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Revelation 20:1-6

33rd Message

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# PLUNDERING THE STRONG MAN'S HOUSE

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

In the Lord's prayer we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We all pray for God's kingdom to come. But how does it come, where does it come, when does it come, and for whom does it come? On these matters there is much disagreement. Nowhere is this disagreement more focused than on our text for today. The first six verses of Revelation 20 are among the most disputed in the entire Bible. In these verses we read of a period of a thousand years, a millennium. The phrase "thousand years" occurs six times, once each in verses 2-7. The phrase occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 2 Pet 3:8, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day," itself a quotation from Psalm 90:4. Although the millennium is described in only this one text, a great amount of doctrine has been developed around the concept of the millennium. Into the millennium is poured much of people's understanding of the whole flow of biblical history. For many Christians, especially evangelical Christians here in America, what you think of the millennium is a very serious issue, serious enough to break fellowship over. Millennial positions are written into doctrinal statements of churches and seminaries.

In Rev 20:1-6, John describes two visions. In the first he sees Satan bound in the Abyss for a thousand years, after which he is set free for a short time. In the second vision, John sees souls living and reigning with Christ for a thousand years. What are we to make of these two visions?

Over the last 2000 years, Christians have interpreted these two visions in very different ways. All agree that the visions of Satan bound and the saints reigning represent some aspect of the kingdom of God, and all agree that Jesus will return to earth. But over the relationship between these two events and over the nature of the millennial kingdom there is very great disagreement.

Premillennialism says that Jesus will return before (pre-) the millennium. Premillennialism comes in two major flavors. Historic premillennialism, so-called because of its heritage in the early church, teaches that there will be a future time of tribulation of unknown duration, after which Christ will return to establish his rule over God's kingdom on earth.

Dispensational premillennialism is much more recent, developed in the nineteenth century. This teaches two returns of Christ prior to the millennium: Jesus will return secretly and remove Christians from the earth in the Rapture. Then follows the Tribulation, a seven year period of intense turmoil on earth; this is the 70th week of Daniel. Some suggest that the Rapture occurs not at the beginning of the Tribulation (pre-tribulation) but half-way through it (mid-tribulation). At the end of the Tribulation, Christ returns visibly to fight the battle of Armageddon. After Jesus and his armies win a decisive victory, Satan is bound. With the church removed from earth in the Rapture, Israel is restored to center-stage. The prophetic promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in her. From David's throne in Jerusalem Jesus rules over God's kingdom Israel. The temple will be re-

built in Jerusalem and sacrifices resumed. Classical dispensationalism teaches that the church was not foreseen by the Old Testament. Jesus offered the kingdom to the Jews, but they rejected it. Their rejection of Jesus stopped the prophetic clock, which will not resume until the Rapture and the Tribulation. Meanwhile the church is a parenthesis in Biblical prophecy. Classical dispensationalism was popularized by the Scofield Bible (1909), Dallas was its pre-eminent seminary, and it became the dominant position within American evangelicalism. This is the view of Hal Lindsey, the *Left Behind* books, and all the charts.

Twenty years ago a major new flavor of dispensationalism emerged. Progressive dispensationalism accepts that the church is a spiritual fulfilment of Old Testament promises, but insists that these promises must be fulfilled literally and physically in Israel.

Postmillennialism says that Jesus will return after (post-) the millennium. The classic postmillennial position has been that the gospel will so prevail in the world that the world will become Christianized. God's kingdom will thereby be made visible in the world; this kingdom need not last for a literal thousand years. This was the dominant view of the 18th and 19th centuries. Recently there has been a new flavor of this: reconstructionism or theonomy, which seeks to make this country a theocracy and so inaugurate God's kingdom on earth.

Amillennialism says that there is no (a-) millennium, at least not the sort of millennium envisaged by the other two positions. Instead the millennium is symbolic for the entire church age, which is a time of tribulation. This was the dominant view for over a thousand years after Augustine established it.

Premill, postmill or amill; pretrib, midtrib or posttrib; classical or progressive dispensationalism; it's enough to make your head spin like a windmill.

Despite these very major disagreements, there are certain matters on which all agree. All agree on the authority of Scripture, though they disagree on how to read Scripture. All are convinced that they are reading Scripture rightly, that they are "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15 KJV), but are usually equally convinced that others are reading it wrongly. All agree that Jesus will return again. All agree that there will be a final judgment. All agree that the millennium is not the ultimate goal, that there is something that lies beyond: the new heavens and the new earth. However, some positions so focus on the millennial kingdom that the new heavens and new earth fade into the background. Finally, each of the positions is held by those who dearly love the Lord. This alone suggests that we need a healthy measure of humility as we approach this text.

My task today, however, is not to make sense of the millennial views but to make sense of John's visions in Revelation 20.

Last week I used the analogy of an art gallery. Each of John's visions is like a painting on the wall, with the paintings arranged in

rooms. We are currently in a room between the Babylon room and the New Jerusalem room. In this room are eight paintings hanging on four walls. The chronology is the order in which we view the paintings, not of the events depicted in the paintings. Though the visions of chapter 20 are seen after the visions of chapter 19, there is no need for the things depicted in those visions to follow in chronological order. This is extremely important. Much millennial eschatology depends upon chapter 20 following chronologically after chapter 19. The visions of chapter 19, which I likened to three paintings hanging on the first wall of our current room, show Jesus riding triumphantly on a white horse, the beast captured, and the beast and false prophet hurled into the lake of fire. Dispensationalism interprets this as Christ triumphant at the battle of Armageddon, which ushers in the kingdom. Postmillennialism sees this as the triumph of God's word, for the victor's sword issues from his mouth; this too inaugurates the kingdom. Most amillennialists see this as Christ's return at the end of the age, immediately before final judgment; they then have to assume a major leap back in time at 20:1 for the amillennial kingdom begins at Jesus' first advent.

I argued last week that we don't need to tie chapter 19 down to an end-point in history. Jesus is triumphant now, conquering the forces of evil through the word; indeed he is the word. Nor do we need to understand the things depicted in chapter 20 as following chronologically after the things of chapter 19.

With this in mind, let us proceed to the two paintings hanging on the second wall, two paintings of the millennium.

### A. Binding Satan (20:1-3)

**And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. 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. (Rev 20:1-3 NIV)**

The vision itself is simple enough: Satan the dragon is seized, bound, and cast into the Abyss, which is then locked and sealed over him. But when does this happen and what does it actually look like in real life? Over this there is great disagreement. A major issue, as we've seen, is the temporal relationship between this vision and the visions of chapter 19, how the binding of Satan relates to the victory of the rider on the white horse. But this is the wrong question to be asking. The important question is how the binding of Satan relates to chapter 12 where John first saw the dragon Satan. Chapters 12 and 20 have numerous parallels.

In chapter 12 John saw a woman about to give birth, and the dragon standing ready to devour the child. A son is born, the dragon pounces, but the son is snatched up to heaven out of his grasp (12:1-5). Next John describes a war in heaven between the dragon and Michael and their armies of angels. The dragon lost and was pitched out of heaven:

**The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (12:9)**

There is widespread agreement, even among premillennialists who otherwise insist on a strictly chronological approach to the book, that the birth of the son is the birth of Jesus. Satan attempted to destroy the Son, but God snatched his Son out of Satan's grasp, enthroning

him in heaven as King. The deposition of Satan is associated with the birth and exaltation of the Son. But we know that the way this came about was through the death and resurrection of the Son. The Son both bore faithful witness to the Father and he was the Father's faithful witness to the world. For this faithful witness he was put to death; it seemed as though Satan had conquered. But God turned the tables on Satan, raising his Son to new life and enthroning him as King. Satan's power is broken.

The vision of Satan being hurled out of heaven is followed by a cry of joy:

**“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God,  
and the authority of his Christ.  
For the accuser of our brothers,  
who accuses them before our God day and night,  
has been hurled down.  
They overcame him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death.  
Therefore rejoice, you heavens  
and you who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has gone down to you!  
He is filled with fury,  
because he knows that his time is short.” (12:10-12)**

The ejection of Satan from heaven is good news and bad news. It is good news for the saints, despite the fact that they die. Seeing that he is thrown out of heaven, the dragon pursued the woman, but she was snatched out of his grasp (12:13-16). Enraged, he turned his attention to the saints, and God allowed him to proceed. He pursues the saints to death and seems to be victorious. But it is the saints who emerge victorious, overcoming Satan by the blood of the Lamb, for they have been redeemed out of his domain by the shed blood of Jesus, and overcoming him by the word of their testimony. But the ejection of Satan is bad news for the earth, as Satan rampages across her, seeking whom he may devour.

Chapter 12 shows Satan hurled to the earth; chapter 20 shows him hurled into the Abyss. What is the relationship between these two events? It is clear that the hurling to earth is associated with the events of Jesus' first coming. I see no need to move the hurling into the Abyss to a time yet future.

The angel has the key to the Abyss. In his opening vision John saw Jesus holding the keys of death and Hades (1:18); it is because of his victory over death that Jesus now holds these keys. Death and Hades are the realm of Satan, but it is the risen Jesus not Satan who now holds the keys to this realm. The Abyss is the realm of Satan, but here he is not sovereign. It is because of Jesus' victory that the angel can hurl Satan into the Abyss. Shutting Satan in this Abyss does not mean that he has no access to the earth; the realm from which he will have no access to earth is the lake of fire. Satan is the ruler of the Abyss: he is Abaddon, Apollyon, the Destroyer (9:11). But he is not sovereign: all that he does is permitted him by God. He can do nothing but that which God permits.

The Abyss is Satan's prison (20:7). Elsewhere in the New Testament we read of the evil spirits being bound in chains and cast into prison (1 Pet 3:19; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6). The Abyss is the realm of the

demonic forces opposed to God, but it is also their holding pen, pending their final judgment and consignment to the lake of fire.

This raises several questions. Why didn't God dispose of Satan right away? The Bible doesn't tell us much about the origins of Satan or evil. Once they did enter the world, why did God not immediately remove them? When Jesus won the decisive victory over Satan, why did God not hurl him straight into the lake of fire? Because it pleased God not to do so; and with that I must be content. What the Bible shows me, though, is what God does about evil. As I suggested last week, that is the theme of this room in the art gallery: visions showing what God is doing about evil. Central to God's response to evil is the appointment of a great Savior who has already won the decisive victory.

Jesus was victorious over Satan in his life. He proclaimed liberty to the captives: he healed the sick, forgave sinners, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. The Jewish authorities misunderstood him; they thought that by associating with these people Jesus showed that he was part of their realm, that he was demon-possessed. But, using a parable, Jesus explained that he had tied up the strong man and was plundering his house. He was liberating captives to form a new society, a new family (Mark 3:20-35).

Jesus was victorious over Satan in his death and resurrection. Though it seemed that Satan finally had him in his realm, the realm of death, Jesus broke free.

Satan is bound and there is nothing he can do about it. On earth, the beast has control over every tribe, people, language and nation (13:7); all the earth-dwellers worship him. But Jesus, through his blood, is redeeming unto God a people from every tribe, language, people and nation (5:9; 7:9). The slain but risen Lamb is plundering Satan's realm and there is nothing Satan can do about it.

Jesus sent his disciples out as his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Witnesses not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles, for God is now expanding his kingdom deep into Satan's realm. Missionaries can have confidence as they take the gospel to the uttermost ends of the earth: the powers of death and darkness have been defeated. As both the psalmist and John Piper put it, "Let the nations be glad" (Ps 67:4).

## B. Reigning with Christ (20:4-6)

**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 for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ 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 are those who have part 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. (20:4-6)**

The second painting is as problematic as the first. Like the first, the imagery itself is not too difficult. It's knowing what the imagery represents that is controversial.

Sitting on thrones are "the souls of those who have been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God," and who "had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark." Does this refer to one group of people or to two?

The first term describes those who have been killed for their faithful witness to Jesus, the word of God. These are the martyrs. The Greek word martyr means a witness, but so many Christian witnesses died that the word came to have a narrower meaning: those who are killed for their witness. Although this narrower meaning had not yet developed at the time Revelation was written, the book makes it clear that those who bear faithful witness to Jesus and the word of God must expect to die. They are called to walk in the footsteps of Jesus who was himself the faithful witness (1:5), for which he was killed.

The second term refers to those who worship God rather than the beast. The imagery of this book is binary, black and white. There are only two groups of people. One group worships the beast, bears the mark of the beast, dwells in Babylon, and is described as the earth-dwellers; this group has been deceived by the false prophet into worshiping what is false. The other group worships God and the Lamb, bears the seal of the name of God and the Lamb, and is on its way to its dwelling in heaven; this group has been liberated by the blood of the Lamb, and now worships what is true. Those seated on these thrones are the faithful saints, who have been faithful even unto death. They form a subset of the faithful witnesses, but all faithful witnesses must be prepared to be numbered in their company.

The NIV and most English translations say that to these saints was given "authority to judge." This evokes the picture of the saints sitting in judgment upon other people. But this is an unfortunate and unnecessary translation. Rather, "judgment was given to them" (NASB). Here, as elsewhere in the book, John has drawn on imagery from Daniel 7 to compose his painting. Daniel saw four beasts arise from the sea; he is told that these represent a succession of four kingdoms. Then a horn arose, "waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High" (7:21-22). To earthly appearances it seemed that the saints were defeated by brute force, by Satanic mis-rule. But in the heavenly realm, seen by those with the eye to see, the saints are vindicated by God, who pronounces them to be in the right.

The martyred saints that John sees enthroned are not given authority to judge others. What they are given is a ruling in their favor. God has pronounced them to be in the right, he has vindicated them. This understanding fits much better with the rest of the book. At the opening of the fifth seal, John

**saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:9-11)**

The martyrs had cried out for vindication. Here they have it: God's declaration that they are in the right.

John sees that these vindicated saints "came to life." Here is another problematic statement! Does this refer to a physical or a spiritual resurrection? When does this resurrection occur? In John's very first vision he sees a resplendent Jesus who says, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!" (1:18). To the church in Smyrna Jesus presents himself as the one "who died and came to life again" (2:8). This was important for the church in Smyrna, for Jesus warns the saints that they are about to die under persecution. They need not fear because Jesus has broken through death into new life. This is what John sees in chapter 20. It is not a physical resurrection on earth. The saints have been killed for their



faithful witness, but they live! This is their vindication! In this, as in all things, they follow the Lamb: in faithful witness, through death, to life beyond. They live because Jesus holds the keys to death and Hades. Death cannot hold his people.

In contrast the rest of the dead do not come to life during the millennium. These are those who worship the beast, who bear the mark of the beast on their forehead. For them death leads into Hades, the holding place for humans pending final judgment. Contrary to what many think, the statement that they “did not live until the thousand years were completed” does not imply that they came to life after the millennium is over. No, they stay dead, in Hades, until death and Hades give up the dead to be brought before the judgment seat (20:13).

John interjects with a beatitude, the fifth of seven in the book. Blessed are those who participate in the first resurrection; the second death has no power over them. The first resurrection and the second death are explicit; there is also an implicit first death. The first resurrection is obviously this passage of the saints through death into life beyond. The unmentioned first death is presumably the physical death they suffer at the hands of the beast. Jesus tells his people not to fear this. His words to the church in Smyrna apply to all his people:

**Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life... He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (2:10-11)**

The second death is the lake of fire (20:14), into which all God’s enemies are ultimately hurled.

By paying attention to the rest of the book, the meaning of these two visions has become clear. Jesus, the faithful witness, is the first-born from the dead. Though he died, killed by evil Satanic forces, yet he now lives. Death could not hold him, as he burst open Satan’s domain. The risen and exalted Victor is now plundering Satan’s realm, redeeming a world-wide people for God. These people follow the Lamb in faithful witness, through death, into life. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

How does this fit in with premill, postmill or amill scenarios? I’ll leave that for you to figure out. I don’t really care!

Death is wrong. We sense that every time a loved one dies, every time we gather for a memorial service. Death is not a natural part of God’s creation. Death entered because of human sin, behind which lies Satan. Death is the domain of Satan. But we have good news to proclaim: it is Jesus not Satan who has the keys of death and Hades. Those who follow the Lamb need have no fear of the first death; they will follow the Lamb through this death into life unending.

The early church was fearless in the face of death. A century after Revelation was written Tertullian expressed this attitude in a defense of the faith he addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He said of the church,

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are

mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.<sup>1</sup>

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The more Christians the beast kills the stronger the church grows. This is what the church in China has been experiencing.

I entitled my first sermon on Revelation, six years ago, “Power on earth to stand in the face of hell,” a line from a song by Iona. These two visions give the church courage to do just that: stand on earth in the face of hell.

We are currently in Lent, approaching Easter. On Easter Sunday the church sings great hymns proclaiming Christ’s victory over death:

Up from the grave he arose,  
with a mighty triumph o’er his foes.  
He arose a victor from the dark domain,  
and he lives for ever with his saints to reign.  
He arose! He arose!  
Hallelujah! Christ arose.

The strife is o’er, the battle done;  
The victory of life is won;  
The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!

Crown Him the Lord of life:  
who triumphed o’er the grave,  
Who rose victorious in the strife  
for those he came to save.  
His glories now we sing,  
who died and rose on high,  
Who died eternal life to bring  
and lives that death may die.

Here is God’s second response to evil. Having appointed a great Savior who has broken the power of Satan, of death, of sin, he is now plundering Satan’s realm, the strong man’s house, to build a new society in the face of evil. Ultimately God will remove all evil, including Satan and death, from his world. But those paintings hang on the third wall which we’ll look at next week.

Our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.

*“Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?”*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:55-58)*

1. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.