

Lesson 47

Last week we looked at the first four verses of Chapter 20, which are controversial and much disputed, although, as we said last week, they need not be. When viewed in their proper time frame and their proper context, and when their symbols are properly understood, those verses mean just what we would expect them to mean — Satan loses, and Jesus wins! The kingdom of Satan loses, and the kingdom of Christ wins!

Oh, but some will say, verse 4 is telling us all about the thousand year reign of Christ on earth! Really? Where in verse 4 is the phrase “reign of Christ”? Where in verse 4 is the phrase “on earth”? All we see in verse 4 is that the martyrs will reign *with* Christ a thousand years. Nowhere does verse 4 describe a thousand reign of Christ, as if Christ were not reigning before or after those thousand years. And nowhere in verse 4 do we see a thousand year reign on earth.

And where did anyone ever get the idea that Jesus will return to stand again on this earth? There is no indication in the Bible that such will ever happen, and every indication that it will not happen.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 — *Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*

Acts 1:11 — *Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.*

Yes, it is true that Romans 14:10 says that we shall all “stand before the judgment seat of Christ,” and some argue that means Jesus will return to the earth to sit on a judgment seat, but this “judgment seat” could also be a description of “the Lord in the air” as Paul describes. I don’t think Jesus is ever setting foot on this earth again, but even if Jesus did return to occupy a judgment seat on the earth, he would not stay very long. How do we know that? Because of what Peter tells us.

2 Peter 3:10 — *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.*

The earth will be destroyed on the day of the Lord, and so there will be no earth on which Christ could reign for any time more than a single day, much less a thousand years.

And as for the so-called “millennial reign of Christ,” isn’t it strange that such an important event (in their own mind) is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible? Barnes explains the situation well in his commentary on Revelation:

It is admitted, on all hands, that this doctrine [of premillennialism], if contained in the Scriptures at all, is found in this one passage only. It is not pretended that there is, in any other place, a direct affirmation that this will literally occur, nor would the advocates for that opinion undertake to show that it is fairly implied in any other part of the Bible. But it is strange, not to say improbable, that the doctrine of the literal resurrection of, the righteous, a thousand years before the wicked, should be announced in one passage only.

If premillennialism were true, then wouldn’t we have expected Paul to say something about it somewhere in his many letters? Instead, what Paul tells us is very different from premillennialism.

Premillennialists have built a very elaborate edifice of false doctrines on a single verse from Chapter 20. Their twisting of God’s word shows the danger of ignoring the time frame and the context of this book. We could say much against premillennialism, but two points are sufficient for our purposes: first, premillennialism is **false**, and second, premillennialism is **dangerous**. Premillennialism belittles the plan of God and the work of Christ, and premillennialism creates a difference between Jew and Greek that leads people astray. We can’t just agree to disagree when it comes to premillennialism. It is a matter of doctrine.

Revelation 20:5-6

5 But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.

Verses 5-6 can be confusing, but they need not be so. Yes, if we don't notice the symbols that are being used here, these verses can be confusing. But if we pay attention to those symbols, and if we study these verses in light of the verses that came before, then everything will fall into place. The first sentence in verse 5 is a prime example of that.

“But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished.” Do we need to get out our calendars to understand that verse? Do we need to count off a thousand years, or perhaps count off some other amount of time, such as the entire Christian era? No. This is the fourth time in five verses that we have seen this thousand years, and in each of the previous occasions we have seen that it refers **not to a period of time but to a state of affairs**. The binding of Satan for a thousand years depicts the **complete defeat** of Satan as to Rome. The reign of the martyrs with Christ for a thousand years depicts the **complete victory** of the church as to Rome.

The focus here is still on Rome. How do we know that? Look at the previous verse again. Who do we see in verse 4? We see the beast. That beast is Rome. Everything we have seen about that beast is pointing to Rome. This beast has seven heads and ten horns (Revelation 17:3) representing the emperors of Rome — the same symbols that we saw back in Daniel 7 describing the fourth kingdom that followed Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. What was that fourth kingdom? Rome. The focus here is still on Rome. If we are tempted to leap to the end of the world, then we need to explain why the focus here is on this first century Roman beast.

Who are “the rest of the dead” in verse 5? At the end of the verse 4, some of the dead came back to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. Those

dead were the martyrs who had been beheaded by Rome (the beast) for the witness of Jesus. They were those who had followed Jesus' command to remain faithful unto death. So who then are "the rest of the dead"? Well, if the dead in verse 4 are those who died in service to Christ, then the rest of the dead in verse 5 must be those who died in service to Rome. Who else could they be? This is the same group we saw back in Revelation 19:21 who were killed with the sword of the rider on the white horse and who had birds feasting on their flesh.

What then does it mean that those who died in service to Rome would not live again until the thousand years were finished? Well, what does "the thousand years" in verse 5 refer to? Again, we need to look in verse 4. The thousand years at the beginning of verse 5 is the thousand years at the end of verse 4 — which means that the thousand years in verse 5 denotes the complete victory of God's people over Rome. Verse 5 is telling us that those who died in service to Rome will have no share in the victory of God's people. They will not share in that victory. They will not experience that victory. They have no part in the complete victory of the saints, and isn't that exactly what we would expect to see?

Verse 5 ends with another seemingly difficult sentence: "This is the first resurrection." What does that mean? I think the key to understanding that sentence is to see the previous sentence as a parenthetical explanation — "But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished." What is the support for putting parentheses around that sentence? The support is the end of verse 6, which once again mentions the thousand year reign with Christ. We saw that in verse 4, and we see that in verse 6. What we see at the beginning of verse 5 is something that is apart from that reign with Christ, as indicated by the word "but" that opens the verse.

If the first sentence in verse 5 is parenthetical, then the meaning of the second sentence in verse 5 is immediate. The first resurrection is the resurrection of the martyrs when they come back to life to enjoy their victorious reign with Christ over Rome.

Verse 6 confirms that understanding with the fifth of the seventh beatitudes in this book: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years." That blessing confirms that the first resurrection is for those who died in service to Christ and who enjoy the victory of Christ over Rome. Unlike Rome, this group is the true royal priesthood as verse 6 tells us: "they shall be *priests* of God and of Christ, and

shall **reign** with him a thousand years.” This group is the church, the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).

What is the “second death” in verse 6, and if there is a **first resurrection** and a **second death**, then is there also a **second resurrection** and a **first death**?

Let’s start with the first of those questions — what is the “second death” in verse 6? Whatever it is, verse 6 tells us that it will have no power over those who take part in the first resurrection. If it is the church experiencing that first resurrection, then verse 6 is telling us that this second death will have no power over the church. Now that sounds familiar.

Matthew 16:18 — *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

In this world, Rome had the power of life and death. At the Roman games, the emperor could with a single thumb up or thumb down signal grant life to a contestant or sentence that contestant to death. Rome could and was sentencing Christians to death because of their allegiance to Christ. But Rome’s power over life and death was in this world only. Satan is the prince of this world (John 16:11); he is **not** the prince of the next world.

Do you mean to say that there is a death that has no power over the church, a death that awaits those who in this world were opposed to the church? Yes, eternal death in hell apart from God. That is the second death of verse 6. Yes, Rome could hand out the first death to Christians, but not the second death. Rome’s death dealing days were done!

But if the second death is eternal death in hell, then haven’t we jumped to the end of the world? Not necessarily. It is possible that all we have done is jumped to the end of the lives of those persecuting first century Romans. Yes, there is a great day coming in which we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, **but our fate is sealed and known to us at the moment of our death**. When we open our eyes in that next world, we will know our eternal fate. We may not know why the reason yet (Matthew 7:22) and we may not know the sentence yet (Luke 12:48), but we will know our eternal fate (Luke 16:23).

Nero and Domitian are not sitting around somewhere anxiously wondering where they will spend eternity! They have known the answer to that question for two thousand years! Remember what Jude 7 says about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah: they are “suffering [**not will suffer**] the vengeance of eternal fire.” And on that last day the wicked will be given the opportunity to

do something they never did in this life — bend the knee to Jesus Christ and confess that he is Lord of all. Nero and Domitian will one day be on their knees before the Lord Jesus Christ, as will we all. We will read more about the second death when we get to verse 14.

Now back to our other question: if there is a **first resurrection** and a **second death**, then is there also a **second resurrection** and a **first death**? Yes and yes. The first death affected both those who were on the side of Christ and those who were on the side of the beast. Both the Romans and the Christians died. But one of those two groups would never die again! The martyrs who came to life would not face the second death. The second death would affect only those who served the beast.

And the **second resurrection**? The second resurrection is the one mentioned at the beginning of verse 5. Those in the second resurrection are those who “lived not again until the thousand years were finished.” We will learn more about that group in verse 13.

But if the beginning of verse 5 is describing the **second** resurrection, then why does the end of verse 5 say that this is the **first** resurrection? Again, I think the only way to see the first part of verse 5 is to see it in parentheses. The first resurrection at the end of verse 5 is pointing back to the resurrection at the end of verse 4 — “they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” Reading it any other way causes the “rest of the dead” in verse 5 to experience the blessing of verse 6, and we know that blessing is reserved for those on the thrones in verse 4.

Those who experience the first resurrection will not experience the second death. Instead, they will be priests and will reign with Christ for a thousand years. Was this something new for them? What this a status that these Christians had not previously enjoyed? Not at all! The church is a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)! Revelation 1:5-6 tells us that we became part of a kingdom of priests when we were freed from our sins by the blood of Christ. These verses in Chapter 20 are simply a public reaffirmation of a status that the martyrs enjoyed even before their death. They reigned with Christ in life, as do we! They were royal priests in life, as are we! This reign with Christ is not something that starts on day one of year one and ends on day 365 of year one thousand. This reign with Christ is something the church has enjoyed from Acts 2 and will continue to enjoy for all eternity. We are the **eternal** kingdom of Christ, not the **thousand year** kingdom of Christ!

Revelation 20:7-10

7 And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, **8** And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. **9** And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. **10** And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Just when we think we are starting to get a handle on things, in walk Gog and Magog! Let's start by recalling what we read about Satan just a few verses earlier:

Revelation 20:2-3 — And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season.

Verse 7 is picking up where verses 2-3 left off. Verses 7 and following are explaining what happens when Satan is loosed a little season.

First, why is Satan not loosed a little season until after the thousand years are ended? Simple — so that Satan will not detract from the picture of complete victory symbolized by the thousand years. God is in effect saying to the church,

“Yes, Satan will try again, and you will need to be ready for that, but for right now just enjoy your victory and celebrate your reign with Christ!”

The “little season” in verse 3 during which Satan is loosed stands in sharp contrast with the thousand year reign with Christ. As we have seen, both periods of time are used to symbolize a state of affairs — the church’s victory over Rome is total and complete, and Satan’s defeat with regard to Rome is total and complete. But the contrast between a thousand years and a little season give us another symbol — unlike the church’s victories, Satan’s **victories** will be neither total nor complete. Satan has **not** been loosed for a thousand years! Satan has been loosed for only a little season. Yes, Satan will try again, but if Satan could not defeat the church with Rome, then Satan will never be able to defeat the church.

And what is this great weapon that the church has that can defeat Satan? What great weapon of the church was able to defeat the mighty Roman empire? Was it some new type of sword? Did the church invent a new kind of catapult? No. We don’t wield carnal weapons.

1 John 5:4 — This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.

We overcome this world by our faithfulness to Christ. We defeat Satan when we say no to Satan’s temptations and instead say yes to Christ. We defeat Satan when we stand firm and strong in the faith in the face of Satan’s fiery darts.

Ephesians 6:16 — Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

That is how the church defeated Satan in the first century, and that is how the church defeats Satan in the twenty-first century.

What causes Satan to be loosed out of his prison in verse 7? If he was locked up, how did he get out? We aren’t told, but I like what Hailey has to say on that issue:

In the spirit of faithfulness [the early Christians] bound Satan by overcoming him. When such a spirit and loyal devotion to the principles and cause of Christ no longer distinguish God’s people, the restraining power is gone; Satan is loosed once more.

Remember that we are seeing symbols in these verses. Satan was not literally locked up somewhere. This binding was a symbol for Satan’s defeat with Rome,

but Rome was not the final nation of this world. There have been many others after Rome, and Satan has used many of them in his fight against the church. Rome was not the last kingdom that was used by Satan to deceive the world.

Well what other nation has Satan used to deceive the world and attack the church? Can we think of an example? We don't have to come up with our own example. Verse 8 gives us an example: Gog and Magog. **But who or what are Gog and Magog?** As Lenski explains, "Gog is the prince and leader, Magog his land and his people." We first meet Gog of the land of Magog in the book of Ezekiel.

***Ezekiel 38:2-3** — Son of man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him, And say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold I am against thee, O Gog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.*

Later in that same chapter, God says this about Gog:

***Ezekiel 38:17** — Thus saith the Lord God; Art thou he of whom I have spoken in old time by my servants the prophets of Israel, which prophesied in those days many years that I would bring thee against them?*

But where is any such prophecy found in the Bible? A quick word search turns up a son of Japheth named Magog, and a son of Shemaiah named Gog — but they are not mentioned again, and there is no prophecy about them. One verse in Genesis seems to have been the source for three names we see here in Ezekiel 38: Magog, Meshech, and Tubal.

***Genesis 10:1-2** — Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth: and unto them were sons born after the flood. The sons of Japheth; Gomer, and **Magog**, and Madai, and Javan, and **Tubal**, and **Meshech**, and Tiras.*

But the first time we meet Gog of Magog is right here in Ezekiel 38. How can there be an earlier prophecy about them? **Our answer to that question will also answer our questions about Revelation 20.**

So what is the answer? If Gog of Magog is never mentioned in the Bible prior to Ezekiel 38, then how can it be true that he was spoken about in old time by the prophets (plural!) of Israel? Not only are we told that one prophet spoke

about Gog of Magog, but multiple prophets spoke about him. What is the answer?

The solution is to recognize that there is no literal Gog of Magog. There is no literal king named Gog, and there is no literal kingdom named Magog. There is no earlier prophecy that mentions Gog by name, but there are many earlier prophecies that foretell of heathen enemies of God's people that would be defeated by God. Daniel 2 speaking of Rome is one such prophecy, but there are many others. Gog of Magog figuratively depicts whoever happens to be the current enemy of God's people. That is exactly how Gog of Magog was used in Ezekiel 38, and that is how he is used in Revelation 20.

How do we know that for sure? We know that for sure by looking at the context of Ezekiel 38 where Gog of Magog was first introduced.

The setting in Ezekiel was that the Jews had been promised a restored kingdom, and they had responded, "So what?" First there had been Egyptian slavery, and then the Philistines had attacked, and then the Assyrians, and now the Babylonians. Who was next? What guarantee did the Jews have that the same thing wouldn't happen to this newly restored kingdom that Ezekiel was telling them about?

We are looking at Ezekiel 38. Do you remember what happened in Ezekiel 37? That's where we see the great resurrection in the valley of dry bones. So you mean we have a resurrection in Ezekiel 37, and then we see Gog of Magog in Ezekiel 38? Didn't we just see a resurrection earlier in Revelation 20, and now we are seeing Gog of Magog? Yes, Revelation 20 is a parallel to Ezekiel 37-38. The time was different and the current enemy was different, but the concern of God's people was the same — **yes, we overcame this enemy, but what about the next one?** Was there any hope? Or were the people correct when they said, "our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts" (Ezekiel 37:11)?

To convince the Jews that under the Messiah their glory would be secure, Ezekiel used a symbolic battle with the fictitious Gog of the land of Magog to show that they would be able to defeat **any** enemy with the Messiah on their side. The earlier prophecies about Gog of Magog are all of the earlier prophecies about all the previous enemies of God's people.

Instead of saying to the Jews that God defeated the Egyptians, God defeated the Philistines, God defeated the Assyrians, God defeated the Babylonians, and on and on and on, God just wraps all of those enemies up into a single package

and calls that package Gog of Magog. There, as here in Revelation 20, Gog of Magog just means “anybody but nobody in particular.” **No matter who it is who attacks the church, that enemy will fare no better than Rome.** That’s the message of verses 7-10, and that was certainly a message the church needed to hear!

In Revelation 20, God’s people have just been vindicated from a terrible oppressor. But then a huge army gathers from all over the world to make war against them. Is there any hope? Yes. God defeats this huge army without his people having even to lift a finger. What God is saying to them is this: “I have already defended and vindicated you in this present crisis and I will do so again anytime and anywhere no matter who or what rises against you.”

And once again that is a beautiful message for us today! I fear that the church today has developed a severe inferiority complex. If at any time the church could have felt inferior and powerless, it was during the Roman persecution — and yet the church then as now was anything but inferior or powerless. Rome was not the eternal kingdom! That description belongs only to the church! Later in Chapter 21 we will find out exactly how God views the church, and he does **not** view it as inferior in any way! If we see ourselves as inferior, is it any wonder if we find ourselves ineffective? The first step to being the kind of church that God wants us to be is to see ourselves as God sees us, and there is no better place to determine how God sees the church than right here in the closing chapters of Revelation. I fear that the church’s neglect and misunderstanding of this great book may have hindered the mission of the church.

And who is Gog today? Where is Magog today? What is our great enemy today? Whatever it is, God will deliver us from that great enemy if we remain faithful to God and refuse to compromise with Gog.

Yes, Gog’s army is huge. In Ezekiel 39:12, we see that Gog’s army was so large it took 7 months to bury them all! In Revelation 20:8, we are told that “the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.” The message here is that no matter how big and powerful the enemy, God will defeat them — but we must do our part. Remember Revelation 12:11 — “and they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.” We must do our part.

We also see in these verses a change of tactics by Satan after his defeat in using Rome. Satan is many things, but he is no dummy. Satan is good at what he does, which is why we have so many warnings in the Bible about him — one of

which cautions us not be ignorant of Satan's devices (2 Corinthians 2:11). What we see here is that those devices can change. Rather than relying on a single great power as Satan did with Rome, verse 8 tells us that in the next round Satan would gather his allies from the four corners of the earth. Yes, Rome almost ruled the whole world, but maybe that word "almost" was the problem. Perhaps Satan just needs a more powerful army. Perhaps Satan just needs more allies.

Satan still seems to be taking this same approach today. Just think about all of Satan's allies. He has Hollywood and the vast entertainment industry firmly in his camp. He has powerful false non-Christian religions in his camp, several of which have taken over entire countries and made evangelism illegal. He has powerful so-called Christian religions in his camp, sewing confusion and deceiving many. If Satan's problem in the first century was that he put all of his eggs into one basket, then he seems to have resolved not to make that mistake again. We see that in verse 8, and I think we see that around us in the world today.

But here is the question — will Satan's new strategy work any better than his old strategy? Satan was not able to defeat the church with a laser focused approach — will Satan be able to defeat the church with a shotgun approach? Will the church survive when Satan throws a kitchen sink at us? In a word, yes! That is the message of these verses! Satan may change his strategy, but the church must never change its strategy. The church's strategy must stay the same, and if it does, then we are guaranteed the victory.

And what is that strategy? We just read it a moment ago. Revelation 12:11 — "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death." Our strategy is three fold: the blood of Christ, the word of Christ, and faithfulness unto death. Satan will never be able to defeat that strategy! But if we look away from Christ and the blood of Christ, then Satan will defeat us. If we fail to follow the word of Christ, then Satan will defeat us. If we fail to remain faithful unto death, then Satan will defeat us. We must do **all** that the first century church did: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death."