

Visions of Victory

Revelation 20:1-6

This past weekend, Wayne and I were invited to meet with the Session of a Westminster OPC in Chicago to talk with them about vision and mission. As I was preparing for that meeting, I was reminded of the essential link between vision and endurance. A vision of a better future is a great help in a hard present. For instance, little babies can be a lot of work. You have to do everything for them: feed them, clothe them, change them, and give them medicine when they are sick. They never say, "Thank you." In fact, they will often fight you while you are trying to help! But it's helpful to keep this in mind – they won't be babies forever. Soon they will be able to do all those things for themselves. And that fact allows you to enjoy the "baby stage" while looking forward to something more. That's endurance.

It's the same for a believer. Life is often hard. Being a Christian is often hard as we fight the world, the flesh, and the Devil. Doing church is often hard. But the hard part is just for a little while. Jesus promises us that soon all the hard things will be done away with. And that allows us to enjoy the good parts of this life while we wait for the joys to come. Here in Revelation 20, Jesus gives us visions of victory.

This morning we've come to what may well be the single most controversial text in all of Scripture. Denominations have been founded and churches have been split over how to interpret the 1000 years of the millennium. There are still many churches today where you are not allowed to be a member if you do not hold to a particular understanding of this text.

As you may know, the primary options when it comes to interpreting this text are pre-millennial, post-millennial or amillennial. And there are variations of each – particularly the pre-mil position. If you would like to know what those terms mean, Google will be happy to help you. I believe the amillennial position is the correct one and will proceed with that understanding. But I'm not going to spend a lot of time trying to prove that position or disprove the other positions. The reason is that I believe we must interpret Scripture first according to its own agenda. Why did Jesus give John this vision and command him to write it down? It was not to start a theological controversy or to end one. It was to strengthen and encourage the church in the face of spiritual opposition and persecution.

So, the question we are going to ask this morning is not, "Which millennial position is the correct one?" but rather, "What is Jesus teaching us in this text? Why does Jesus want us to know these things? How is this meant to encourage and strengthen us in our battle with the world, the flesh, and the Devil?"

There are three visions in chapter 20, each introduced by the words, "Then I saw" (vv. 1, 4, 11). We will look at the first two visions this morning.

I. The Binding of Satan

20:1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.

As we've seen throughout the book of Revelation, Jesus is showing us human history "behind the scenes" from the vantage point of heaven. These visions are not journalistic reports but pictures and images to help us grasp the truth of God's ways in dealing with this world. In verses 1-3 we have a vision concerning the binding of Satan. There is wonderful truth here, but we need to do a little unpacking.

Eric Alexander asks three questions of the text that I think are helpful:

1. What does the thousand years refer to?
2. What does it mean that Satan is bound?
3. When does this binding of Satan take place?

A. The Thousand Years

What does the thousand years refer to? It's almost certainly not meant as a literal number. As we've seen, the book of Revelation is full of numbers, most of which are symbolic:

3 - the number of the Trinity

7 – number of perfection

10 – the number of power and authority

12 – the number of the church (12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles)

In chapters 7 and 14 we saw the number of the saints was 144,000: $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ – representing all the saints of God throughout history.

So there is no reason at all to expect this number to be literal, and many reasons to expect it to be symbolic. The number 1000 is $10 \times 10 \times 10$ – a number of power and completeness. Of course, if it is a symbolic number, what does it symbolize? What period

of time does it point to? I believe the best answer is that it points to the gospel age, the time between the first and second coming of Christ when the gospel is proclaimed, the church is built up, and the elect are gathered in. In other words, we are living in the millennium right now.

There are several clues in our text that would prove this, one being the binding of Satan.

B. The Binding of Satan

20:2 *And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.*

What does it mean that Satan is "bound" with a great chain for a thousand years? To bind is to restrain. And that is the idea here. During the thousand years, Satan is restrained by the power of God, unable to exercise his full power and influence on the earth. In verse 3 we see that he is restrained so that *"he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended."*

That might be a little confusing to you. If the Devil is restrained during the thousand years so that he doesn't deceive the nations, and we are now living in the thousand years, why is the Devil still deceiving people? The answer is, because he is restrained, not destroyed. He is on a chain, and can only go so far and no farther. He still wields a devastating power, but not like he once did and not like he will again, for a short period, in the future.

We can get more clarity on that when we ask the next question:

C. When Does the Binding Happen?

When does this binding of Satan take place? For that we need to look at other Scriptures. Remember, although the Bible is composed by many different authors and has many different books, it has one Divine Author, the Holy Spirit, and we can expect the Bible to be its own best interpreter. When one Scripture isn't clear, we turn to other texts to shed light on it, using Scripture to interpret Scripture.

When we look at other Scriptures, we can see that the binding of Satan took place when Jesus first came to earth!

Matt. 12:24–29 *But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" ... ²⁶ And if Satan casts out*

Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?...²⁸ 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.

Jesus is saying, "The reason I'm able to cast out demons and plunder the kingdom of evil is because I've bound the strong man, the Devil."

The disciples shared in Christ's power over demons. In Luke 10 we read of the disciples returning from a mission trip.

Luke 10:17-18 *The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" ¹⁸ And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."*

This power of Christ over the Devil is sealed in the cross!

Col. 2:15 *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

This makes all the more sense when we step back and see all of human history. History can truly be divided into two parts – the time before and after the birth of Christ.

Before the time of Christ, from the fall of Adam until the incarnation, all through the days of the Old Testament, the Devil was allowed to rule over and deceive the nations in a particular way with particular effectiveness.

- Why was the world of Noah's day so thoroughly evil? In Genesis 6:5 we read that God looked out over the world and saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth. In fact, **every** intention and thought of his heart was **only** evil **all** the time. Why? Because of the overwhelming deception of the Devil.
- All through Israel's history, they were the only nation that believed in God. All the other nations served idols. Have you ever wondered why, in the 2000 years from Abraham to Christ, the gospel never went beyond the borders of Israel, and yet, in the 2000 years since the coming of Christ, the gospel has spread all over the world? Why the difference?

It was because, in former times, God was allowing the Devil to keep the nations in spiritual darkness. But then joy dawned upon the world!

Matt. 4:16 *The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.*

When Jesus came, the Devil was restrained. Yes, he is still at work; the beast and the harlot are wreaking havoc. But the gospel is being preached all over this world and sinners are being saved every day – from every tongue and tribe and nation! Jesus is gathering his elect. The church is advancing against the gates of hell. Jesus is plundering the Devil’s kingdom as the gospel is preached, and the Holy Spirit is raising those who are spiritually dead to new life in Christ. We are living in the thousand years, the gospel age – a time in which Jesus Christ is exercising his power from heaven, plundering the Devil’s kingdom, building his church, and gathering his saints to their eternal home.

We are tempted to look at our day as a day of decline. The church is being persecuted. The powers of darkness seem to be gaining the upper hand. But Jesus wants us to know that, in this gospel age, the gospel mission is powerfully advancing!

- While we are experiencing a decline in our nation, in other nations the church is experiencing rapid growth.

Interesting fact, do you know where Christianity is growing the fastest today? Iran. Highest percentage growth. Isn’t that tremendous?

The nations are being gathered in, exactly according to the purpose and plan of King Jesus.

- Yes, the church is being persecuted, but that isn’t the church losing – that is the church conquering. In 12:11 we saw the saints of God had *“conquered the Devil by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”*

It is precisely as the church suffers in faith and for the faith that her witness is the most powerful. As the church faithfully endures, bearing witness to the truth of the gospel and holding on to its hope, we are in fact participating in Christ’s triumph over the Devil. To suffer and die in the faith and for the faith is not failure or loss, but victory and gain!

Every soul he has determined to save is being saved. Every true follower of Christ is being preserved. Every day thousands go home in triumph to be with their Lord. We are more than conquerors.

II. The Victorious Saints

20:4 *Then I saw thrones...*

When John sees thrones, we know that he is seeing heaven itself (3:21; 4:2). On those thrones were seated those “to whom the authority to judge was committed.” Who would that be? Who would be given such a great honor as to reign with Christ??

The answer is as glorious as it is astonishing. They are believers who have died in the Lord. There are two groups of believers mentioned here: martyrs and normal faithful followers.

- *Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God...*

These are the martyrs, those who have died for the sake of the name of Christ.

- *...and those who had not worshiped the beast.*

Those who were faithful in life, had not believed the Devil’s deceptions, had not received the Devil’s mark, but had persevered in their faith in Jesus Christ.

“They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” In other words, every true Christian who died in the faith is, right now, reigning with Christ in heaven. The world sees martyrs as victims at best, as despised losers at worst. But Jesus says, “See them reigning in heaven! They are not victims – they are conquerors!” Those who have died in Christ have been translated at the hand of God to reign with Christ.

Eric Alexander tells the story of a man martyred in Scotland during the late 1600s. The British government hunted down Christians and put them to death.

The Colonel Diehl was a persecutor of the church who would go around the moors, killing those who stood for Christ. He killed a man who had been fearlessly preaching Christ.

“What do you think of your man now? Do you see what we have done to him?”

A woman in the crowd said, “All that you have done sir, is to dispatch him to the right hand of the glory on high, there to reign as a prince with God.”

What a great encouragement to the suffering church – both in John’s day and in our own! Jesus gives us a vision of victory. The souls of our loved ones are not merely residing in glory, but reigning with Christ!

Death is not death – it is a resurrection! That’s what we are told in verse 6: *“Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection!”* Though death is a separation of the soul from the body, it is rising of the soul to everlasting life.

20:6 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.

Over them the second death has no power. The second death is the death of being separated forever from God. It is what we all deserve, and what all those who did not bow to Christ Jesus in this life will experience.

“And they will reign with him for a thousand years.” The souls of believers in heaven are reigning with Jesus right now. And then what? Well, that’s chapter 21. Then everything gets made new. No more mourning, crying, or pain. The former things are passed away and everything gets made new.

That’s our future. Let’s patiently wait when the days are hard, enduring in faith as we keep in mind what Paul says in **2 Cor. 4:17-18**:

This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.