

This morning we will finish our study of Revelation 20. We will consider two main subjects, what happens when the 1000 years are ended which is covered in verses 7-10 and the final judgement as it is depicted in verses 11-15.

So verse 7 says, “And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city....” Now this is highly symbolic. We are not to expect all the saints gathered in one place surrounded a massive enemy army, but we are to expect something that corresponds to this. The restraint that Satan is under at the present time is going to be removed and so he will be free to deceive the nations in a way that he has not been free during the 1000 years and organize war against the people of God.

By the way, the names “Gog and Magog” come from Ezekiel 38 and are a way of referring to the nations in opposition to God and his people which connects that opposition to the opposition there has always been against God and his people. Just like so much else in the biblical teaching about salvation and judgement, there are these themes that run through history and come to a climax at the end of the age. So we are not to be looking for any specific nation as the fulfillment of these names, but see them as pointing to the enemies of God and his people in this period when God will remove the restraints that have bound Satan during the 1000 years which is symbolic for whole period of history from the time when Christ was on earth until just before the end of the world.

So just before the Lord Jesus returns there will be this short period when Satan will be released from his prison. He will be able to deceive the nations and he will organize the nations to battle against the saints.

What is described in these verses is consistent with other passages of Scripture that speak of a time of great tribulation for the church just before the end of the world. Jesus speaks of this in Matthew 24:21, “For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.”

Paul also teaches this in 2 Thessalonians 2. In that chapter he is telling his readers not to believe those who were teaching that Christ had already returned. In verse 3 he writes, “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,” [Verse 4] “who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming to be God.”

So the Bible teaches that there will be an increase in Satanic activity and influence during a short period just before the return of Christ. During that period there will be a level of persecution against the church that will be greater than any of the persecution that has been experienced before that time. In Matthew 24:22, Jesus

says, “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”

Anthony Hoekema in his book called *The Bible and the Future* writes about this, “[I]t would appear that there will ... be a final, climactic tribulation just before Christ returns. This tribulation will not be basically different from the earlier tribulations which God’s people have had to suffer, but will be an intensified form of those earlier tribulations.” (p. 151)

So that is what verses 7-9a are teaching. A final great persecution just before the end of the world as a result of God releasing Satan from the restrictions he is under at the present time – which restrictions make possible the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church in this present time.

There is another wrinkle to this. Persecution is not the only possible way that these verses are fulfilled. Notice what our text in Revelation actually says. It says that Satan will be released from his prison “and that he will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth,” that he will “gather them for battle.” So this is about the nations being more and more deceived by Satan and it is about Satan and his followers making war on the saints. Certainly that happens through persecution, but it is not the only way. Satan blinds the nations through deception and that deception itself is also part of the way that he make war against the people of God.

Again we turn to Matthew 24 to give us a little more detail about what things will be like when Satan is released from his prison just before the return of Christ. Listen to what Jesus says about this time period in Matthew 24:23-25, “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christ’s will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand.”

So the Scripture also describe the time when Satan is released from prison as a time of deception and false teachers who will lead many astray. This is not surprising when we think of the fact that Satan will be released to deceive the nations, but Jesus’ warning alerts us to that fact that this deception will attempt to lead stray even the elect. The point is that this time of great deception will be a danger for the visible church. The elect will be kept from falling to this false teaching, but the non-elect in the visible church will fall away during that time.

Now what does this mean for us? It does not appear that we are yet in this time that Revelation 20:7-9a describes because the gospel is still being blessed around the world. There are places in the world where the church is growing very rapidly and that suggest that Satan is still bound so that he is not able to deceive the nations at least to the extent of keeping the gospel from rescuing some people from his kingdom. At the same time the nature of biblical prophecy makes it impossible to be to precise about the exact timing of their fulfillment.

However, It does seem that we are seeing an increase in persecution all around the world and we do seem to be moving towards greater persecution in our society and the growth in the extent of the blindness of the majority of people in our society when it comes to right and wrong suggests that we may be coming closer to the situation described in our texts and the other texts that I have mentioned.

Regardless of where exactly we are on God's timeline, its clear enough that we are in a time of intense Satanic deception. That is clear enough from what is going on around us in the world and the ungodly things that people believe and do and the increasing aggression against the church especially when it comes to the biblical teaching about gender and sexuality and marriage.

And we need to be aware of our own weakness and vulnerability. Just think about Jesus' warning that the false prophets are seeking "to lead stray, if possible, even the elect." There is incredible pressure on us to conform to the thinking of the world and the fact that so many confessing Christians succumb to the satanic deception that is bombarding us shows us how dangerous it is.

All of this puts an extra urgency on being serious about our relationship with God. Our relationship with God is always a matter of great urgency, but the kind of pressure we are under at the current time just highlights that and so does the likelihood of that pressure even increasing further. Peter puts it like this in his 1st epistle, 5:8, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...."

So wherever we are relative to the time when Satan will be released from prison, the reminder that a time is coming when he will be allowed to be even more active than he is now, impresses upon us how important it is for us to be sober rather than careless and firm in our faith rather than weak and cavalier about our faith. Or think of what Paul says in Ephesians 6:11, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you might be able to stand against the schemes of the devil."

So there is a time coming just before the end when Satan will be released from prison. He will come out to deceive the nations. And he will gather them for battle. And wherever we are relative to that time, it is a call for each of us to be very diligent about resisting temptations and nurturing our faith through prayer and through fellowship with God and through our involvement in the life of the church.

But notice next how this all ends. Satan is released from prison. The nations are deceived and gathered against the saints. And then we read "but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

The Bible describes the final victory over Satan and his followers in a number of ways. Here it is in terms of fire from heaven, the enemies being consumed and the devil thrown into the lake of fire. The beast and the prophet are already there. Their destruction has already been described earlier in the book of Revelation.

Revelation is not at all concerned with chronology except in the very broadest terms. What matters here is that all the enemies of Christ and his people end up in the lake of fire.

Clearly this is meant to be an encouragement for the people of God. Satan is real. He is powerful. And as we come closer to the end, God is going to give him more freedom to deceive the nations and to make war on his people. But we know how it is going to end. We know that Jesus has already won the victory and that he will bring that victory to its conclusion by fire from heaven which will consume his and our enemies and they are all going to end up in the lake of fire.

We may wonder why God releases Satan from his prison and gives him this time to deceive the nations and make war on the saints in even a greater way. This is another version of the question of why God allowed Satan to tempt Adam and Eve in the first place and why his plan includes such a long and difficult road for his people. It is the same question as why God's plan includes so much persecution and so much temptation for his people.

One thing that we can say, just on the basis of the nature of the Bible is that God reveals his glory in and through the different events that make up history. God reveals his mercy and grace as the one who saves his people from their sins. God reveals his love and care for his people by rescuing them from danger or by strengthening them to remain faithful all the way to death. God reveals justice and might in the victories he wins over his enemies. When we think of the way that the book of Revelation describes what is going on in the world in the light of the plans and purposes of God, again and again we see the glory of God as he sustains his people and judges his enemies. We see this point made explicitly in the many passages in the book of Revelation that describe the worship in heaven in response to what God has done and is doing on earth.

Think again of the song of Moses and of the Lamb. Revelation 15:3-4, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." God reveals his glory in his deeds in history and those are the kinds of deeds we read of in the Bible – in a history that includes a great deal of struggle and difficulty for his people.

Another biblical theme that illumines the question of why God allows Satan to be released and make even greater war against his people, is the theme of chastisement or discipline. 1 Peter 1 speaks of this in the context of persecution. Peter acknowledges that his readers have been grieved by various trials and the reason is "so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

God tests the genuineness of our faith through suffering and in particular persecution and spiritual warfare. And the result is a faith that is more pure – a faith from which some of the dross has been removed. One of God's way to grow his people is through putting them in situations that test their faith. Will we continue to

trust God's love and care even if we are called to give up everything else but God in order to remain faithful to God? The book of Revelation makes it clear that God calls us to be faithful even if it means literally giving our lives. And lesser forms of persecution or temptation test us to see if we are willing to give up money, time, comfort, pleasure, for the greater pleasure and satisfaction of living for God.

And so when we wonder why in the world God would release Satan from his prison so that he will deceive the nations and gather them to make war against his people, the Bible does not answer all of our questions, but it does give us some reasons – God reveals much of his glory in saving his people and winning the victory over sin and Satan and God's way for growing and strengthening the faith and endurance of his people includes facing temptations and trials including the spiritual warfare that belongs to the Christian life.

So we come to the great white throne. Verses 11-15. This is the throne of the final judgment. And it is this final judgment that gives meaning to life. If there were no judgment at the end of our lives – nothing would ultimately matter. This is the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes grapples with the apparent meaningless of life. 1:2, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All of vanity." The answer comes at the end of the book 12:13-14, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. 'Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.'"

So right near the end of the Bible we have the great white throne. Verse 11, "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them." We have seen before in our study of Revelation that the color white represents righteousness and justice in God's judgment upon the wicked. When white is worn by the saints it represents the righteousness of Christ, but also it is a symbol of their vindication in the light of their persecution by the wicked. Here it is clear that the whiteness of the throne represents perfectly righteous judgment.

The one who is seated on it is so great and majestic and glorious that "earth and sky fled away." The earth and the sky represent the created order. From the human perspective there is nothing more solid and substantial than the earth and the sky. Generations come and go, but the earth and the sky remain. But here they are described as fleeing away before the presence of the one seated on the throne of final judgment.

The Bible teaches that at the end of the world heaven and earth will be renewed, but the process of that renewal will include the disintegration of the created order. 2 Peter 3:10 says "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (or burned up)."

All of this emphasizes the greatness of God and the fact that heaven and earth do not have an independent existence. Heaven and earth do not just exist on their own. Only God exists on his own. And thus he is the only place of stability that exists. This text that describes God on his throne is intended to fill us with awe before

the great glory and majesty of God. The creation itself will be unraveled on the final day of judgment. The only solid place will be in God himself.

Then John sees “the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” Verse 13 “And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them according to what they had done.”

There are a number of books mentioned here. There is the book of life. And there are the books that contain a record of everything that every person in the world has done. The focus of this text is more on those whose names were not written in the book of life. There will be much greater attention given to the end of those who were written in the book of life in the following chapters. But in this passage, there is just a reminder that there is a book of life and those whose names are written in it will not be thrown into the lake of fire.

So the dead will be raised and judged according to how they have lived their lives. And only those whose names are written in the book of life will escape the lake of fire, which is the second death.

But we will all be judged. All the dead are judged, both believers and unbelievers. It is not so that unbelievers are judged and not believers. Every single person will be judged. But those whose names are written in God’s book of life will not be thrown in the lake of fire. Believers will be judged righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, but their works will also be judged. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul writes to believers, “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” Our lives as believers will be evaluated and our reward in eternity will be influenced by how we have lived our lives in the service of Christ. Even though we are saved by the righteousness of Christ, how we live as believers matters greatly and the fact that we will be judged makes that very clear.

But there is a book of life. And it is just mentioned here to make it clear that on the day of judgment there will be those who are not thrown into the lake of fire. And what the symbol of the book of life emphasizes is God’s sovereign choice when it comes to those who are saved. It is significant that what is written in the book of life is not deeds, but names. The other books contain the record of deeds, but the book of life is said to contain names. Verse 15 says that “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life....” This is a reference to election.

Ephesians 1:4 says that God “chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world.” The book of life is the book of those who have been chosen to life. Certainly how we live as Christians matters. Indeed, faith and obedience are signs that we have been chosen. But at the end of the day, we are believers because God has chosen us for salvation and this choice is based on God’s own decision to include us in the number of the saved. As Paul quotes in Romans 9:15, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion

on whom I have compassion.” And Paul continues in verse 16 of Romans 9, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

It is significant in our text that Death and Hades were also thrown into the lake of fire. Hades is the abode of the dead. It is associated with death. These are thrown into the lake of fire along with the wicked. The point here is that Jesus has won the victory over death. 1 Corinthians 15:26 says, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” In the end because of Jesus’ victory over sin and death and Satan there is going to be a great separation between life and death. The lake of fire will be the place of death. Those who go there will suffer eternal death, which is eternal separation from God and eternally suffering his wrath. On the other hand in the new creation there will be no death. There will only be life – eternally in loving relationship with God experiencing his love and living for his glory.

This picture of the great white throne stands near the end of the book of Revelation. It stands as the transition between this age and the age to come. Chapter 21 begins with the new heaven and the new earth. Between now and then is the great white throne.

And that puts all of life into perspective. Just as the biblical story ends up at the great white throne from which people are directed either to the lake of fire or the new creation, so human existence ends up at that great white throne. For those who are trusting in Jesus and living for him, the great white throne is a sign of hope because in Christ we will be directed into the new heaven and the new earth. For those who are not in Christ, the great white throne leads to the lake of fire. For those who are on that path, there is still time to repent and turn to the Lord. Surely one of the reasons for this awful teaching about the second death and the lake of fire is to awaken sinners to their danger so that they might yet turn to the Lord. If there is anyone here who is not faithfully following Christ – there is still time to turn from your sins and receive salvation. I urge you in the light of this passage to escape the lake of fire and the second death by turning to Jesus and receiving the gracious salvation that he offers to whoever will repent and believe.