before God's throne, and books will be opened. These books here in verse 12 are records of what we have done. All of our deeds laid out before a holy God as the basis of our judgment before Him. Every single thing we have done. And all kinds of people—scores of people—are hoping that on the day, the scales will weigh heavier on the side of good deeds rather than bad deeds. I would dare say many people have put their eternal confidence in the hope that the good will outweigh the bad.

But that is not what the Bible teaches will determine your eternity or my eternity. Instead, two questions on that day will determine your and my eternity. First question: did we put our faith in Christ's work? You see, you have two pictures of books here in Revelation. You have the "books," which contain your deeds, and then you have another book, "the book of life." And when you go back to Revelation 13:8, you see reference to "*the book of life of the Lamb who was slain*" (Rev. 13:8). This book is a reference in Revelation to everyone who has trusted in the saving work of Christ on their behalf.

The Bible is absolutely clear. All of our deeds—even our best deeds—deserve the wrath of God. We are not holy as He is.

And all of us, every single one of us in this room, from the youngest to the oldest, the best in this room has rebelled against God. And we deserve death, eternal death. But God has sent His Son to die in our place. He sent His Son to live the life we couldn't live, to die the death that every one of us deserves to die, to conquer the enemy that we can't conquer. Sin and Satan and death. Who in here can conquer death? Christ has done it. That's His work, His life, his death, His resurrection. Everyone who has turned from their sin and put their hope, their trust, their faith in Christ as Savior, Lord, and King will be safe on this day of judgment and welcomed into the presence of God.

You say, "Okay, then what's the other question? I thought that's all there was to it." Well, don't forget these other books, these records of what you and I have done because they are still in the scene here. And they're in the scene all throughout Scripture where judgment is described, even for believers, according to what they have done.

Matthew 16:27, "*...The Father will repay each person according to what he has done*" (Mt. 16:27). Romans 14:12, "*Each of us will give an account of himself to God*" (Rom. 14:12). 1 Corinthians 3:13, "*... Each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it ...*" (1 Cor. 3:13). 2 Corinthians 5:10, "*We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*" (2 Cor. 5:10).

Now people read these verses and think, "Well, is my work the basis of whether I will enter into heaven? Is my work in some way the basis of eternal salvation?" And the answer to that question is absolutely not. Christ's work on the cross alone is the basis of our salvation. You and I cannot earn eternal life with a holy God. We put our faith in the Christ's work. And then when we do this reality of faith bears fruit in our lives. It changes us.

Which inevitably leads to this second question: was there evidence of faith in our work? And this was a huge question that John was putting before people who claimed to be Christians in the first century, and that the Bible is putting before people who claim to be Christians in the twenty-first century.

There are all kinds of people who claim to believe in Christ, but there is no fruit of faith in Christ. There are all kinds of people who said at one point they believed in Christ, but

there's no fruit of ongoing faith in Christ. And the reality that Scripture teaches is that if this is true in our lives, if there is no fruit of faith, then there was never truly faith.

Look at those who reign with God in Christ in heaven in this passage. They are those who are beheaded, who did not worship the beast, who did not bear his mark. The Bible is not saying, "Okay, since they were beheaded, they get to be in. And since they didn't worship the beast, then they get to get in." No, they are welcomed by God into heaven based solely upon the work of Christ on the cross. They trusted Christ completely with their lives. And that was evident in their proclaiming Christ, even when it cost them their lives. It was evident in their worshiping Christ, even amidst all the lures of this world.

So the book of Revelation is beckoning each of us to consider questions in the background on this day of judgment. Questions like were we faithful in our worship? Did we turn aside from the worship of the ways and things of this world? Were we faithful in our witness? Was it evident that we believed Christ in the way we proclaimed Christ?

Did we fight against sin? Not, "Were we perfect?" None of us is, and we all struggle with sin on a daily basis. But the life of the Christian is not content with sin. The life of a follower of Christ who has trusted in the work of Christ over sin is to fight sin with all the power He provides. Did we trust amidst suffering? Even when the world seemed like it was crashing down around us, and even when we didn't understand why this or that was happening, did we trust God?

These are the kinds of things that John was calling the church to in the first century, and these are the kinds of things that the Bible is calling us as the church to in the twenty-first century. Amidst the temptations of this world, worship God! With men and women who don't know Christ all around you, witness to God's grace for God's glory! Fight against sin and trust amidst suffering! All of these works are the fruit of faith in the work of Christ.

Please don't misunderstand this picture. Picture it this way. When you stand before God in heaven, on the day when your eternal destiny will be declared openly and finally, what will be the basis for you to be welcomed by God into His presence forever? What will be the basis? Only the cross of Christ, the work of Jesus on your behalf.

And what will be the means by which His work has been applied to your life? Faith alone. Faith alone in Christ alone. On that day, you and I will say, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Your cross I cling. I trust wholly in Christ." Faith is the only means of salvation. And in the background of your life that day, it will be evident that such faith was indeed a reality.

So based upon this, one of two destinations await us all. Either eternal torment for all who have not turned from themselves and their sin and trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord. Including even those who pretended to be Christians while they lived in either self-indulgence or self-righteousness. Apart from saving faith in Christ, they, you will be thrown into the lake of fire. Just how literal this is is open to interpretation, but it is absolutely clear that this is at the very least imagery of a horrifying place to be forever, without end. We shy away from this truth. We get so soft on this truth.

It grieves my heart when people die in this community with no fruit of faith in Christ. (I'm not thinking of anyone in particular at all. This just happens all the time.) People die with no fruit of faith in Christ, and yet the conclusion we come to in this land that is filled with churches is, "Surely this person is with God in heaven." It's not true! And we desperately need to realize that it's not true.

Now I emphasize that I'm not thinking of anyone in particular because only God is a person's eternal judge. But that's just it: God is the eternal Judge, and He will throw you into an eternal fire if you reject His grace in Christ, if you turn from Him and live for yourself.

Yet for all who turn to Him, to anyone who turns from themselves to trust in Christ as Savior, you will be saved from the eternal torment that your sin deserves. You will be saved to experience everlasting joy with Him forever. Turn and trust in Christ today.

Amidst all the things I don't know in the Bible, this I do know. And this we will all know one day. At the end of history, every single one of us will be judged by God. So, have you trusted in the work of Christ? If not, I urge you to now.

And then I ask, is there evidence of trust in the work of Christ in your life? With that question, I want to urge every Christian who has trusted in the work of Christ to repent of any ways you are worshiping this world. Pray for grace and power and boldness to be His witness. Fight against sin that is pressing in around you in your life. Trust God amidst the suffering you are walking through, knowing that this world is passing away, and one day soon Jesus is returning for you.

\* NOTE: A list of additional resources to assist you in further study of the book of Revelation and eschatology are available as a PDF download at [Radical.net/Revelation](http://Radical.net/Revelation). Click on the "Materials" button under any message in the series for this and other weekly resources.

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