

Zoom Out in End Times

Revelation 20:1-10 (EHV)

¹ Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven. He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ² He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, ³ threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end. After this he must be released for a short time. ⁴ Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the 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. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years. ⁷ When the thousand years come to an end, Satan will be released from his prison. ⁸ He will go out to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. They are as numerous as the sand of the sea. ⁹ They came up over the broad expanse of the earth, and they surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are. There they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

We're going to play a little guessing game to start. What is this a picture of? (Slides 2-5) When you stare at the magnified details, you often miss the whole picture and can't figure out what it is. (Slide 6) There are a bunch of interesting details in our verses from Revelation 20. We will examine the details, but we need to zoom out to see the whole picture of this vision regarding the end as God gave it to the Apostle John. Instead of being confused or scared, God records this vision for us to give us hope and a future.

(Slide 7) We start with verse 1. "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven." Who's this angel? It's best that we read on and see what this angel does before we try to figure out who he is. "He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end." (verses 1b-3a)

(Slide 8) This angel locked up the dragon. The meaning of the dragon is spelled out: it's Satan, the same one who brought sin into our world through his temptations and lies to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Here the angel binds up and locks away Satan in the abyss. Earlier in Revelation 12:11, in a battle where Satan is defeated, the song goes out: "They conquered him because of the blood of the Lamb." Jesus told us specifically that he came to destroy the devil and his works. Zooming out, we see that Jesus' first coming, his perfect life, his sacrificial death, his triumphant resurrection bound and limited Satan. This event has already happened. In this way, the angel could be Jesus himself delivering the message of Satan's defeat or another angel serving God's will like Michael did when he beat the Devil and cast him down in Revelation 12.

(Slide 9) Okay, but what's this abyss? Although we default to heaven and hell as the only names of the places where good and evil spirits dwell respectively, both Jews and Greeks had different words for this. Greeks used this word abyss as a realm of the dead and would refer to heaven or hell, depending on the context. Here, Satan is bound. So, it's hell, but temporary because it's contrasted with the forever lake of fire and sulfur over verse 10.

Satan is locked up, but he's still dangerous. He's like a convict in jail that you can visit, and he can still lie to you. He's like a rapid pit bull chained up in someone's yard. He doesn't have free reign, but if you try to pet him, he's going to bite you. Zooming out, take comfort in knowing that Satan is limited, locked up by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection so we can proclaim his victory.

(Slide 10) Then there's the troubling end to verse 3: "He could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end. After this he must be released for a short time." What's the 1000 years? Some would have you take this as the literal time frame of Jesus' victory until Satan is released, Jesus' millennial reign. But zoom out. The words around this verse are all symbolic and representational. The book of Revelation itself lists two different numerical time frames of Satan's defeat until he is released before Christ's Second Coming and the end of the world. The other is a time, times, and a half time, which is 3 ½ years or 42 months. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus says that no one will know the day or hour of Jesus' return. God doesn't want us to take the 1000 years literally but symbolically. The 1000 years is a set time until Satan "must be released for a short time."

Even zooming out, we don't know why God is doing it this way. And it's scary to think Satan must be released for a short time. But, God tells us this so that we know what's happening when we see it and so that we can have confidence that he will do what he said he will do in the end. We want to understand why we suffer and why there is evil. God doesn't give us the why, but he does tell us that he can and does work all things, even evil ones, for your good. God doesn't ask us to understand why he does what he does, but he does ask us to trust him. He gives us good reason to do so as we read on.

(Slide 11) Verse 4: "Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the 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. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

The symbolism here is easier. Those sitting on the thrones are believers who died in the faith, some were beheaded, brutally martyred for sharing their faith in God. They're in heaven right now because they continued to trust in Jesus as their Savior. God brought them from spiritual death, from a time of no faith, to believing in him. This is the first resurrection: being brought to saving faith in God. They reign right now with Jesus for this determined amount of time until Satan is released and Jesus returns.

This again is a message of hope, not something to make us afraid of how we might die telling others about Jesus. Maybe we forget that Jesus ascended to the right hand of God. This doesn't mean that he has a cushy seat up in heaven; it means that he has taken this position of power and authority to rule over all things in our world for our good. Since we have been brought to faith, we are rulers right along with him and will continue to do so in heaven after we die. This reigning with Christ is a truth that I'll admit that I don't fully understand. Probably a good idea for another sermon on another day. But this truth is meant to comfort us to know that we aren't subjects of the world, tossed around by the waves unbelievers make in the world we live in. We rule with the risen Christ!

(Slide 13) The beast and his mark are also mentioned in this verse. What are those? The beast represents all antichristian power in the world. It's not a specific country or government; it's anything that opposes Christ and his message of victory, of him having taken away our sins, giving us perfection. The mark is believing in these antichristian messages, being an unbeliever. The mark of the beast is not a barcode or a Social Security number or the COVID-19 vaccine. Zoom out. Unbelief cannot be forced on you. So neither can the mark of the beast. What's more is that Jesus promises that no one, no power, no force, no demon, not even Satan himself, can snatch you out of his hand or separate you from his love.

(Slide 15) Verse 6: "Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years." The first resurrection is when we were physically alive but spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins. Then God made us alive in Christ Jesus – it is by grace you have been saved. We are alive in Christ right now. We are his priests, here to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light. Given this understanding, then the first death must be the day we physically die. That makes the second resurrection the time when all people - believers and unbelievers alike - are raised to life physically on the Last Day when Jesus returns. This will happen when that 1000 years, that predetermined time by God, has taken place.

(Slide 16) The second death is spelled out specifically in Revelation 20:14-15, "The Lake of Fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the Lake of Fire." The second death is when the unbelievers are judged on the Last Day and sentenced to hell for all eternity in both body and soul. This second death has no power over us as believers because we are a part of the first resurrection, that we have been made spiritually alive through the faith the Holy Spirit created in us to believe in Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As God's people, we no longer fear death.

(Slide 17) Wrapping it up with verses 7-10: "When the thousand years come to an end, Satan will be released from his prison. He will go out to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. They are as numerous as the sand of the sea. They came up over the broad expanse of the earth, and they surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city." Now is maybe the time when we panic because Satan is no longer locked up but is out deceiving so many people all over the world. God helps to take our fears away because he told us that this would not happen until the Gospel, the good news of what he has done to defeat sin, death, and the devil had been preached to the four corners of the earth. The Gospel reaches everyone first before Satan is allowed to deceive people all over the world. Those deceived and who want to destroy God's followers are symbolized with the names Gog and Magog, call backs to Ezekiel 38 & 39, enemies of God's people, not literal nations or cities even in Ezekiel's time. God prepares us for the evil that will take place as many unbelievers will rise up against God's people, us.

(Slide 18) Zoom out and have again the hope that God provides. "And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. And the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are. There they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever." (verses 9b-10) As this great army is amassing and coming to the camp of saints and the beloved city – again a symbolic not literal way to refer to all believers on earth – the enemies are defeated in an instant. God sends fire from heaven and devours them, tosses them into the lake of fire and sulfur forever. This future event is

written in the past tense. God does not want us to be afraid of when this day comes at the end of times, on the Last Day; he wants us to know that our victory over the forces of evil is absolutely going to happen. We will stand victorious with God.

(Slide 20) There are so many details here in this vision, and, yes, the details can be tough to understand. But zoom out. The message is pretty easy. God wins. We belong to God. So, we win with God as he defeats the forces of evil as we come to the end of the world. God gives us this vision as a message of hope, that we can be unafraid as Christ's return approaches, that Last Day, when we will enjoy victory and reign forever with God our King. Amen.

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