

June 9th, 2024

Pastor Prieue

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Revelation 20:1-6

The Devil Does His Worst, Yet Jesus Always Wins

If I had to make a list of sections of the Bible that have become the most misunderstood by people, this section from Revelation 20 which includes the “Thousands Years,” or the “Millenium,” would probably crack the top 10, maybe even top 5 list. There are probably several sections from the book of Revelation that would fill out the top 10 list, and that’s because it can be a difficult book of pictures and visions designed to give a message using imagery. Because we’re dealing with pictures and visions, like Pastor Scherbarth says in *7 Visions 7 Truths*, (his commentary on Revelation), we have to use good picture reading skills. We have to look at the whole picture, without getting distracted by any one detail. It’s what is meant by the phrase, “Don’t lose sight of the forest for the trees.” Don’t spend all your time looking at a single tree and forget about the rest of the forest.

Today, as we look at a portion of Jesus’ Revelation about the things that “must soon take place” and are now already taking place, we’ll consider each of the details as a part of the whole picture. We’ll do so keeping in mind our worship theme for the day: *The Devil Does His Worst, Yet Jesus Always Wins. Past, present, and future, Jesus always wins.*

First, we start with an event that for us has already happened. **“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.”** It’s good to start with the most obvious things and work from there. We are told who the dragon is—Satan, that ancient serpent who appeared in the Garden of Eden to deceive Adam and Eve. We heard in our Genesis 3 reading today how God cursed the serpent and promised that the seed of the woman would crush his head. That gives us a clue as to who the angel is who is holding the key to the Abyss and the chain to bind Satan. Revelation 1 confirms for us who it is—Jesus who says, **“I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! I hold the keys of death and Hades.” (Rev. 1:18).** So Jesus is the one who bound him and **“he threw him into the Abyss, (which is hell) and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.” (20:3)**

What’s the chain that Jesus uses to bind the devil for a thousand years The chain is used to limit the power of the devil to deceive people. In our Gospel lesson, we heard Jesus make a reference to tying up a strong man. The teachers of the law came to accuse Jesus of driving out demons by the power of Satan. And Jesus basically says, [That doesn’t make any sense!] **“If Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house.” (Mark 3:26,27)**

Jesus was telling them what he had been doing. He had come first in the flesh to tie up the devil with his words and work and ministry. He went around preaching and casting out demons, binding the devil so that he could rob his house once and for all, and free all those were held in slavery there. The chain that binds the devil is Jesus’ gospel ministry and the continued proclamation of the gospel throughout the “thousand years”.

Now you might wonder, if Satan is bound and locked in the Abyss, how come he still has so much power and freedom, so much ability to tempt us and make this world so bad? There it’s better to picture that chain, not as shackles and handcuffs holding him tightly to the wall of a prison cell, but rather like a chain holding a vicious dog from getting out of the yard. Like in the Sandlot, Hercules “the giant gorilla dog thing” is chained up behind the fence, but he can still roam around in there to devour autographed baseballs or neighborhood kids that come into his realm. How does the Bible explain the picture elsewhere, **“The devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8).** He has room to roam, yet God has set his limit with the chain of the gospel message to prevent him from deceiving the nations of the earth in the same way he had done to the Gentiles in the Old Testament, who with a few exceptions, were pretty much all unbelievers.

Then, there actually is a time where **“he must be set free for a short time.” (20:3)** But unlike Hercules the gorilla dog who breaks off his chain, Jesus knows that this is coming. It’s part of the plan. He tells us to expect terrible times in the last days, filled with wars and rumors of wars, and the increase of wickedness, and the love of most growing cold, and then the end will come. It is very possible that we have already entered into that “short time” of terrible distress in the last days, where we flip on the news for two seconds and see how much devouring the devil is doing all over the world.

But let’s take a step back for a moment to look at the picture painted so far and ask ourselves, “Who is in control? Who is winning?” Jesus is in control. Jesus is and has been winning. He came and bound the devil and has been robbing his house and freeing the prisoners ever since. Even in the moment when it seemed the devil had handed Jesus sure and certain defeat when he convinced the Messiah’s own people to crucify him, look how it turned out. Jesus was actually at that moment winning his great victory over death and the devil! His death was the planned payment for sin, and after it was rendered, he rose from the dead, according to the plan, to seal his great victory. Then he descended into hell to proclaim that victory to Satan and all his evil angels. The serpent had indeed struck the heel of the seed of the woman, but that same heel was crushing the devil’s head and bringing salvation for all people.

That big picture view helps us to reframe our struggles against the Devil in the present, in the here and now, when it feels like we are losing. We deal with the presence of evil on a daily basis and we feel the devil is breathing down our necks and we might be tempted to glare up at God and ask, “Why do you give you him so much leash? Why is his chain so long? Why don’t you make it easier on all of us? Why does your plan go like this?”

Instead of glaring up and giving God advice, what he wants us to do is remember and rely on his promises. **“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” (1 Cor. 10:13).** He will protect you and help you escape from the jaws of roaring lion as you remember and obey his word. Jesus won in the *past* when he rose from the dead. He is winning now *in the present* as his gospel is going out throughout the world freeing more souls from the dreary prison house of sin.

The next section shows us how Jesus is winning even in the most extreme circumstances John says, **“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.”** (Rev. 20:4). Now you might ask? “How is Jesus winning when his faithful people are being beheaded?” These were the ones that **“had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.” (20:4)** “Where’s all that deliverance and protection that God promised them?” Shouldn’t he be taking better care of his faithful ones?” Well look at the big picture and see what happens after they were put to death? **“They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” (20:4b)** Christ’s people are not dying and losing, they are living and winning and reigning with Christ for a thousand years right now in heaven.

Now there again we hear that phrase “a thousand years”. From this phrase come many variations of the teaching known as the “millennium,” which is the idea that there is going to be a literal one-thousand-year reign of peace and harmony on earth. The devil will be bound during that time, unable to deceive anyone. Some, called the pre-millennialists believe that Christ will return to earth before that starts, reign over that kingdom for a thousand years, and then will come a second time on Judgment Day. Others, known as post-millennialists believe that eventually the gospel will gain more ground, pick up more speed, the world will turn Christian for a thousand years of peace on earth, and then finally Christ will come after that.

But all of that is to force a literal interpretation of one or two details, to focus in on one tree, in the forest, and to forget what Jesus told Pontius Pilate, **“My kingdom is not of this world...My kingdom is from another place.” John 18:36.** That place is heaven, where Jesus ascended to right hand of the Father and is living and ruling and reigning with the souls of dead believers, the saints and martyrs, whose souls have gone to heaven immediately at the moment of their death. **“This is the first resurrection.”** So we are amillennialists, not expecting a literal thousand years, but a long and complete period of time between Christ’s first and second

coming, during which the gospel goes out into the world. During that time, souls of the saints in heaven are already experiencing Jesus' victory over Satan while their bodies are waiting in the grave for Jesus to resurrect them on the Last Day. That day for believers is the Second Resurrection, or the Resurrection of the body as we say in the Creed. That will be the last and final victory. Like we said, *the Devil does his worst, but Jesus always wins—past, present, and future!*

Now this portion of Revelation is revealing to us the most important thing in all of life—that we must share in the first resurrection, that during our time of grace here on earth, we must be found on Jesus' team sharing in his victory through faith either when our last breath comes, or when the Last Day comes. For unbelievers, and false believers, and those who have given up the faith and worshipped the beast, there won't be any victory, but only a share in the devil's defeat. Previously in Revelation 13, this "beast" had been described as a beast who deceived people with signs and wonders into worshipping it and receiving its mark. This beast represents the force of all anti-Christian religion that devil uses to lead people and especially believers away from Christ. Those who fall away from Christ die spiritually, and their first death seals their eternal death. **"The rest of dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended."** (Rev. 20:5). Really, they're not so much coming to life as they are rising to face the second death, to be condemned on the Day of Judgement. The second death is eternal death, the death of body and soul forever in hell.

So Jesus tells us what team to be on, and what team will win—His team. **"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."** (20:6) But you know, this isn't the kind of team you just try out for or earn a spot on. This is a team that God, by his grace, makes you a part of, when he raises you to spiritual life already during this life. It's what the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2:4,5. **"God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."**

It's not only the martyrs and believers who have already died that get to reign with Christ during the thousand years. Even while you still live on this earth, God has made you a kingdom of priests to declare his praises in this world. He has raised you up and seated you with Christ to reign with him now and forever in heaven. Let's take one last look at the big picture. God made a promise to crush the devil. Jesus came in time, bound the devil, freed us from sin, shared his victory with us and with all the saints in heaven, and guarantees for us that on the Last day he will destroy the devil and all his evil forces forever in burning lake of fire. Trust his guarantee with all your heart. **The devil does his worst, but Jesus always wins. Amen.**