

OF HEAVEN AND HELL Revelation 20

I need to give you a quick interpretation of this chapter before I move to a very important question. I've tried to stay with big themes in our study of Revelation, but this may be the most debated chapter in the whole book, so we're going to get into the details of interpretation a bit more. The source of interpretational controversy has to do with the Millennium- the thousand years mentioned in this text (the only place in Scripture that talks about this 1,000 years). Let's review what exactly what the text says about the Millennium:

Verse 2 says that Satan is bound in a bottomless pit for a 1,000 years. After the 1,000 years, he'll be released for a while. Verse 4 says some dead believers came to life and reigned with Christ for those 1,000 years. Verse 5 says 'the rest of the dead' came to life after the 1,000 years. Verse 7 says that after the 1,000 years, Satan will lead a massive battle against the saints, but will fantastically lose that battle, and then he and all on his side will be thrown into a lake of fire and sulfur and be tormented forever. The action all seems to hinge around this thousand year time frame.

Now, the popular view is that this is a **literal** time frame. This 1,000 years follows the 2nd Coming of Christ, which is described in chapter 19. Satan is bound and Christ ushers in a long period of peace on earth, until the 1,000 years is over and Satan is released for a final battle.

Ok, I'll say- that's possible. But I don't think it's the best interpretation of the text (and when I say 'I', I am speaking about my interpretive tradition, I didn't come up with any of this myself).

We've seen in our study how over and over there are descriptions of God's judgment on the world. We've called them 'snapshots from different angles'- 7 seals, 7 trumpets, the symbolic figures, the bowls, judgment of Babylon, white horse judgment- now this is the last of the 7 cycles of judgment- and now in chapter 20 we have 'the white throne judgment.' This chapter repeats the fact that judgment is coming, but it also adds that we'll be judged before the throne with the Book of Life.

So it seems that verses 7-10 are another symbolic picture of the final conflict, which we just saw in chapter 19. It's not two different conflicts, it's the same conflict from two different points of view. After all, chapter 19 ends with the slaughter of the satanic army which seems to be exactly what happens in chapter 20. Again to summarize, literalists say that chapter 19 is about the 2nd Coming and chapter 20 is about the Final Battle. But the alternate interpretation is that chapter 19 is about both the 2nd Coming and the Final Battle, and chapter 20 is about both things as well.

So, what is the 1,000 years (the Millennium)? I believe it's the time between the 1st and 2nd coming of Christ and, like all of the numbers in Revelation, is highly symbolic. And the reason Satan has been bound is because Christ triumphed over Him through the cross and the resurrection. So, the saints are reigning with Christ in heaven- that's the 1st resurrection and when He returns all believers everywhere will be a part of the 2nd resurrection.

But, my wish is not to start Millennial battles in our church- if we disagree on details of this text we can still have fellowship and agree to disagree. This is a non-essential- the details of how it will all end are interesting, but ultimately not a matter of

orthodoxy. The important point is, *Jesus wins and Satan loses!* If you didn't understand much of anything I said up till now, remember that- Jesus wins.

But let's move to something that is more of an essential. The big question that these last few chapters of Revelation bring up to modern readers is, 'Should we really believe all this stuff about hell? I mean, is there really a place where God sends people to be tortured for all eternity? Isn't that pretty old-fashioned scare tactics?'

Objections to hell come from skeptics who don't believe the Bible. But it also comes from believers, who do believe the Bible. I've been asked, 'Isn't Revelation full of symbols, so maybe hell isn't fire and brimstone like we've always heard. Maybe it's just separation from God or a symbolic way of saying we die fully in ceasing to exist.'

There's truth in that- Revelation is full of symbols. And much of the language about hell is probably symbolic. But there are two things I want to say in response to this:

1st- there's just too much in Scripture about hell to discount its reality. The Old Testament talks about it, the New Testament talks about it, it's all through Revelation, and in fact Jesus talks about hell more than anyone- that ought to tell us something. But the presentation of hell in Scripture is very consistent- it's real, it's eternal, and it's reserved for God's enemies. There's no reason *from Scripture* to think it's not a real place.

2nd- symbols don't point to something less than the symbol. They point to something greater than the symbol. The very nature of a symbol is to try to get across a taste of a much greater reality. In other words, whatever the Scriptures say about hell, the reality is infinitely worse. Just as whatever the Scriptures say about heaven, the reality is infinitely better.

I don't know who said it, but it's true- *Hell is the ultimate compliment God pays to man*. Think about it: if what we do matters, then the consequences of our actions must matter. If everybody is saved or if everybody just ceases to exist, then what we did here had no meaning beyond what I could measure in my life. If there is no hell and no final judgment then there are a few things that become meaningless:

Suffering would be pointless, if there were no heavenly reward for our earthly pains. Justice would be a farce, because we know too many people who get away with murder- literally. And God's grace would be a meaningless concept, if heaven or annihilation were an automatic thing.

Theologian Peter Kreeft has said, "It is Heaven and Hell that put bite into the Christian vision of life on earth, just as playing for high stakes puts bite into a game or a war or a courtship... For salvation to be "good news" there must be "bad news" to be saved from. If all of life's roads lead to the *same place*, it makes no ultimate difference which road we choose. But if they lead to *opposite places*, to infinite bliss or infinite misery... then life is a life-or-death affair... and our choice of roads is infinitely important."

Now let me answer an objection: "I don't prefer to think of God like that. I like to think that my God is loving, not that he's a judge or this angry deity who punishes people."

Well, that's like me saying, "I like to think of myself as 6'6" and as handsome as Brad Pitt and with a 2 handicap in golf." But none of those things is true.

But here's actually what happens when you think that way- you actually turn God into a monster- because He becomes a being who doesn't care about good and bad; He has no sense of justice.

Think about it- would we admire a judge who failed to give justice? When a little child is abducted, abused and murdered- do we think, 'O, that judge just needs to be loving and let the murderer go'? Of course not- we demand justice! But in order to relieve our consciences of the idea that we will have to answer for our behavior one day, we make God into a blind deity who never protects the weak or avenges the oppressed- we make Him into a 1-dimensional ogre who is much less than the real God. As theologian Miroslav Volf has said, "If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence- that God would not be worthy of worship."

Now, some of you are wondering when I talk about hell 'what kind of stuff will get me sent to hell.' And you're really afraid that I'm going to say that you go to hell for lots of little stuff. Matthew Turner wrote a book called *The Christian Culture Survival Guide*, where he talks about all the rules his church had growing up, things that you might go to hell for:

- No dancing, gyrating, head bopping, or (in-church) clapping.
- No drinking, smoking, cursing, or hanging around those who did those things.
- No watching the *Smurfs*, *He-Man*, *the Care Bears*, or *Dukes of Hazzard*.
- No playing with or publicly displaying unicorns, wizards, gnomes, elves, or any other fantasy creatures.
- No touching, holding hands, hugging, or kissing the opposite sex (I think this rule was waived for married couples).

Let me put you at ease: You don't go to hell for any of those things in and of themselves. Heaven and hell aren't primarily about what you do, what TV programs you watch or what games you play. It's about how you relate to God. Are you for Him or against Him? Do you want to be in His presence, or do you hate the thought of His having rule over your life?

Now here's a place where Christianity differs from every other religion. Because every other religion says that to escape hell you have to be good. But, the obvious question is, '*How good do I have to be?*' But, here's the thing- they never tell you. They tell you that you have to be good- and they tell you things you can do to be good. But they never are able to tell you how much is good enough.

I read a book by Andy Stanley that helped me think about this- in it he uses the metaphor of a race. Imagine you are entering a race and you step up to the starting line. However, you have no idea how long this race is- whether it's a marathon or a 10K or a 5K. And, in addition to that, there are no clear boundary marker to tell you which way to go. How do you know where the finish line is? You don't! In any works-based religion you don't know where the finish line is; you never know whether you're doing enough good things to warrant heaven or avoiding enough bad things to stay out of hell.

This is where Christianity is crystal clear. Christianity steps in and says, 'Stop. Cancel the race. Call this whole good works project off. Because you'll never do enough to earn your way to heaven.'

You see, our problem is not that we sin, that we do bad things. Our problem is that we're sinners, we have a sin condition. That sin condition keeps us from loving God

like we should and keeping His commandments. Sin stands between us and God- we can't and won't reach out to have a relationship with Him. So what happens to us? God Himself had to come down and have a relationship with us.

He did that in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus came and lived a perfect life of obedience before God. And when He went to the cross, He took on the condition of sin for us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

On the cross, Jesus experienced hell itself for us- so that we don't have to. He not only endured the physical pain of being crucified, He also endured the judgment of God poured out on Him. All of the wrath of God for our sin was put on Jesus on the cross and He endured separation from God. And He changed our status before God- to where we were once sinners in rebellion against Him, we are now His children who long to do His will.

And, as Pastor Jeffrey White says, the cross itself is proof of the existence of hell. Because if hell is not real, Jesus' death- the agony of it, the horror of it- was totally unnecessary. It's because hell is real that God went to such great pains to save us from it.

Two questions before we close:

Where do you stand in the light of the judgment that will take place one day? Have you really thought through how you're going to deal with the final judgment, or are you just coasting through life?

Are you living your life in light of the reality of ultimate judgment? Do you care that your neighbor will be judged by a holy God one day? Do you care enough to tell him? Do you weep for your friends and family who might have an eternal destiny apart from God? The doctrine of hell doesn't make us into angry moralists just hoping to see blood. The doctrine of hell, properly understood, should break our hearts and make us passionate lovers of all people.

Will your name be written in the book of life at the end of days?

For this sermon I used for sources a couple of books, *The Returning King* by Vern Poythress and *Christ and the Future* by Cornelis Venema, as well as a couple sermons by Rev. Arturo Azurdia and Rev. Jeffrey White.