

Revelation 21:1-15

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[0 : 00] God wins. These two words capture the message of Revelation. It's a book that is in places very complicated, very difficult to understand. The chapter we're going to be looking at this morning, there are parts of it that are difficult to understand, but the big message is a very simple one. God wins. God is in control. The one who is seated on the throne reigns, and His is the victory in history and over history. God wins, and God's faithful people are vindicated. God's victory is assumed, predicted, anticipated, and in a measure displayed from the very beginning of the vision, from the very beginning of the book of Revelation. But in the closing chapters, we are witnesses of a vivid, stark, and shocking portrait of the final and absolute victory of God over all His enemies. If we can just scan through from chapter 18 through to chapter 20, where we'll be landing and then giving some more thought to. In chapter 18 and in the first half of chapter 19,

Babylon is defeated. Now, Babylon represents all the earthly empires and powers throughout history that have opposed God and persecuted His people, and Babylon is defeated. The defeat described is devastating and irreversible. Last week, we read the words in the first half of chapter 19 in verse 3, the smoke from her goes up forever and ever. A total irreversible defeat of Babylon. God wins.

In the second half of chapter 19, which we haven't considered and which we haven't read, but in the second half of chapter 19, we find the two principal agents of Satan as presented to us in the book of Revelation. The beast and the false prophet, and they are defeated by Jesus.

And Jesus is portrayed as the Word of God riding on its white battle horse. This is a spiritual battle, one not with physical weapons of war, but the power of God's Word. And we read that the beast and the false prophet are captured, and we are told both of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

God wins. In chapter 20, we reach a climax with the defeat of Satan, the ultimate and most ferocious enemy of God. Again, the defeat, as we will discover this morning, is crushing and complete.

[3 : 19] We read in chapter 20, the devil was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur. God wins.

But the defeat of Satan is set in the vision in the context of and as the culmination of the much disputed thousand years or millennium spoken of and described in the chapter. And it is the millennium that we want to explore this morning. Now, if we were to examine all that has been said and written on the subject of the millennium, it would last the best part of a millennium to do that. But we've only got half an hour, so we'll see how we get on. What we will do is consider what is said about the millennium in this chapter under three headings, which I think hopefully just the very language kind of gives a hint as to the way we're going to do it, but then we'll develop the headings. First of all, we're going to consider the millennium's dawn. Then we'll move on and consider the millennium's day, and then thirdly, the millennium's dusk. So the millennium's dawn, the millennium's day, and the millennium's dusk. First of all, then, the millennium's dawn. What happens at the dawn of the millennium? What happens at the beginning of the millennium? Well, we read in chapter 20 and verses 1 to 3, and we are told what happens at the dawn of the millennium. Let's just read again those three verses. And 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 snake who is the devil or

Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it over him, and it goes on. But what I want to focus in on is one truth that we're told about concerning Satan, and that is that he is bound. At the dawn of the millennium, Satan is bound. More is said, but it all revolves around that big truth, and that's the truth we want to just think about for a moment. Satan is bound. Now, the question that confronts us and that often consumes all consideration of

the millennium is this. Well, when is Satan bound? We're told that Satan is bound, but when does this happen? What is the cause of his being bound? I think it's here that we need to take a step back and consider the big picture of God's victory over Satan. When was the mortal blow inflicted on Satan? When did the seed of the woman, the snake crusher, strike? Well, let's answer the question in this way, or let's pose the question in this way. What secures the binding of Satan? I'd love to shout out the answer, but I'll hold back and let another far more qualified provide the answer we are looking for. Listen to Jesus. The question that we're posing is, what secures the binding of Satan? And we want to hear an answer to that question from Jesus. If you turn with me to Mark chapter 3. Mark chapter 3, if you have your Bible, you can turn to that chapter, or you can just listen as I read the verses. Mark chapter 3, I'm going to read from verse 22. The context is a context in which Jesus has been casting out demons, indeed His disciples also, and He has been accused by His enemies of doing what He does in the power of the devil. They say that dark forces are at work that explain the evident power that Jesus has, and Jesus responds to their accusations. And let's just read what He says. Well, we'll read verse 22, which also gives that context. And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, He is possessed by Beelzebul, another name for Satan. By the prince of demons, He is driving out demons. And Jesus responds. So, Jesus called them over to Him and began to speak to them in parables. How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand. His end has come. And listen to what Jesus says.

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. And Jesus, of course, is speaking about His own work and how He has come to tie up the strong man to tie up the strong man and plunder his house, to bring to Himself all those who are under the dominion of the strong man of Satan. And He uses the very language of binding Satan, of binding up the strong man in order that He can perform His rescue of those who are enslaved by the strong man.

[8 : 38] But let's listen to Jesus again in John chapter 12 and verse 31. John chapter 12 and verse 31. And hear what He says again on this matter that helps us answer the question, what secures the binding of Satan? In John chapter 12 and verse 31, we read as follows. And again, it's important to notice that the context of this is Jesus speaking about His death and the significance of His death and what His death will secure. And we read there in verse 31, now is the time for judgment on this world. And He's speaking about His death on the cross. Now is the time for judgment on this world. Now the prince of this world will be driven out. And so, when we think about these expressions of Jesus, what Jesus explains as the purpose and the outcome of His work, I think we can conclude that it is Jesus who bound Satan by His life, by His death, and by His resurrection. The apostle Paul sees the cross as the pivotal victory over Satan. In Colossians chapter 2 and verse 15, he speaks about how at the cross, the principalities and powers, spiritual powers, were defeated and made a public spectacle of at the cross and by the cross. And so, I think we conclude, can conclude that the binding of Satan, the dawn of the millennium coincides with the coming and redeeming work of Jesus. The millennium dawned at Bethlehem, at Golgotha, at the garden tomb, and on a hilltop in Galilee as Jesus ascended to His throne. If you were here two or three weeks ago when we were looking at chapter 12, the vision of the woman and the dragon, the woman who was about to give birth, and the dragon wanted to consume the child who was to be born, and we identified the child as Jesus. And what do we read in that vision? That the child was snatched up to heaven to be enthroned. And what followed on from the child being snatched up to heaven and enthroned? Immediately there followed a battle in heaven in which the devil was evicted and cast to the earth. And why did that happen? Because Jesus had won the victory, Jesus had been enthroned, and so what followed was the casting act of the devil from heaven. I think we see parallels in the beginning of chapter 20 with what is going on there in chapter 12. Different images, different pictures being employed, but to speak about the same reality. So, we're saying that Satan is already bound, that Satan was bound by Jesus and by His work 2,000 years ago. But to speak of Satan as bound creates a real problem, or perhaps the appearance of a real problem. Namely, that Satan doesn't appear to be bound. And that is true. When we look around this world in all the evil and wickedness that seems to reign, it doesn't appear as if Satan is bound.

In our broken world, Satan appears to be running riot. Now, the explanation for this apparent contradiction is to be found in answering another question that tackles the nature of his binding.

So, we've tried to answer the first question, what secures the binding of Satan? And we're answering that it is Jesus and His work, His redemptive work. But what is the purpose of the binding of Satan as it is described in chapter 20 of Revelation, where we're told that He was bound to keep Him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years are ended. Before the coming of Jesus, where did the nations stand vis-à-vis the God of Israel? Well, the nations were either ignorant of or hostile to the living and true God. That is what we read in the Old Testament from beginning to end.

The nations didn't know God. The nations were hostile to God. The nations opposed God's people. They were blinded. They were deceived. Throughout that time, Satan had very effectively deceived the nations. But what happened when Jesus came? What happened when He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven and was enthroned in heaven?

[13:26] What followed just a few days later, the day of Pentecost, where men and women from all the nations of the world heard the good news about Jesus and their eyes were opened and the binding or blinding power of the deceiver was broken. And what follows, of course, in the book of Acts is a story of the nations coming to Jesus in Asia, in Africa, in Europe. What follows in church history to this very day is that same story of the ingathering of the nations to the feet of King Jesus. Today, not in some symbolic way, but today, the 13th of October, today, men and women, boys and girls in all the nations of the world will put their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. And the deceiver, bound as he is, can do nothing to stop or even stem the flow of the ingathering of the nations into the kingdom of God.

What is the purpose of Satan being bound? That he might no longer deceive the nations. And what are we to do? Are we simply to look on and applaud that this is so? No, this is a call to mission. It is a call to confident mission. You see, we do our mission in the assurance that Satan is bound, that he can deceive no longer. And so, we go into the world in that security and in that confidence of what Jesus already secured and of how the devil has been bound, no longer able to deceive the nations as he once did. What secures the binding of Satan? What is the purpose of the binding of Satan? But what is the duration of the binding of Satan? Well, in the language of revelation, which is the language of symbols and pictures, we're told that for a thousand years, for a thousand years, and after that he must be set free. How are we to understand the thousand years? Well, I think it's evidently, certainly in the light of so many numbers in Revelation, that all have a symbolic significance. It seems to me reasonable and almost inescapable to come to the conclusion that this too is also a symbolic number, a number of completeness, a number that confirms to us that it is God who determines the duration, a thousand years.

But what does it symbolize? Well, it symbolizes or represents the gospel age, the period of time between the first and second coming of Jesus. We are citizens of the millennium, the millennium's dawn.

But let's move on in this day that we're exploring from the dawn to the development of the day itself, the millennium's day. I'm thinking of what we read in verses 4 to 6 in particular. What happens following the dawn and through the day of the millennium, through this gospel age that we've already identified? Well, in these verses, what is highlighted is the reign of the saints.

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. They 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, and it goes on.

[17:02] They reigned with Christ for a thousand years. So, the millennium's day is marked by the reign of the saints with Christ. And I think that statement at the heart of what we read really captures what we want to notice. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But, of course, that awakens a lot of questions. One question is, who are they? Who are they? They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. I think they are God's faithful and persevering people represented by the martyrs. In the language of Revelation 20, the focus very much is on those who were martyred for their faith. And the language is very graphic and gory. They've been beheaded for their faith. So, the martyrs, it seems to me, represent God's faithful people.

It's true that the focus on the martyrs almost suggests that it is only the martyrs who reign with Christ. But this, it seems to me, is incompatible with all that we know about the unity of God's people, the idea that somehow martyrs would be in a different category to those who, for reasons

often of providence, found that that was not their fate. They are God's people, and they reign with Christ through the thousand years. We're told that those who reign with Christ experience what is called a first resurrection. That statement that we read, they came to life, but then also the summary of it at the end of verse 5, this is the first resurrection. What is the first resurrection that they experience? Now, here are different, as you can imagine, different answers are given. And I don't claim, you know, an absolute certainty in terms of how best to understand that.

But I understand this to be their, or our, spiritual resurrection. We are born again of the Spirit of God as we are enabled to put our trust in Jesus. The Spirit of God raises us up from spiritual death to spiritual life, and we are raised up to reign with Christ. The first resurrection.

What is the nature of their reign? This reign that they share with Christ through the gospel age.

What does it look like? I think it can be captured in two words. Martyrdom and mission, or mission and martyrdom. Proclamation and persecution. Triumph and trial. Let's stick with mission and martyrdom.

First of all, mission. The nature of their reign is marked by mission. And this follows on logically from what we have seen as the purpose of Satan's binding. As he can no longer deceive, the door is thrown wide open for mission to the nations. And this is precisely what is said about those who reign in the vision. We're told that they suffer as they do because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God, they had in the second half of verse 4. Why do they suffer? Because of the manner in which they exercise their reign, testifying to Jesus and proclaiming the word of God. They, or we, as God's people, reign with words. Words of eternal life. Our weapons are words. Words of love and truth and salvation. We reign as we speak words about Jesus. We reign as we urge men and women to be reconciled to God through Jesus. We reign as we nurture those brought to faith with words of truth about living as citizens of the kingdom of God. That is the nature of our reign. As we declare the good news, as we testify about and to Jesus. So, their reign is marked by mission, but their reign is also marked by martyrdom.

[21 : 10] Now, as I've already suggested, martyrdom is a vivid way of representing the path of suffering that is the lot of every believer in the truth. We reign as we serve every believer in different measures, including those who in all probability will include all of us, though we don't know what the future holds, even those who are spared martyrdom. Now, this is the counterintuitive and revolutionary nature of our reign. We reign as we suffer for Jesus. We reign as we sacrifice ourselves in the service of others. This is the nature of our reign. It is marked by mission, and it is marked by martyrdom. It is marked by proclamation and persecution, by triumph, but also by trial. The millennium's day. Let's move on to the millennium's dusk.

We're coming to the close of the day. We're coming to the close of the millennium. We're coming to the close, the dusk of the thousand years. What happens at the close of the millennium? Well, the vision identifies two events that take place at the dusk or close of the millennium, the defeat of Satan and the judgment of the dead. First of all, the defeat of Satan. Now, it's true we've already indicated that the fatal blow was struck by Jesus at Calvary, but that mortal blow did not mean that Satan was altogether eliminated. It was the blow that would ultimately secure his defeat, but he continued, bound though he was. But then there comes the time for his final, the consummation, if you wish, of his defeat. So, first of all, the dusk of the millennium is marked by this event, the defeat of Satan, but also the judgment of the dead. We'll start with the defeat of Satan. I think there are three verbs that capture the nature and extent of Satan's defeat. Released, devoured, and thrown. We've moved on to verse 7 and what follows through to verse 10. In verse 7, we're told, when the thousand years are over, the dusk, the conclusion of the millennium, when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison. Now, this is perhaps of the trio of verbs, perhaps the most surprising and intriguing. How can Satan's release be understood as constituting his defeat that seems to go, it seems to be contradictory? Surely his release is good news for Satan. But of course, when we read further on, we discover that's far from being the case.

We discover more about his release and what follows. And what's the first thing we discover? Well, he is released by God in order that he might be finally defeated in this dramatic and vivid way in this great battle scene that is painted for us in the vision. So he is released by God in order that he might be defeated. He is released, we are told, for a short time. Now, we don't know how short that time is. It may be an extremely short time, enough time for God to consummate Satan's defeat in the manner that God has determined. And we're told in these verses from 7 through to 9 or 10 that he is released to gather a great army. And again, here we read these words and we think, well,

what is going on here? To deceive the nations of the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle.

In number, they are like the sand on the seashore. And there's a real dark edge to that description. You know, we know how Abraham's descendants were described as like the sand on the seashore. And now the enemies of God are described in the same language. It's very dark.

[25 : 03] They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. You can maybe visualize the scene. And that leads us on to the second verb. So, released, but then the second verb is devoured.

And just for a moment, try and visualize that scene that's painted for us, that's described for us as in these verses. As this great army surrounds God's people, beautifully described as the city he loves. And the scene is set for battle to commence. It's all described in those terms. A battle is about to begin. You can almost hear the trumpet sound for the deadly advance of the unending battalions of Satan. Now I would ask you to do this for me. Tell me something about the actual battle. Read what it says. Tell me something about the actual battle. How does it play out? Some incidents from the actual battle. Can you tell me something about the battle? Anything. Of course, there's nothing to tell.

There is no battle. There is no battle. The armies gathered, surrounded the city he loves, but there is no battle. Because before any battle can commence, we're told, but fire came down from heaven and devoured them. God does not allow Satan or any of his soldiers to lay one blow on the citizens of the city he loves.

Not one blow. The defeat of Satan then is marked by this release in order that he might be defeated. Then the army he gathers is devoured. And then he himself, we're told, is thrown into the lake of burning sulfur then in verse 10. And what are we told about his fate in that lake of burning sulfur?

[26 : 58] Well, he joins with the beast and the false prophet who we've already been told had been consigned to that dark place. And then we're told they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. And the language of forever and forever echoes what we heard about Babylon. And it's simply to emphasize to us that defeat is final and irreversible. There's no turning back. There's no fight back on the part of the devil. So, the defeat of Satan is one of the events that occurs at the dusk of the millennium. But there's another event, and that is the judgment of the dead. And that's what we read of in verses 11 to 15. What do we learn about that great day of judgment at the dusk of the millennium?

It's interesting that the description of the day of judgment employs a lot less in the way of perhaps the difficult imagery that we find elsewhere. And perhaps the reason is for us to be left in no doubts as to the reality of it, and no doubts as to what is going to happen that we might know how to be ready for that day. And we need to just go through very swiftly some of the elements that we find in this section in verses 11 through to 15. First of all, who will be the judge? Well, we're told that him who was seated on the great white throne. God is seated on the throne in heaven. God will be the judge. In other parts of the Bible, Jesus is identified as the judge, but this creates no difficulty. God the Father and God the Son are jointly responsible for judging on that day.

Who will be judged? Well, in verse 12, we're told the dead, great and small. In verse 13, we go on to be told that the sea will give up her dead, and death and Hades will give up her dead. And that the purpose there is simply to emphasize that everybody will be judged. If you die, you'll be there. I can't imagine anybody here would be so bold as to say, well, I'm not planning on dying. If you die, you'll be there.

Now, that solemn reality of the inescapable nature of God's judgment stands in stark contrast to human justice. So often, power and influence and wealth affords immunity from justice in our world. You know, just this week, we've been hearing, and it's a tragic case, and I bear no ill will to the person that I'm going to make reference to, but we've been hearing of the diplomat's wife who is escaping justice on the grounds of diplomatic immunity from that tragic accident there was down south.

Influence, position, and you can evade justice. We think of what's happening in northern Syria, where the Turkish forces are attacking the Kurds, and as a result, I think already there have been ISIS fighters who have escaped from the prisons in which they were being held.

[30 : 05] And have they also escaped justice as a result? Well, in our broken world, that's what happens time and time again. But on this great day, everybody will be there. Nobody is immune.

Nobody will escape. What will be the evidence that will be used? Well, we're told that the books were opened, and we're told what is found in the books. In the very same verse where reference to the books is made, in verse 12, and I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. And then in the second half of the verse, the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. So, these books record our lives. Everything that we have done and everything that we have left undone is all recorded in the books. And the judgment is on the basis of what is found in the books. Now, this is all very bleak. You see, on the basis of what we have done, we will all be justly condemned. We fall short. There is no one righteous. No, not one. But there is another book. In that same verse, we're told another book was opened, which is the book of life. And what is in that book? Well, in verse 15, we're told that in that book are written names. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life, it is a book of names. Whose names? The names of all who belong to the family of God. The names of those who have been granted eternal life through faith in Jesus.

The names of those who have trusted in Jesus as their Savior and served Him as their Lord. These are the names that will be found in the book of life. And what are the outcomes on this day of judgment?

Will the guilty, those whose names are not found in the book of life, will be thrown into the lake of fire? We're told very clearly and in very stark terms that is the outcome.

The rest who are also guilty in terms of the books, but whose names are found in the book of life. They will be declared innocent, not because of their own good works, for they have none, but because of the righteousness of Jesus that has been given to them and that is credited to their account. And what will happen to them? Well, they will dwell with God in the new heavens and the new earth that the following chapter goes on to describe. The millennium's dawn. Satan is bound. The millennium's day, the saints reign with Christ. The millennium's dusk. We don't know when it will be, but it's coming. Satan is defeated and all are judged. Let me close with these words. I don't know if my understanding of the millennium as I presented it this morning is the right one. There are moments or there are alternatives that can be argued and well argued on the basis of God's word. [33 : 25] I may be wrong at different points, but what I do know is that a day is coming when we will all stand before God to be judged. And you will be there on that day. We will all be there.

Will your trust on that day be on what is written in the books? Because if it is, you will be condemned. Because what is written in the books will condemn you. Or will your trust on that day be on the wonderful reality that your name is in the book of life. That is where your trust must lie. That is the only place where your trust can lie. Trusting in Jesus and what he has done for you. Maybe you're asking yourself, how can I know? How can I know if my name is in the book of life? We're told this book of life and it has names in it, but how can I know if my name is in the book of life?

Many perhaps have been tormented by that question. How can I know if my name is in the book of life? Maybe you're tormented by that question. Well, you can know. And you can know by trusting in Jesus.

If you put your trust in Jesus, then you can be assured that your name is in the book of life. So that's what you need to do. That's what we all need to do. For the first time, for the umpteenth time, we need to put our trust in Jesus. Come to him. Put our trust in him. Follow him. Serve him. Embrace Jesus.

[35 : 07] And that is what I would urge you to do. Embrace Jesus. Trust in Jesus. Secure from him the forgiveness that only he can grant. Be clothed by him in his righteousness that will prepare you for that great and awful day at the dusk of the millennium. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you that you are the God who governs over history. We thank you that you are the God whose victory is indisputable. We thank you for the assurance that we have that there is a day coming when Satan will finally be put to rest, will be cast aside, no longer able, even in the limited way that he is able to today to torment and to harm and to bring pain. We pray that as we contemplate on these matters, help us to see through the perhaps the the mist of images that we find confusing and of language that seems uh unreal in many ways to draw out and be struck by the the big truths concerning who you are and who we are and how essential it is for us to be trusting in the one you have provided as our savior.

And so we do pray that you would help us all to put our trust in Jesus and to find our security in him and in him alone and we pray in his name. Amen.