

# A Thousand Years

## Revelation 20:1-16

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



**Reminder:** When we began our time in the book of Revelation 21 weeks ago, we started with a few ground rules that are designed to help us read Revelation responsibly. Those ground rules were to focus on the timeless principles, not on the timelines, keep the original audience in mind, remember that it is part of a larger literary genre, and finally, keep the main thing the main thing. And, what is the main thing? **Jesus is victor.**

The vivid images in this scene alert readers to the fact that John is using word pictures to describe things that do not neatly fit within the confines of space and time. Think, first of all, about the use of space in this vision. John understands Satan to be a real force that exerts its evil influence in the world, but he is not trying to persuade readers that Satan has the physical body of a dragon or that the dragon can be bound with a metal chain. John does not invite readers to speculate about exactly where on the globe the angel might capture Satan, or to wonder whether the door to the bottomless abyss is located in the northern or the southern hemisphere. John uses physical and spatial images for spiritual realities. This will also be true in his description of the kingdom of the saints in 20:4–6, which we will consider shortly. Second, if the physical spaces in John’s vision point to spiritual realities, the same is true of the references to time. John says that Satan is bound “for a thousand years” (20:2). Just as the door to the great abyss cannot be located on a map, the duration of the thousand years cannot be located on a calendar. One does not draw nearer to heaven by means of a space shuttle or nearer to the abyss by digging a shaft into the ground, and one does not enter the thousand-year period by turning a calendar page. John refers to time in order to point readers to a reality that lies beyond time. ... This nonliteral sense fits with other references in Revelation. When John says that the allies of the beast receive kingly power “for one hour” (17:12), he means that their reign is brief, not that it lasts for exactly sixty minutes. When he refers to persecution lasting for a three-and-a-half-year period, he repeats and varies the time reference, so that it does not fall into a neat chronological pattern (see pp. 108–9). When he uses multiples of a “thousand” to identify the number of the redeemed in 7:4–8 (twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes, for a total of 144,000), he quickly alters the imagery in 7:9 to show that this same group actually consists of a multitude “that no one could count” (see pp. 93–94). Similarly, John will use multiples of a “thousand” when stating the dimensions of the New Jerusalem (21:16)—not to tell readers how much square footage to expect in eternity but to speak about its fullness and perfection. Fullness is what the

“thousand years” signifies in 20:1–6.<sup>1</sup> As we make our way into chapter 20, we are again reminded by all of the imagery that there is one central authority over the universe, God. That truth and the reminders that John gives us should fill us with hope. Why? Because no matter the turbulence of my life, **hope cannot be hindered with God.**

## 1. Authority

### a. Who is the central figure in this passage? → Jesus

- i. This is again one of those passages in Revelation that elicits lots of thoughts, opinions, and theories. → As long as your speculation prompts gospel faithfulness and not an increase of secret knowledge, your speculation is healthy.
- ii. We keep our eyes focused in this passage by coming back to the melodic line of Revelation – Jesus is victor. → Jesus has authority.
  1. There is no figure implied or explicitly figured that has a greater authority than Jesus in these verses.
  2. v.1 - John says nothing to place this chapter in the time sequence. He simply says that he *saw an angel*. Except that he came from *heaven*, the angel is not distinguished in any way. John does not describe his appearance. He concentrates on what he does. But they show that the angel had authority over the abyss and that he could restrain Satan.<sup>2</sup>
    - a. Key – The angel is not operating under his own authority but Christ’s.
- iii. God’s worthiness stands in direct contrast to the worthiness of Cesar. → Cesar demanded worship and worship (that his people would see him as worthy). God is worthy whether humanity recognizes it or not.
  1. **“God is glorious, and that His glory does not allow itself to be diminished, to be disturbed in its gladness and the expression of that gladness, to be checked in the overflowing of its fulness.”**<sup>3</sup> - Karl Barth

### b. Either God has the authority and ability to offer salvation or he doesn’t.

- i. I.e., If he can’t judge and condemn, then he can’t give life.
  1. This is often an uncomfortable truth for us as a modern audience. But, it is a key truth in Revelation. We see the God of the universe who has the authority and ability to judge evil and to give life.
  2. You cannot have one without the other.
    - a. The ability to judge and not give life would make God cruel.
    - b. The ability to give life and not judge would actually render God impotent if he cannot contain evil, he can’t grant life that transcends it.
    - c. Revelation shows us the God of justice and of grace. → That should give us hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 223–224.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley, First American edition. (London; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 163–166.

- c. **The primary question for us: Who or what is the central authority in my life?**
  - i. We cannot live without a central authority. → We need a guiding rubric, compass, or ethic.
  - ii. This authority is the thing that answers and sorts through the tough and complicated questions of life.
- d. What are the options for authority figures?
  - i. **Me, myself, and I** – I look to my own thoughts and perspectives to guide me.
    - 1. I.e., Follow your heart. / Live your truth.
  - ii. **Love** – There is no greater force than love so that is all we need.
    - 1. This so often gets expressed through situational ethics in our modern moment.
    - 2. What are situational ethics?
      - a. A term coined by the Episcopalian theologian Joseph Fletcher to denote the ethical theory that love is the primary, if not the only, principle governing moral action, and consequently that all other ethical principles and laws are illuminative, rather than descriptive, in nature and force. Situation ethics is situational in that it assumes that the form that the principle of love will take in any particular circumstance cannot be determined by abstract reflection prior to or apart from the situation itself. Thus, situation ethics teaches that in any given situation, the moral agent must seek to discern what in that circumstance would be the most loving course of action and then act accordingly.<sup>4</sup>
      - b. Simply this ethical system asks, “What is the most loving thing for me to do in this moment?”
    - 3. The focus on love and asking the question of love can seem really thoughtful, kind, and complete. But depending on how you understand love, the source of love, and the purpose of love, it can actually be very destructive.
      - a. Too often, we can ask the question of love, the answers we come up with feel loving in the moment, but are too often destructive in the long run.
      - b. Why is this? → In our cultural moment we tend to believe that being kind is one of the greatest moral goods. And, being kind is incredibly important. But we mistake true kindness and real love for a lesser version that hurts less up front and causes damage in the long run.
      - c. We all can think of situations where we needed “tough love.” That is when something didn’t feel loving in the moment but was actually the most loving thing.
    - 4. The ethic of love doesn’t have to be destructive, as long as love comes from the right source, God.
  - iii. **God** – The one who truly possesses all authority in heaven and on earth.
    - 1. **The repeated phrase “1000 years” is an important phrase. But, it isn’t just important to signify a period of time or for us to figure out a timeline of events. It is important because it points us to the one who has authority to see through the plan of redemptive history.**
      - a. It shows us that this age has limits. And it is limited by the one who has victory.

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 109.

2. As we have seen time and time again in Revelation – as believers we are called to remain faithful and submit to God’s authority.
3. Why? – Revelation shows us a deeper and more compelling picture for life, that is one that is experiencing the abundant presence of God.

## 2. **Life** – Where are the saints? → They are with Christ. (vv. 4-5)

- a. What are the shiny objects in the text?
  - i. “1000 Years” → Reign with Christ → First resurrection → Second Death
  - ii. These are all fine to dig into and ask about what they mean or how they will be worked out specifically.
  - iii. **While there are many theories on them, all of those theories come back the main point of what John is trying to remind us of, in Christ we are offered a life that cannot be taken away from us by physical death or by the powers of spiritual darkness.**
- b. **They are in a state of relational and abiding communion with the Lord. → “Regin with...”**
  - i. John speaks of the saints’ whereabouts in relational rather than in geographical terms. Each time we might expect him to say that they “reigned on earth,” **he says that they “reigned with Christ” (20:4, 6).** The point bears repeating. If we ask, **“Where are the saints?” we receive the answer, “They are with Christ.” The relational answer “with Christ” points us to the heart of life in the millennial kingdom.** John is more concerned with “who” than with “where.” Having assured readers that the saints will be “with Christ,” John leaves most other questions unanswered, as if to say, “What more do you need to know?”<sup>5</sup>
  - a. **Those who have conquered...** they conquered not under their own strength, but the strength of Jesus. They conquered because they were filled with the life of Christ.
    - i. They were about Jesus’ business because they had Jesus’ perspective.
    - ii. They had Jesus’ perspective, because they knew Jesus and are known by Jesus.
    - i. **The blessing of obedience is the assurance or confidence that it gives us in our relationship with God.**
      1. It reminds us that we are unified with him.
      2. That we are safe and secure in him now and in the future.
      3. That we are cared for by him. → Again, if he cares for us now, how much better with his care be in the age to come?
    - ii. The real beauty of obedience is the intimacy it fosters in our relationship with our Father in Heaven. Skye Jethani notes this reality in his summarizing of the Prodigal Son; he says,
      1. **Like the younger son, we often build our identities around what we receive from God. Or like the older son, we find our value in how we serve God. A great deal of effort is expended in faith communities trying to transform people from younger sons into older sons. But this is a fool’s errand, because what mattered most to the father was neither the younger son’s disobedience nor the older son’s obedience, but having his sons with him. And so it is with our Heavenly Father. Reversing the rebellion of Eden and restoring what was lost can only be accomplished when we learn that at the center of God’s heart is having his children with him.**<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the way you relate to God* (2011), p. 95.

- iii. Their identity had been changed, and so it was common or second nature to act out of that new identity.
  - 1. Where are the saints? → They are with Christ.
    - a. **Jn. 15:4-7 - <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**
    - b. **Jn. 17: 25-26 - <sup>25</sup> O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."**
  - 2. Because we are with Christ and nothing can change that, we have hope.

### 3. Hope

- a. Revelation is a book of hope.
  - i. It is a book of hope because it reminds us of who is in control, that we are going to okay because of whose we are, and they this age and its evil will not persist.
- b. What is hope? → A confidence that it is all going to be ok.
  - i. cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-5 – **"<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."**
  - ii. A biblical term (Greek *elpis*) referring to the expectation of the believer that God will fulfill promises made in the past. **Biblical hope is more than a simple wish; it entails certainty based on God's demonstration of faithfulness to people in the history of salvation as recorded in the Scriptures and as experienced by the church.** Ultimately the Christian's future hope lies in the promise of Christ's return and the anticipation of resurrection from the dead.<sup>7</sup>
- iii. **What is cosmic hope?**
  - 1. If in this book we experience the weight of the cosmic problem, that is the problem of evil and sin that impacts not only this world but the spiritual realm as well, we also see the offering of cosmic hope. That is, a hope that both meets and transcends our physical reality.
- iv. What hope do we have? → Rev. 5:9b-10
  - 1. Those who are redeemed are made into a kingdom and priests.
    - a. Cf. 1 Pet. 2:9 – **"<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."**

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 61.

2. The universal scope of redemption is brought out by piling up expressions to show that the redeemed come from no restricted group but from all over the world. **John is fond of linking every tribe and language and people and nation (see 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; cf. 10:11; 17:15).** An interesting point of style is that John's word order is not the same in any two examples. The expression resembles the 'peoples, nations and men of every language' (Dan. 3:4, 7, 29; etc.), and indeed some think that John is quoting Daniel.<sup>8</sup>
- c. **How do we have hope?** → Our hope is not in our circumstances or abilities, but in the one who offers us victory.
  - i. The new song sang by the elders and four living creatures – Rev. 5:9b–10 express the content of the "new song." In the OT, a "new song" **is always an expression of praise for God's victory over the enemy**, sometimes including thanksgiving for God's work of creation.<sup>9</sup>
    1. The word *ōdē* is 'the general word for a song, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, whether of praise or on any other subject'. In the New Testament, however, it is always used of sacred song. This "new" sacred song is not merely referencing the time of its signing, but the deeper reality that it is reflective of. **It is concerned with quality rather than date.**<sup>10</sup>
  - ii. The praise of every creature – v.13
    1. Now the whole creation joins in the song. *Every creature* is explicit enough, but John spells it out by mentioning specifically heaven, earth, the subterranean regions and the sea. *All that is in them* is redundant, but it serves to emphasize that all are included in the mighty chorus of praise. John's vision is not concerned with an obscure being of no great importance. **In the last resort there is no creature, wherever found, which does not recognize the superior worth of the Lamb.**<sup>11</sup>
- d. We are still forced to ask: What are our options for hope?
  - i. **Myself** – "Only I can save myself."
    1. Is this really a sure thing?
  - ii. **Someone / something else** – "I cannot save myself."
    1. Who really can I hope in?
- e. What does it mean to live as a person with a living hope? (1 Pet. 2:12)
  - i. 1 Pet 2:12 – "<sup>12</sup>**Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.**"
    1. **Resiliency** – Holding fast (i.e., conquering) just as the seven churches were encouraged to keep going.
      - a. i.e., We don't give up on cross-bearing and being salt and light.
    2. **Faithfulness** – Forward-facing trust in God.
      - a. i.e., We don't place our trust in anything else to be our ultimate hope.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 100.

<sup>9</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 358.

<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 99–100.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 102.

3. **Declaration** – Proclaiming the good news of the gospel as the most important message we can share and the greatest hope we could offer.
  - a. i.e., We don't shrink from thoughtfully giving a defense of the hope that resides within.

### Additional Notes:

There is nothing explicit about the earthly reign of the Messiah in the Old Testament, but there are several passages on the coming kingdom of God on earth, and these provide the background for the concept of a “millennial” reign of Christ (Psa 72:8–14; Isa 11:6–9; Zech 14:5–17). The early rabbis had such a concept, with lengths ranging from 40 years (built on the wilderness wanderings) to 400, to 4,000 years. The early church debated “chiliasm,” their term for the thousand (Greek *chilias*)-year reign, for the first three centuries until Augustine won the day for the amillennial position. The premillennial position did not reappear until the Pietist movement of the 1700s and the Plymouth Brethren movement in England in the 1800s.<sup>12</sup>

Pre-millennialists hold that at Christ's return the Christian dead will be raised, and believers still living on earth will be caught up to meet him in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). They will reign on earth with Christ for 1,000 years (the millennium). After this Satan will be released for a time. This short period will be followed by the raising of the rest of the dead. In this way there is an explanation of the two resurrections. Finally there comes the judgment of the great white throne. Post-millennialists differ in seeing the return of Christ as taking place after the millennium. Sometimes they see the millennium as standing for the triumph of the gospel in this present age, sometimes as a literal 1,000 years at the end of time. Amillennialists hold that there is no literal millennium; the 1,000 year period is symbolical. It stands for the whole time between the life of Jesus on earth and his second coming. They usually see the first resurrection as the new birth of the believer, his rising from the death of sin.<sup>13</sup>

How can Christians resist both the temptation to worship the beast and the temptation to resort to violence? It's because we have been freed from the fear of death: “Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years” (20:6). The first resurrection is the gift of spiritual life we receive when we become Christians (v 5). This is the sign that we'll receive the second resurrection, which is physical resurrection to eternal life. John says the second death is to be thrown into the eternal lake of fire (v 14). This is the spiritual death of eternal separation from God. The first death, then, is the physical death we all must face (unless Christ returns during our lifetime).

The first resurrection = spiritual    The second resurrection = physical

The first death = physical    The second death = spiritual

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<sup>12</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 321.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 222–223.

Those who share the first resurrection to spiritual life may well have to face physical death—some may be beheaded (v 4). But we don't need to fear physical death because for us it doesn't lead to the second death of eternal judgment. (We find a similar pattern in John 11:25-26.)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Chester, Tim. Revelation For You: Seeing history from heaven's perspective (pp. 153-154). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.