

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part twenty-six

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MILLENNIUM, RESURRECTION, AND JUDGMENT

Revelation 20:1-15 - "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. [2] And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, [3] 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.[4] 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 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. [5] The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. [6] Blessed and holy 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.[7] And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison [8] 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. [9] 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, [10] 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.[11] 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. [12] 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. [13] 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. [14] Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. [15] And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

There is an obvious flow of thought from chapter 19 into chapter 20. Before the establishment of Christ's eternal kingdom, His enemies must be judged and destroyed. Naturally, the most detailed descriptions of judgment center around the most destructive and public enemies of the cause of Christ. Chapter nineteen closed with the vivid judgment supper of God on the beast (antichrist), the false prophet, and the allied kings of the earth who yielded to Babylon's lure of wealth and power.

Chapter twenty now resumes the theme of the judgment of God in Christ. Only now the focus will be the judgment (described in two phases) of the dragon, Satan himself.

1) THE NATURE OF THE THOUSAND YEAR REIGN OF CHRIST - THE MILLENNIUM

Before we start into the text itself there is another issue we must come to terms with. This chapter is the one chapter in the Bible that specifically uses the phrase "*a thousand years*" to describe the reign of Christ on the earth. It's repeated too many times simply to ignore:

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

Revelation 20:3 - "...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."

Revelation 20:4 - "...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 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."

Revelation 20:5 - "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection."

Revelation 20:6 - "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."

Revelation 20:7 - “And when the *thousand years* are ended, Satan will be released from his prison....”

Whatever you do with all the details, you simply must come to terms in some way with this barrage of references to the *thousand years*. The church has traditionally held one of three interpretations:

- a) **Postmillennialism** - Postmillennialism can be simplified in these terms, with only slight variations: Postmillennialists believe the bodily return of Christ to this earth will **not** take place until the Kingdom of God has been established by the church in human history.

In postmillennial interpretation chapter nineteen of Revelation **doesn't** describe the literal return of Christ in judgment, but is a symbolic picture of the triumph of Christian principle and life through the presence, witness and ministry of Christ **through His church on earth**. In other words, the Kingdom of God is established by the church **before** Jesus actually returns. So the millennium comes **first**. The Second Coming comes **after**.

While it's usually not stated in clear terms, much of the emergent church movement leans in a postmillennial direction. The emphasis is usually more on the societal and social implications of Christian discipleship (and those certainly **are** important), and the eternal state is downplayed.

- b) **Amillennialism** - Amillennialists (as the name suggests) don't believe in a literal millennium, either before or after the return of Christ. Amillennialists believe the thousand year span John refers to is a symbolic picture of the reign of Christ in believers' hearts and the binding of Satan is either the incarnation of Christ or His death on the cross. The first resurrection that John describes in **20:4-5** is usually understood as the believer's conversion to Christ. Paul says we were all dead in sin and were made alive in Christ Jesus through the power of the cross.

There are also some amillennialists who interpret the millennium as not having anything to do with this earth at all. They see the millennium as the triumphant reign of those who have already gone to be with Christ in their death. The millennium is their reign with Christ in the intermediate state between their death and the second coming of Christ to earth.

- c) **Premillennialism** - Premillennialism is the view that Revelation 20 is altogether eschatological. It deals with events yet to come. This is the view that I lean to. I still think this view fits best with the whole flow of chapters 18-20 of Revelation. These chapters seem to be composed of a string of **connected visions** - a **series of visions** - dealing with the destruction of Christ's enemies. First Babylon (18), then the beast and the false prophet (19), and then finally the judgment and destruction of Satan himself.

It should be said that there are fine, devoted, Bible believing Christians in each school of interpretation. I find the premillennial view the more satisfactory from the flow of this chapter. This will be the view assumed as we proceed.

2) **THE BINDING OF SATAN, THE FIRST RESURRECTION, AND THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM**

Revelation 20:1-6 - “Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. [2] And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, [3] 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. [4] 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 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. [5] The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. [6] Blessed and holy 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.”

Several thoughts come out of these verses:

- a) **Notice the power of one angelic being to confine Satan to the abyss for a thousand years.**

John has already encountered this **"bottomless pit"** from which hosts of demonic beings were released upon the earth (9:1-6). The **"bottomless pit"** was also pictured as the home of the beast (11:7). These details are important because they describe the **nature** of the binding which Satan experiences here. This is not his **punishment** per se. It is merely his **confinement** to his own realm.

b) ***After the thousand years are completed Satan is loosed for a short season.***

I am not of the opinion that the thousand years needs to be pressed too literally. But they certainly do describe a pre-prescribed length of time, determined by God Himself. After this time span Satan is said to be loosed for a season. One of the reasons I prefer the premillennial interpretation is it is very difficult to explain this **releasing** of Satan if the binding of Satan is taken to be Christ's victory over him on the cross. Christ's victory over Satan is not a **temporary** victory. Nor are it's effects ever removed or suspended.

c) ***Saints will take their assigned place to rule and reign with Christ.***

Revelation 20:4 - "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 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."

John sees this group being made up of those who had **"judgment committed"** to them, and those who had been **martyred** for their witness to Christ. John saw these souls of the martyrs **"come to life"** (4b). And they then reigned with Christ a thousand years.

The next verse (5), immediately separates these resurrected souls from those who would not experience resurrection for another thousand years - **Revelation 20:5** - "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection."

While I don't think it is of crucial importance, this verse is the main reason I am much more inclined to the premillennial position than any other. Amillennialists and even more so, postmillennialists, have a difficult task with these two resurrections. They usually treat the **first resurrection** as the **spiritual resurrection of conversion**. Yet they leave the **second resurrection** as a literal resurrection from literal death.

I simply can't see any way to do this from the context of verses 4 and 5. In fact, verse 5 begins with the words, **"The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended...."** If language means anything at all John means to tell us that both resurrections deal with resurrection from the **same kind of death**. He's saying **some** of the dead were raised in the first resurrection. Then, later on, the **rest** of the dead were raised.

To my mind there is simply no justification for interpreting the first resurrection as **spiritual** and the second as **physical**. I think, unless the context makes it crystal clear, this is bad hermeneutics.

More on this topic next week.