

# THE REVELATION OF JOHN

## LESSON 12

The next section, especially chapter 20, is fraught with misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It is supposedly a major source for the false teaching of millennialism, both premillennialism and postmillennialism. To better understand this, a brief outline of basic (dispensational) premillennialism is helpful. It teaches a literal physical 1000 year reign of Jesus on the earth with all His saints, based on the reference to 1000 years in Rev. 20:4. He will sit on the literal throne of David in Jerusalem, where Jewish worship in the temple will be restored. This is still yet to happen in our future, in this last of the ordered ages of time, the last millennium or last dispensation. This philosophy teaches that these events will be preceded by a 'rapture' or ingathering of all living faithful saints, and all others will be left behind. What follows is a 7 year period of world-wide physical and spiritual tribulation, during which the Beast or Antichrist will take over world control. Many who missed the rapture will be converted to Christ during this time. Following the 7 years, the ultimate battle of good versus evil occurs, the Battle of Armageddon. It begins in the Valley of Jezreel in Palestine and spreads across the entire world. Jesus is victorious, Satan is defeated, and the righteous dead are resurrected to reign with Christ and His saints for a literal 1000 years here on earth in the 'true kingdom' (the church being an 'interim program' set up when Jesus failed in His mission to convert the Jews). Satan will be bound during this 1000 year period, only to be briefly loosed. He will then attempt to lead more astray and fight another literal battle with Jesus, only to finally be destroyed in the lake of fire. Following this, all dead are resurrected at the end of time, the final judgment takes place, and all saints are taken to heaven to live with God eternally.

Obviously, this philosophy mistakes all the events of the Revelation as being literal physical events and not spiritual concepts. All numbers are taken as literal figures as well. A patchwork of many other scriptures are taken out of context to bolster this theory, including from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, Matthew, I Thessalonians, and the Revelation itself. Belief in this philosophy forces many blatant contradictions to be made with existing scriptures, and premillennial futurists are constantly looking for modern signs that these events will be coming soon (remember Jesus' warning in Matt. 24:23-27). It should also

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be mentioned that premillennial theory assumes several things from these brief few verses that are not found at all in this passage: 1). a second coming of Christ; 2). a bodily resurrection; 3). a reign of Christ and His saints on earth; 4). the literal throne of David; 5). Jerusalem, or Palestine; 6). any conversion of the Jews and Jewish religious restoration; and 7). Christ ever being on earth again. Verse 4 only mentions saints of the past or that time and never includes any from the present.

## CHAPTER 20

Unfortunately, the usual focus of chapter 20 becomes verses 4 & 5, which speak of the righteous reigning with Christ “*for a thousand years.*” The real emphasis of the first 10 verses of this chapter should be the victory of the saints over evil and the fate of Satan following the destruction of the beast. The first vision we see involves an angel coming down from heaven, having the keys to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. In chapter 9:1-3, we had previously seen a *star* (Satan?) which had fallen from heaven to earth, having a key to the bottomless pit and opening it to release smoke, darkness, and a plague of spiritual locusts. The keys now reside with the current angel, who now controls the abyss. The key and chain symbolize the power to bind Satan. As he is now without the vessel he controlled (the Roman Empire), Satan’s power to deceive the world and control nations is greatly restricted. This new angel lays hold of the dragon (a symbol for being powerful and ferocious) or the serpent of old (a symbol for being a cunning deceiver), and then throws him into the abyss. Satan is not destroyed, but his previous power is greatly reduced for a “*thousand years.*”

This is not the first time Satan has been restricted. We have previously seen limitations to Satan’s power following Jesus’ victory over sin. Satan no longer has any power to use demons to possess saints against their will, no power to accuse saints of being worthy of the ‘second death’, and no power to elevate world kingdoms to destroy the church. Jesus discussed such a ‘binding of Satan’ when speaking to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:28-29. Using the figure of binding “the strong man”, He reasoned that He had entered Satan’s house and done just that, proving His ability to cast out demons was by God and not Satan, and thus the kingdom of God was now among them. Jesus’ resurrection also proved His ability

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to limit Satan. The Hebrew writer said “that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil (Heb. 2:14-15). Satan was here restricted since the bondage of sin and death was forever broken. Finally, we see that Satan has been prevented from destroying the church on earth. A dominating world empire that severely oppressed the church has not existed since that of Rome, in accordance with Rev. 11:15: “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever.”

The figure of 1000 years is not a literal period of time, but signifies a complete period of time as deemed appropriate and necessary by God. Whereas Satan’s and his allies were given free-reign to persecute the saints for a limited period (the holy city trampled for 42 months, the witnesses prophesying for 1260 days, the radiant woman protected in the wilderness 1260 days or 3 ½ years or a time-times-half a time, the beast’s blasphemy and persecution for a time/ times/ half a time in Daniel 7), the brief period of terror is now past and the redeemed enjoy a spiritual reign with God on spiritual thrones for a complete and extended period of time. Persecution, like life, is always brief. Those whom John saw sitting on the thrones were those souls who had either been beheaded (*pelekizo*, from *pelekus*, an axe) or those who possessed the same willing spirit of sacrifice (refused to bow to Caesar or receive his mark). These included those martyrs who were waiting under the altar in chapter 6. Although we are also part of the kingdom, the picture here is referring to just those saints who suffered under the beast (“*they*” and not “*us*”), as contrasted to the fate of Satan and his allies.

We notice two things: the sealing in the abyss is only temporary, and Satan is still completely free to deceive individuals who will listen to him, both the great and small. He is still a “*roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*” (I Peter 5:8). The reason for returning Satan to the abyss is not to punish him (that will happen later), but rather to restrict him and prevent further deception of the nations. When Jesus came and destroyed the beast/ Rome, the power of paganism and forced emperor worship was destroyed.

Much controversy is raised with explaining the meaning of the ‘first resurrection.’ The Roman Catholic scholar Augustine believed this to be baptism, and the spiritual resurrection after physical death to be the second one. However, that would make the statement in verse 5 that they cannot be affected by the

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“second death” untrue, as anyone can apostatize after they are saved. The first resurrection here described is the spiritual victory of the martyred souls over Satan. Verse 4 states “*they came to life*” and reigned with Christ. Similar analogies to resurrection were used to describe the victories of Israel and Judah over idolatry and their respective releases from Assyrian and Babylonian captivity (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1-14; Hos. 13:14). This resurrection is a figurative one and not literal, pictured as being in heaven and not on earth. As such, these martyred souls are forever protected by God and shall never see the second death (spiritual death, being thrown into the lake of fire and eternally separated from God). “*The rest of the dead*” mentioned in verse 5 likely refers to those who have yielded to the demands of the beast/ emperor by worshiping and supporting him. They would not share in the victory and would perish in the second death. Verse 6 describes this first resurrection as being the fifth of seven beatitudes found in the Revelation, a great comfort for those who had given everything to follow the Lamb. It is said that Martin Luther wrote the following words in the margin of his bible: “Born once, die twice; born twice, die once.”

After the 1000 years or complete time of his imprisonment, Satan is released and once again able to “*deceive the nations.*” He wastes no time gathering a large spiritual army to fight against God, Gog and Magog. Mentioned in Ezekiel 38 and 39, Gog was the king of the land of Magog and was a symbol for all the pagan kings who fought against Israel and continued to afflict the people after their restoration from Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel tells of a battle in which these forces destroy Israel and the temple, forcing the people into slavery. Yet, God is able to keep His promise and deliver a faithful remnant from which the Savior will rule the earth. Here, this analogy is brought to remembrance to describe another spiritual battle or series of battles which will test the faith of new generations of saints. Regardless, all these forces are quickly dispatched with fire from heaven, just as easily as those who previously met Christ at Armageddon. We can easily picture the fiery destruction of the pagan altar to Baal on Carmel after Elijah’s prayer to God (I Kings 18), and the reminder of the end of world in fire and judgment (II Peter 3:7 & 10).

Instead of using one great world power to oppose God, Satan now spiritually marshals many independent nations to separately help accomplish his purposes through physical means and also continued spiritual degradation. Some

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see this as a warning of another tremendous Armageddon-like spiritual battle near the end of time. More likely it involves a general ongoing spiritual attack from every direction, as all societies continue a slow decline as they wander farther and farther away from God. It is also possible that this describes the intermittent brief resurgence of Roman persecution of Christians under such evil emperors as Diocletian, Marcus Aurelius, and Julian, before the final collapse of the Roman Empire.

The lack of specific details in verses 7 through 9 have allowed men to greatly speculate as to the exact meaning of these events after Rome's destruction and thus how to understand the general framework of the Revelation. This has led to the popularization of several of the common Revelation interpretations which were discussed in Lesson One, especially the Historical and Futurist philosophies. We must always keep in mind that the spiritual principles and historical realities dealt with in this apocalypse are recurring and eternal. If we were unable to see ourselves and the ongoing social upheavals of our current day, then the apocalypse would have little practical use for us as modern Christians.

In verse 10, we see the final end of Satan. He is thrown directly into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast, the false prophet, and the harlot have already met their fates. This punishment is eternal, just as the reign of Christ with His saints. It will be a place where the residents "*shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever*" (vs. 10), where there is "*no rest day or night*" (14:11) and remains continually in "*outer darkness*" (Matt. 22:13 & 25:30). There are those who believe in annihilationism, or a total destruction of the souls of the unrighteous after death and judgment. This would assume that the soul is not immortal unless it is given eternal life by God. Although an attractive alternative to the thought of eternal punishment, this is not taught in scripture. Eternity not only defines the time of punishment for the wicked, but also the duration of God's reign (Rev. 4:9; 11:15). From reading Matthew 25:41 & 46 and Rev. 14:11 and 20:10, it is clear that our souls are immortal and will either spend eternity blessed with God's presence or suffer eternally without Him. Non-existence is not an option.

John is now shown a great white throne on which Jesus is seated (Matt. 25:31-32). The judgment seat of God and Christ are the same (II Cor. 5:10; Rom.

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14:10). There is no room for the earth and the heavens any longer, clearly indicating that time and the universe have ended (remember II Peter 3:7 & 10-13; Heb. 1:11f). It is very appropriate at this time to assure the righteous to whom John is writing of the final outcome of all things, even involving *our* future. John sees all souls who have ever existed present before the throne for judgment, the great and small, the transformed living and the long dead. Jesus and His disciples had foretold of this resurrection event long before (John 5:28f; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:10-11; Acts 17:30-31; Acts 24:15; Heb. 9:27-28). Although many try to predict the timing of this event (based on supposed signs of a coming literal millennial kingdom), the time is unknowable (Matt. 24:43-44; Mark 13:32). Many find the idea of a judgment strange, as men are already separated into either Paradise or Tartarus after death. This assembly is not to decide on the eternal destiny of each individual, as that has already been determined based on God's truth and our individual responses to it. Its purpose is to declare the sentence for each individual, and thus acknowledge God's justice and mercy. All the unrighteous and unforgiven will be convicted of their sins (Jude 15), and every knee will bow to Jesus and acknowledge His authority (Phil. 2:9).

The next thing seen are books which are opened. Some scholars believe these to be the different dispensational standards (OT and NT) by which the living will be judged (Heb. 1:1; Rom. 2:14; John 12:48-49). It is more likely these are the records of the character and deeds of each soul before God. This is not literal writing on God's scrolls, as each of us has written his or her own book on the fabric of time and history. They are symbolic of the divine record of each of our lives and actions before an omniscient God. A similar scene is presented in Daniel 7:10, where "books are opened" as the Ancient of Days comes to meet with the Son of Man and provide Him an eternal kingdom.

Another book is now opened, the book of life. Both the "Lamb's book of life" and "book of life" are mentioned several times in scripture, and these references appear to be talking about the same thing: the roll of God's faithful ones, or the list of those enrolled in heaven. In the Old Testament, we see it mentioned in Exodus 32:32f, Psalm 69:27-28, Isaiah 4:3, Daniel 12:1, and Malachi 3:16. In the New Testament, we hear of it in Luke 10:20, Philippians 4:3, and several times in the Revelation (3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12 & 15, and 21:27). Whereas the works of all men are recorded in the first set of books, only those who have

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been deemed faithful and worthy are recorded in the Lamb's book of life, and that even before the foundation of the world (by God's omniscience, not by His predetermined choice – see 17:8). Of course, all the unrighteous, the ones whose names are *not* found in the Lamb's book of life, are destined for the second death, spent forever in the lake of fire and brimstone (21:8).

When verse 13 says the sea gave up its dead, this could refer to those who were actually lost at sea or were lost and died without ever being found (a great concern for the Jewish mindset). More likely it is figurative of the restless turmoil of the nations (as in 13:1) and thus refers to the total mass of humanity of all societies and peoples. It would also include the saints who were still alive at Jesus' second coming (I Thess. 4:16f). The sentences for all of humanity are given, and the sheep and goats are forever separated. The last thing to be destroyed are **Death** and **Hades** (the abode of the dead, specifically *Paradise*, from Luke 23:42 and II Cor. 12:4, and *Tartarus*, from II Peter 2:4 and suggested in Luke 16:23). Death and its partner Hades, are the last enemies to be destroyed (I Cor. 15:26). Both are cast into the lake of fire. This symbolic destruction of death and hades assures us that they can never hurt us again. God has no more use for them, and they will be abolished forever.

## CHAPTER 21

We now see a picture about things beyond the final judgment. John is shown a “*new heaven and new earth.*” The word for “new” here, *kainos*, suggests not just another improved physical heaven and earth (such as an earthly millennial kingdom), but one of freshness and completely new in kind, especially better than before. This would be familiar to the Jews, a theme previously stated by God in Isaiah 65:17-19, as he prophesied about how the kingdom of Christ would replace that of the old Law. The old order of creation and a physical world would be replaced by God's eternal spiritual realm. Peter presents the same picture (II Peter 7-13) of a judgment and destruction of ungodly men, followed by a passing away of the present heaven and earth. The mention of “*no longer any sea*” could suggest one of two things: **1**). the passing of the restless tumult of the sea of humanity which led to godless nations (13:1); **2**). removal of the ‘sea of

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glass' which stood as a separation or barrier between God and His saints before the end of time (15:2).

The New Jerusalem or holy city is now revealed, coming down from heaven (divine origin). In this analogy we see God's righteous people from all times: those of the Patriarchal age, the Mosaic Law, and the Christian age (consider Heb. 11:10, 13-16 and 12:22-24). Earthly saints are a part of this city (Phil. 3:20; Gal.4:26), but are still looking "for a city yet to come" which is the heavenly abode of the church. This city or holy fellowship appears "as a bride adorned for her husband." We have already discussed the analogy of the Jewish wedding ceremony to the church's relationship to Jesus (see also Eph. 5:22-33). A loud voice from heaven announces the tabernacle of God now "is with men." As all the unrighteous are now gone, God now comes near to His people and dwells in total union and complete, intimate, and personal fellowship (Eph. 2:21-22). This will continue throughout eternity.

Verse 4 describes the joy of being in God's presence as He removes of all the negative factors in life that stifle joy and result in our tears: **death** (never seeing the loss of a loved one, and removing the consequences of separation such as loneliness), **pain** (the trauma of injury, illness, mental illness, and disability), **mourning** (prolonged sorrow and grieving which weigh us down and paralyze us), and **crying** (no tears from the suffering, persecution, and oppression that steal from us our spiritual happiness). Our former feeble existence and the sin which has led to these things has forever been removed. The voice of God or Christ now speaks and makes certain John writes these things, as He has made all things new and certifies that these promises are forever guaranteed. As creation began and has now ended, the Lord reminds us that He is Alpha and Omega (1:8; 10:6). Through Christ, God provided the life-giving spiritual water (John 4:10 and 7:37), and as the Shepherd guided those coming out of the great tribulation to springs of the water of life (7:17). We will also see the river of the water of life in 22:1, coming from God's throne. As if the guarantee of such blessings is not enough, the Lord reminds all who overcome (see 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) that He will be their God and they will be as His sons and daughters.

What follows in verse 8 is a listing of the character and final destiny of the wicked. We see the **fearful** (cowards who avoid the stress and conflict resulting from spreading the gospel truth - see Heb. 10:38-39), the **unbelieving** (those who



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refuse to accept Christ and His salvation, denying the Lord), the **abominable** (those who pollute their hearts with the “unclean things of the whore’s cup of abominations” and choose to remain morally foul, despite the consequences – see I Cor. 6:9-10), **murderers** (those who willfully take the life of innocent people, showing no respect for life and God – see Gal. 5:19-21), **fornicators** or **immoral persons** (the sexually immoral, or those who satisfy sexual desires outside of the rightful place of the marriage bed – see Heb. 13:4), **sorcerers** (those who practiced witchcraft and magical arts, especially using drugs or potions or spells, with the intent to deceive and control others for spiritual or monetary advantage), **idolaters** (those who worship gods other than Jehovah, whether a statue/ image/ object or even any deified pursuit in life – see Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:5, I Cor. 5:11), and finally **all liars** (those who practice deceit, whether by word, silence, action or intimation). This listing is given as a sober warning to the living, as the fate of these unrepentant sinners is to be thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, the second death.

John is now approached by one of the angels who had the seven bowls of wrath. He is invited to see the bride, the wife or the Lamb. John is again taken away in the Spirit to a high mountain to see the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. This is similar to verse 2, where such a scene was previously beheld. In verse 5 of chapter 5, John was expecting to see the Lion of Judah and instead saw the Lamb. John now expects to see a beautiful bride, but instead sees a brilliant holy city, the church. In Ezekiel 40:2, the prophet saw the framework of a holy city (the church to come), and now John sees the church in its final glory at home with God and the Lamb, with God’s perfect fellowship and perfect protection of His people. Of course, it must be kept in mind that we are seeing a physical description of spiritual concepts. There is not a literal city in heaven, but there certainly will be that which this glorious city symbolizes. Indeed, the individual saints of the church, the Bride of Christ, comprise this city, or New Jerusalem. The beautiful description of this city in the following section must also be understood in the same manner.

Verses 11 through 21 describe the radiant glory of the bride, or New Jerusalem. Her appearance is like crystal-clear jasper, which is foreign to our understanding, but probably suggesting here the brilliance of a clear diamond (see also 4:3), illuminating heaven with God’s light (22:5). There are no longer any

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enemies to invade the 'city', but the "great and high wall" is symbolic of perfect security and protection in God. There are 12 gates (12 being the number of organized religion, specifically the old and new covenants of God), which here serve as portals or entrances. They are likened to the 12 tribes of Israel, by which God's collective people came into a defined relationship with their Lord. The gates are regularly spaced along each of the four walls of the city, allowing entry in all directions as people from every kindred and tongue and nation will have complete access to God's throne (5:9; 7:9). Twelve foundation stones underlie the wall of the city, with the names of the 12 apostles written on them. We see a merging of the old and new covenants into a single structure, as was suggested by Jesus (Matt. 19:28).

The angel who had spoken to John now has a golden measuring reed or rod in his hands. He uses it to measure (evaluate and ensure the perfection of) the **city** (as it provides the needs of the saints), the **wall** (and its security for the saints), and the **gates** (for the means of entrance into the city). The city is a perfect cube of 12,000 furlongs or stadia (about 1500 miles) per side. It is estimated that the holy of holies in the tabernacle was a perfect cube of 10 X 10 X 10 cubits, and in Solomon's temple it was a 20 X 20 X 20 cubit cube. This likens the holy city to the holy of holies in the temple, and means that the righteous of God (His holy priests) will forever serve Him directly in His presence. The wall is 72 yards (144 cubits, again a multiple of twelve), likely in thickness, more than adequate to provide full spiritual security. As for the meaning of the "human" versus "angelic" measurements, there is most likely a confusion in the translation from the Greek. A better translation would read as, "*...and he measured the wall, 144 cubits as a man measures it, here measured by the angel*", or perhaps as "*The angel measured it as a man would measure it, 144 cubits.*"

The wall is also of the appearance as clear jasper (vs. 11), and the city as gold so pure that it is also clear. This is probably saying that its brilliance reflects God's glory as if it was finely polished glass. Verses 18 through 20 describe the twelve foundation stones as adorned with all manner of precious stones, suggesting not just beauty but eternal value. The account proceeds to describe each level as consisting of the most beautiful gemstones that could be imagined in the ancient mind. The twelve gates are described as each consisting of a single pearl, evoking the feeling of finding the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45-46).

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Finally, the street of the city was pure gold (vs. 11 & 18), again highly polished to completely reflect the glory of the Father. It is not as if we should really expect to see earthly jasper and gold in heaven, but that the spiritual beauty it reflects is described in the strongest possible terms of beauty that humans can comprehend. Isaiah said of God, *“To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?”* (Isa. 40:18). What we shall “see” in heaven is beyond our imaginations (remember I John 3:2 and I Cor. 2:9).

The temple of God standing in heaven was mentioned in several places in the previous chapters (11:1-2; 11:19; 14:7; 15:5; 16:1). Verse 22 of chapter 21 now reveals that the temple is no longer seen in heaven, as *“...the tabernacle of God is among men”* (21:3). There no longer is a need for a separate spiritual “structure” to “house” God apart from His children. God’s glory now completely fills the heavenly city, and His glory provides all illumination for His people. The contrast of God’s truth & light with sin & darkness could not be any clearer than with this illustration. To underscore this point, John writes that the nations will walk by this light, and the kings of earth shall bring their glory into this heavenly light. We remember scriptures such as Isaiah 60:3 & 49:6 and Rev. 5:9 & 7:9, showing the redeemed of all peoples and nations who have entered the Kingdom. They have all renounced their own ‘glory’ and laid it all at the feet of the King in order to walk only by His light.

As the chapter closes, John states that the gates of the heavenly city shall never be closed. This is from the passage in Isaiah 60:11: *“And your gates will be open continually; they will not be closed day or night, so that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession.”* There is no longer any reason to close the gates, as there are no longer any enemies left to invade the city (including pain and death). As the gates of God’s holy city under Christ were always open to all who wished to enter, so the gates have now been finally closed spiritually so nothing unclean can ever enter.