

The Thousand Years of Revelation 20 – Part III

by

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4. *The final rebellion* (Rev 20:7-10)

Again, I provide a literal translation along with the NIV text.

“And when the thousand years are finished, Satan will be set loose out of his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them in war, of whom the number [is] like the sand of the sea. And they went up over the breadth of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints, even the beloved city; and fire came down from heaven and swallowed them up; and the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet [were], and they will be tormented day and night to the ages of the ages”

“When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the sea shore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (NIV).

In part 1 of this series, Satan’s imprisonment was dated at Christ’s first coming, based on the teachings of the NT. This event was followed by the vision of the overcomers reigning. Both things are said to last a thousand years. John saw both things; however, it is dubious whether he saw them in real time. How did he know that they lasted exactly a thousand years? No appeal to an angelic revelation is present. John somehow knew it. But if it was not a “real time” vision, what is the meaning of the thousand years? I submit that it stands for a long period of time. It lasts for as long as Satan is bound and the deceased saints reign with Christ in heaven.

It should be borne in mind that nowhere else does the Bible speak of this particular period during which just two concrete things are known to happen for sure: Satan is imprisoned and the saints reign. Anything else added to the picture that John presented is at best mere guess, or wishful thinking at worst.

Although many Christians are eager to fill the perceived gaps of the millennium with material supplied mostly by OT prophecies, I see no valid reason for accepting these addenda.

If we turn to the Bible, we will soon discover first that the number one thousand is often used as a full number, to indicate something that is complete: “a thousand generations” (Deut 7:9; Ps 105:8) , “a thousand hills” (Ps 50:10), “a thousand days” (Ps 84:10), “a thousand shields” (Song 4:4).

Second, we will find out that outside Revelation 20, there are only three texts that mention a thousand years. Ecclesiastes 6:6 says that a stillborn has more rest than man, “even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity”. The obvious meaning is that an ungrateful man will be always restless, no matter how long he lives. Psalm 90:4 reads, “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night”. Finally, there is 2 Peter 3:8f, “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”. In these three and only instances outside Revelation 20, the expression “a thousand years” is uniformly used of a *very long period* as reckoned by man’s standards. The latter two texts also say that it is actually a short time as measured by *God’s* standard. Given the use of the expression “a thousand years” outside Revelation, I can see no reason for assuming that John is talking about a precisely defined time span.

As the beginning of the thousand years is started by the binding of Satan, this long period finishes with his unleashing. As the binding implied a restraint of his freedom of action, the loosing means that this restraint is removed. The fact that Satan has to be unbound to wage war against the saints implies that he can perform his evil deeds only when and to the degree that God allows him to do so. We are not told who looses the Devil, nor exactly why he must be loosed; but this event indicates that the day of salvation approaches its end as the time of God’s patience draws to its close. All the “inhabitants of the earth” have had the opportunity of taking heed to the witness of the faithful overcomers. Now the consumation is quickly approaching, and evil must be definitively destroyed before the kingdom of God is made manifest in all its glory in the new heavens and the new earth.

Interestingly, John does not go into a long depiction of this last satanic offensive. John soberly points out that as soon as Satan is again allowed to deceive the nations he goes back into business with amazing success. His followers do not belong to a particular nation, but to many nations; the reference to the “the four corners of the earth” means that they come from everywhere. The names Gog and Magog appear in genealogies (Gen 10:2; 1Chr 1:5; 5:4) but the allusion here undoubtedly refer to Ezekiel 38-39, where unrighteous rulers attempting to destroy Israel are intended. God says to Gog, “You will come against my people Israel like a cloud, to cover the land. It will be in the latter days that I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me, when I am hallowed in you, O Gog, before their eyes.” (Ezekiel 38:16). W. Boyd Carpenter explains:

Gog and Magog stand for the great hosts of the nations, and their leaders, who would break forth into uncalled-for hostility against the people of the Lord. It must be remembered that the imagery is derived from the history of Israel. Jerusalem, the beloved city of the true Israel of God, looks out upon her foes ... Gog and Magog are thus used as typical names (C.J. Ellicott, ed., *A Bible Commentary for Bible Students*; London and Edinburgh: Marshall Brothers, n.d. [ca. 1890], 8: 625).

Probably the “camp of the saints” and “the beloved city” are parallel expressions that depict one and the same thing under different images. The image of a camp is a military one, which would be appropriate for those who are overcomers; a besieged city seems to stand for all the saints living on earth at this time. The word translated “camp” is *parembolē*, a military term used for the fortified camp of Israel (Hebrew *mahaneh*) in the LXX (Exo 29:14; Lev 4:12, 21; 10:4f) and in Hebrews 13:10,13. The expression immediately brings to mind the previous descriptions of the Lord’s army on earth, depicted as 144,000 Israelites from the twelve tribes, who have been sealed (7:4-8). In chapter 14:1-5 this army is depicted on Mount Zion, as following the leadership of the Lamb and strictly complying the purity regulations appropriate for holy war (cf. Deut 20; 23:9f).

It has been remarked that “the camp ... assumes its significance simply because it is adjacent to the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God’s presence” (R. Laird Harris et al., Eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*;

Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, 1:300). And, of course, the beloved city is the place where God's temple stands on earth. It is hardly a reference to earthly Jerusalem, which in 11:8 seems to be equated with Sodom and Egypt, symbols of idolatry and filthiness.

So both the camp and the city have this in common, namely the presence of the living God, and therefore they are the only place for God's army to gather around when the satanic hosts charge against them. The image of Christian soldiers completely surrounded by the forces of evil which far outnumber them dramatically pictures the seemingly desperate situation of God's people.

However, the final battle actually never happens. The saints do not even need to engage in combat, because "fire from heaven" completely consumes the approaching hosts. The utter destruction of Satan's minions immediately reminds us of the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24f). An even more relevant parallel, though, is found in the New Testament:

Destruction by fire is also prominent in 2 Peter 3, the only NT text outside Revelation 20 that also mentions "a thousand years":

"By the same word the present heavens and earth are *reserved for fire*, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord *a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day*. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be *destroyed by fire*, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." (vv. 7-10, NIV; italics mine).

Although neither Peter nor John make an explicit mention of the coming of Jesus Christ in connection with this flaming havoc, the Apostle Paul does:

"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen *when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels*. He will *punish* those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with *everlasting destruction* and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our

testimony to you.” (2 Thess 1:6-10, NIV; italics mine)

The same idea surfaces again a few verses ahead, while Paul is teaching about the destruction of the Man of Sin (2:8): “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.” (NIV). Here the “splendor [*epiphaneia*] of His coming” seems to refer to the “blazing fire” mentioned before. In the LXX words related to *epiphaneia* are used to translate both the Hebrew 'or , to cause to shine and nora', terrible, in the context of God’s glorious manifestation in redemptive acts (Deut 33:21) and judgment (Joel 2:31, cf. Acts 2:20). Thus, it depicts “Yahweh’s marvelous rescuing and redemptive vindication of his people in the sense of the OT theophany” (B. Gärtner, in Colin Brown, o.c., 3:318). In the NT context, it is Jesus Christ who brings forth the final deliverance of the saints and the destruction of all evil forces.

A description of the final demise of Satan follows: he joins the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire. Those who believe that Chapter 20 follows chronologically Chapter 19 understand that the Beast and the false prophet have been there since just before the beginning of the millennium, since their confinement in the lake of fire is narrated in 19:20. However, as already stated (see above 1. *On whether there is chronological continuity between Revelation 19 and 20*) there are good reasons to think that there is a discontinuity between both chapters. In this view, chapter 20 recapitulates the whole present gospel era, and 19:11-21 is a parallel account of 20:9-10; both depict the final defeat of Satan and all his allies. It should be noted that in passing that the reference to the beast and false prophet in 20:10 lacks a verb, although most translators supply one (for example, “are”, KJV, NKJV; “were”, NRSV; “had been thrown”, NIV). This addition improves the language but obscures the point that John is probably making, namely that Satan shares the stark destiny of his assistants.

5. *The judgment* (Revelation 20:11-15)

And I saw a great white throne, and the [One] sitting on it, from the face of whom the earth and the heaven fled, and a place was not found for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another scroll was opened, which is the [book] of life. And the dead were judged out of those [things] written in the books, according to the

works of them. And the sea delivered the dead in it, and the death and the Hades delivered the dead in them. And they were each one judged according to their works. And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And if anyone was not found having been written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. 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 (NIV).

After the ancient serpent is confined to his place of eternal punishment, a new scenario ensues. John sees a throne and the One who was seated on it. The allusion to heaven and earth's flight probably underlines the solemnity of the trial which is to follow.

In order to understand this event we must relate it to other judgment descriptions found in the Bible.

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people – everyone whose name is found written in the book – will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (Dan 12:1-3).

From this passage we learn that the people of God will go through an unprecedented time of distress, or tribulation, just before their ultimate delivery. It is at that time that the resurrection both of the righteous and the wicked will take place. Jesus made an obvious allusion to this text from the book of Daniel when he explained his parable of the tares and the wheat.

Jesus told them another parable: "Let both grow together [that is, the wheat

and the weeds] until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” (Matthew 13:30).

“He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 13:37-43).

Here Jesus clearly teaches that the final separation of the children of God and the children of the Devil will not occur until the end of the age. Tares and wheat grow together until the time of the harvest. At that point evil will be completely and definitively eradicated from heaven and earth. This text speaks about the fate of both the just and the wicked. In other texts, the focus is on the destiny of one or the other of these two groups. For example, in another parable found in the very same chapter, our Lord spoke about the fate of the lost:

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous. and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50).

The same stress is put in 2 Peter:

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men ... But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. (2 Peter 3:7, 10)

Notice that this will happen in the same occasion in which the old heavens

and earth will be no more, that is, after the period depicted by John as a thousand years:

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

On the other hand, in the following text the accent lies on the lot of the righteous:

Immediately after the distress of those days “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other (Matthew 24:29-31).

The same may be said about 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

In the same chapter 24 of the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus Christ stresses the need for watchfulness, lest his coming takes believers by surprise. Of course, unbelievers will certainly be caught off guard, since they do not take heed of Christ’s words.

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? (Matthew 24:37-45)

The wise servant, of course, is no other than each watchful believer, who always does what he should do as if the Master was there. When the Lord comes, there will be no further opportunity to repent; the final fate of each member of the human race will be settled forever.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matthew 25:31-46).

Although the above quoted text does not mention the resurrection of the dead, we learn that it will happen just before the final judgment, as succinctly but clearly recorded by John:

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-

29).

The Apostle Paul taught essentially the same doctrine at Athens:

Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:29-31).

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul put as clearly as words allow the fact that the ultimate joy of the saints would begin at the same event as the final destruction of the wicked:

... we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1: 4-10).

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul stressed that everyone, including believers, would go through the judgment. Although believers already have life eternal in Christ, their works will be judged nonetheless.

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience (2 Corinthians 5:9-11).

Returning to Revelation 20:11-15, the first thing we notice is that, as predicted by Jesus and Peter, the old heavens and earth pass away and humankind is gathered before the throne of God. Every human being that has existed from Adam on, small or great, will certainly be there. No appeal to a higher court will be possible. Those whose names are not written in the Book of Life will share the lot of the Devil, the beast and the false prophet, while the righteous will enter their eternal state in new heavens and a new earth, in the new Jerusalem.

Paul said that the very last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26) and that this will happen when believers are either resurrected or transformed:

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must be put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory”. “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:51-57).

Here Paul, as John in Revelation, depicts the last enemy to be destroyed as death (and Hades). Since its destruction immediately follows the transformation and resurrection of believers in 1 Corinthians, it may be safely concluded that the same is true about Revelation 20.

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