

# 29

REVELATION 20: 1 – 10

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## JESUS RETURNS AS KING TO CONTINUE HIS FINAL CLEAN-UP

It can be very discouraging to contemplate the disturbing reality that there is so much evil in this world. Is Jesus Christ really a King, who sits on the throne at God's right hand to govern all things? Sometimes you wonder.

But then, remember that Revelation was written to encourage suffering and persecuted Christians. The message is that Christ is indeed King, and that he will return as King, glorious and victorious. This is what we have come to recognize as the main theme of the book: *the victory of Jesus Christ and his church over every enemy*. This is the theme that appears again in the passage we look at here, the first part of Rev. 20.

It is also good to remember that the order in Rev. 17–20 is not chronological. The visions we have seen in Rev. 17, 18 and 19 show us simultaneous events that happen on the same day. We see the effects of the seventh bowl of God's wrath, poured out in Rev. 16:17–21. In Rev. 20 we are still in the middle of the events on this last day of history, the day of Jesus' second coming, the day of the final judgment.

The world is out of kilter due to the evil work of Satan and company. But the good news is that proper order will be restored. In Rev. 19 the two beasts were removed from the scene and put into their proper place, the lake of

fire and sulphur. Now Satan follows. The returning Christ will continue his clean-up.

This makes this a passage full of encouragement for you and me today.

## SATAN RESTRAINED

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At the end of Rev. 19 we witnessed, through the eyes of the apostle John, the destruction of the beast and the false prophet. *The two of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur.* When Jesus returns as warrior, the final clean-up of the evil in this world has begun.

However, this is just the beginning. The major evil power behind those two is still alive and active. That is Satan. The final clean-up on the day of Christ's return is not done yet. It continues. It must continue, for there will only be peace when the grand-master of all evil himself will be eliminated. This is what is going to happen next.

But not right away in the beginning of this passage. First, John's vision transports us back in history. In the v.1–6 we get, in a few broad strokes, the big picture of history as it unfolds on earth and in heaven, a picture that is full of encouragement for us, today. For it shows that our history leads to the unavoidable and permanent end of the fiercest enemy of God and his church.

During a symbolic period of one-thousand years before his final and absolute end, Satan will be bound. We will learn more about the implications of this restraining order, but let's remember this from the start, that, despite the terrible things you see happen in this world, despite the ruinous influence of the antichristian powers we are faced with, Jesus Christ **IS** King. And he will return as King. He will return with royal authority and power. And everything is firmly under control, all the time.

John sees *an angel coming down from heaven* (v.1). His point of departure tells us that, whatever he is going to do, he acts on behalf of Almighty God, powerful and with great, divine authority.

With him he carries two props that confirm his power and authority: a key and a heavy chain. What is he going to do with those things?

The key is *the key to the bottomless pit*, or the Abyss. We have heard about the “Abyss” before. For instance in Rev. 9:1,2. This image of an ‘underworld’, an awful place deep underground, symbolizes the place where dark powers, demons, evil spirits are dwelling and waiting for God’s eternal punishment. Think of ‘hell’ before the Last Judgment. After that it is called the “fiery lake of burning sulphur”.

And what about this heavy and strong chain? Apparently someone is going to be shackled and locked up.

Then John sees again the most frightening of all the horrible creatures he has seen in any of his visions so far. It is the enormous fiery red dragon. We have met this fire-breathing monster in Rev. 12. He is God’s most formidable, most notorious, and absolutely irreconcilable adversary.

This shows also in his other names. It’s the same list as in Rev. 12:9: *the ancient serpent*, that cunning liar from Gen.3, *the devil*, *Satan himself...*, just to emphasize his major role as the very root, the source of all evil under the sun.

Well then, God’s angel, coming down from heaven, is so incredibly powerful, strong and big that effortlessly he grabs this enormous monster – think T. Rex, but then ten times larger and more ferocious! The verbs John is using demonstrate how overpowering this angel is. Look at the power and strength he uses.

He grabs the dragon, binds it with his chain, throws it in the Abyss, closes this dark, smoking hole with a heavy lid, locks it and seals it. Done! He will not escape.

Now remember, it is a vision. This whole impressive action has a symbolic meaning. What we are seeing in this graphic picture, is that God’s fiercest enemy is being restrained. His power and influence are being restricted. In the glorified Christ, Satan found his Master. He can no longer do what he wants to do. He has no longer the freedom to reach his goal which is to undo the work of Jesus and to destroy the consequences of this work. God’s power will prevent him from getting there.

All this will last for one thousand years. When it comes to the interpretation of these thousand years, also called “the millennium”, Rev. 20 is the most

controversial and hotly debated chapter in Revelation, perhaps in the whole Bible.<sup>11</sup>

This book reflects the view that is also expressed in the Reformed confessions. Since all the numbers in Revelation have a symbolic meaning, also here we should not be thinking of a literal period of a thousand years. As a cube of 10x10x10 is symbolic for completeness and perfection, so a thousand years represents not only a long, but also a perfect and complete time period.

So, yes, although we do not know the exact length, we are talking real time, with a beginning and an end. In v.2 and 3 we find out that the beginning and the end of the thousand years are marked by two events. It begins when Satan is bound, and it ends when he will be set free for a very short time.

What does it mean that Satan is 'bound' or 'restricted'? Does the Bible say other things about Satan being restricted? Yes, it does. In chapter 12:23, 31 of the Gospel of John we hear Jesus say, when he predicts his own death: *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified..... Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.* Think also of Luke 10:18, where Jesus says *I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.*

In other words, Satan is bound, his power is restrained at Jesus' first coming. He is expelled, driven out, as the result of your Saviour's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. That's when it begins, this one thousand year time-period.

Here is the picture. Before Jesus came, only Israel was God's special people, the people of the covenant, chosen to share in God's saving grace. All other nations were in Satan's grip, covered in moral and spiritual darkness. But that would change. To Abraham God had said, *You will be the father of a multitude of nations* (Genesis 17:4-5), *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Genesis 12:3). And God did not forget his promise: Jesus came.

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11 There are three major millennial views, *Premillennialism, Postmillennialism and Amillennialism.*

However, within each of these views there are a number of varieties. Brief descriptions are given in the introduction. For those who want to learn more about it I recommend C.P. Venema's *The Promise of the Future*, Banner of Truth Trust, 2000.

To be sure, throughout Israel's history in the Old Testament individuals from other nations have joined God's people. And there is a longing in the Old Testament for other nations to join worshipping the One True God. But only after Jesus died, arose, and went to heaven, did the Holy Spirit open up the whole world for the preaching of the gospel of God's saving grace in Christ.

Then the church began to grow and spread among Jews and Gentiles, to the ends of the earth. Satan could not stop it. And he will still not be able to stop it.

What began in the Book of Acts and continues today, is the result of the restriction of Satan's power. Despite persecution the church is everywhere and the Bible can be read and heard in many languages. The glorious majesty of Jesus our King will keep Satan from destroying the church. As a matter of fact, gnashing his teeth in fury, the devil is forced to see the work of Jesus bear fruit.

Will this go on forever? No, only *until the 1000 years were ended*. Then Satan *must be released for a little while*. In v.7-9 we will find out that this will give him a very, very short time, only to be sent to his final destruction at Jesus' return as glorious and victorious King.

That's why the thousand year period stands for the entire gospel era, between our Saviour's first and second coming. This is the exciting time we live in today. From his throne in heaven Jesus guarantees that his work continues. Satan is restrained and he can do no more damage than God's superior power allows him to.

But yes, indeed, the devil can still do a lot of damage today. Let us not forget that. Satan's restraining order does not make him entirely powerless. We are not living in, or heading for a thousand years of universal peace, a golden age of unhindered freedom and unprecedented prosperity for the Christian church before Jesus returns.

It does not say that Satan was restrained to make such a golden age possible. Nowhere does the Bible promise this.

On the contrary, as the gospel makes progress, persecution goes on too. The growth of the church triggers growing opposition, hatred, and resistance.

It is true, the devil, who *prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour* (1 Peter 5:8) can indeed do much damage. But there is one thing he cannot do today. He cannot muster enough power to put an end to the saving work of Jesus.

This is so encouraging. Long before Jesus' return we may know already that evil is on its last legs. What happens to Satan during the thousand years tells us already how the story is going to end. Jesus can handle him, today already.

The frightening dragon will become the pathetic loser.

## THE KINGDOM SECURED

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Then another scene appears in John's vision (v.4-6). The apostle John was familiar with persecution. And throughout the centuries large numbers of Christians have been and are being tortured and killed. Others are being ridiculed or marginalized. Does that make the Christian faith a failure?

There are many who want you to believe this. "Do you really think that Christianity is still relevant and has a future? Do you not see that many churches are empty and that Christians only survive in the margins of our society? What do you think will be left of it a hundred years from now?"

But John turns our eyes to heaven. And the first thing he sees are *thrones, on which were seated those to whom the authority to judge was committed*. Who are they? Many scholars think of "the souls of the martyrs" mentioned in the next sentence of v.4. But it does not say so. At the end of v.4 these 'souls' of the martyrs are said to reign, not to judge.

It might be better to think of a heavenly supreme court that is called to 'judge' those martyrs, as well as other believers who die. This court declares them worthy to come to life in the first resurrection, and to reign with Christ!

John then sees *the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the Word of God...* the martyrs who had suffered and were killed for their faith. Then the ESV (also the NIV) continues "and who had

not worshiped the beast and had not received the mark of the beast". There is a suggestion that this is an added description of those same martyrs.

But it actually says: "the souls of those martyrs and [the souls] of those who had not worshiped the beast".

In other words, the "souls" that John is seeing include others who may not have been martyred, but who died as people who refused to worship the antichristian powers in this world. That is all faithful believers.

John sees the souls of all who die in Jesus Christ *coming to life to reign (as kings) with Christ for a thousand years*, whether they died as martyrs, or died a natural death, or in any other way. That is what we believe, right? All God's children who die here will be with the Lord in heaven.

"It is true," says John, "I see them! There they are, fully alive for the full time, till the day that the thousand years are ended. The glorious day of Jesus' second coming."

This "coming to life in heaven" he calls *the first resurrection*. This means that there must also be a second resurrection. The latter is the resurrection of the bodies, which will happen when Jesus returns, on the last day of history. Here he sees "souls in heaven".

This is so full of comfort. We do not know what 'souls' look like. But we do know, when God's children die here on earth, they come to life in heaven, right away! As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it in Question and Answer 42: "for those who die in Christ, death becomes an entrance into eternal life." The first resurrection!

Do you believe this? Do you trust John's vision when you have to say farewell to your loved ones who die as God's children? We say sometimes that 'we have lost a loved one'. But that is not really true. You have lost something if you cannot find it; if you do not know where it is. I can say, for instance, "I lost my car-keys. I don't remember where I put them, and I have no idea where to find them".

But that is different with believers who have died. We can no longer see them and for a while we can no longer communicate with them. That can be hard. But it does not mean that we have lost them. We know where they are.

It is so amazing if you come to think of it. The moment of their death on earth turns out to be a glorious moment of great victory. Remember what Jesus said to Mary & Martha: *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies* (John 11:25 [NIV]). And really, this is what happens today, all the time!

The souls of those who believe in the Saviour Jesus and have died in him, continue to live with him in glory, in his Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of his people. And in this Kingdom the values of this world are turned upside down, now already. The oppressed find justice. The dead live. The despised rule.

Oh sure, we can ask many questions that no one can answer. What do these souls look like? What does it mean and how does that work, “to reign with Christ”?

But do not worry about those questions, says John. These souls belong completely to God, and so *they are blessed and holy*, now already. They died the first death, here on earth. But they do not have to be afraid for the second death. They are beyond its power. The second death is the eternal death, God’s unrestrained wrath with no chance of parole.

No, with the first resurrection behind them, they may now look forward to the second one, when the souls will be re-united with their glorious bodies, to be ushered into the New Jerusalem.

This is such an encouraging vision. From here, the point of view from below, Satan and his evil buddies appear to be pretty successful. The church is under attack and continues to lose terrain to the powerful antichristian culture we live in. When Christians are a weak and marginalized minority, when powerful lobby-groups line up against them, is there any hope for survival, never mind victory?

To the world it looks like Christians have been defeated. Oppressing governments are powerful and getting away with murder, sometimes literally! Christian communities are being wiped out, then here, then there. And if that is not the case, much of Christianity has done a good job in making itself irrelevant in our modern culture.

Does God not care? Is he really in control? Can anything undo this depressing picture?

But the view from above, in 4–6, tells us, if you want to see the full picture, you must include heaven. There we can see that those who belong to Jesus, reign with the glory of kings and serve with dedication of priests. They experience the reality *that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us* (Romans 8:18).

And what a glory it is! Ruling with Christ, communion with Christ, rejoicing with Christ, celebrating Christ's victory – now already. From above we see that God's Kingdom is secured – now already. Today, the souls of the King's people live in the presence of the Holy God and the exalted Christ.

This is such a tremendous comfort. It fills you with so much hope and courage. As it turns out, you cannot defeat Christian believers. It is impossible. Even when demonic forces ravage the church, all they are doing is putting more and more Christians in positions of real power.

John also answers, at least partly, another question that may come up when we try to wrap our head around this astounding vision. What about those who died during the thousand year period, but not in Christ? What about the folks who did worship the beast and who did have the mark of the beast? John mentions them in v.5.

Those dead do not come to life with Christ in the first resurrection. After all, they refused to live with Jesus here on earth, and this will not change after they die. Then their final destination will not be with Jesus Christ either.

No, their souls remain in the deadly grip of evil for the entire time, until the end of the thousand year era, the day of the second resurrection when also their souls will be re-united with their bodies. What this will mean for them will come later, in the last part of Rev.20.

## **S**ATAN DESTROYED

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Since we believe the thousand years to be the time between Jesus' first and second coming, John's words in v.7, *when the thousand years are over,*

imply that Jesus' return is about to happen. This brings us, in John's visions, back to the time of all the events of Rev. 17, 18 and 19. We are back at the events that unfold on the last day, the day of the completion of Jesus' victory.

In the "flash-back", so to speak, which we have seen in the v.1-6, we were encouraged and comforted to learn that it was actually clear all along, since Jesus' first coming, that he was going to win this victory.

So, yes, when the thousand years are over, Satan is going to be released from his prison in the Abyss. His restraining order will be lifted, as announced in v.3. He will be free to go and deceive the nations; free to go and unite mankind in one antichristian front against God, against Jesus Christ, and against the Christian church. One more try. And he might succeed.

That sounds scary. But remember, we are on the last day. With royal power the returning Christ is working on his final clean-up. And God remains in control. Satan does not escape from his dungeon. He does not fight his way out of the Abyss.

No, he *will be released*. Somebody stronger than him and with authority over him has to do that. God, or perhaps the glorified Christ.

Also, his release will be at God's time and only for the short time God has set for it. In other words, Satan's "freedom" on the day of Jesus' victory only serves God's plan. It will expose the depth of his evil nature. And it will show at the same time his powerlessness, and how much he deserves what is coming.

Satan's goal has always been to wipe the church of Jesus Christ from the face of the earth. And he will hang on to that to the bitter end. He is not giving up. And when the end is near, he will be given more room to pursue this, to the point that he will manage to pull out all the stops and rally all the troops he can find.

Indeed, he will be able to unite the nations, the peoples *at the four corners of the earth* for a massive assault on the church and on the Christian faith. More and more the Christian believers have it coming from all over the world, a huge accumulation of hateful attacks, oppression, and hostilities.

In this vision it comes to us in the image of a huge army. The numbers are staggering: *like the sand of the sea*. . . . With the qualification *Gog and Magog* John refers to powerful enemies of God's people Israel in the Old Testament: Gog, the prince of Magog (Ezekiel 38 and 39). It is a frightening name for a strong enemy, who is filled with so much hatred, that he was almost successful in his attempts to destroy God's people.

Here the name becomes a symbol for God's most fanatic, powerful and final enemies to wage war against Christ and his church. It looks like it might even work.

Verse 9 pictures a frightening scene. It says that these enormous armies *surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city*. The word "camp" reminds of Old Testament Israel as they were travelling. They were free from slavery but had not yet arrived in the Promised Land. They were camping out in the wilderness, which made them pretty vulnerable.

Today, God's church is also travelling, freed from the power of sin, but still on its way to the new heaven and the new earth. Still camping out in the wilderness of this world. That makes us quite vulnerable, with the hostilities coming from all directions.

This passage is full of military imagery. But Satan's war comes also with religious, philosophical, cultural, social and economic attacks. Whatever works for Satan, he can use it all.

Today this whole idea of uniting people from all over the world under Satan's leadership in support of one cause is not as farfetched as it may sound. He only has to send out one message with a cool-sounding 'hashtag' and add, "Like me on Facebook, follow me on Twitter and all other social media", and it will go viral in no time! There they all come, from the four corners of the earth.

But as it turns out, all this impressive and frightening display of power only leads to Satan's final and permanent defeat. Yes, what we are seeing here, looks dark and gloomy. It is the same battle that is also mentioned in Rev. 16:14, 16; Rev. 17:14 and Rev. 19:19, 20: the great battle of Armageddon.

But it is not even a real battle. It is over before it starts. *Fire came down from heaven and consumed them*. The end is swift, sudden, and unexpected. On

the last day of history, the glorified Christ appears as King and his royal power consumes the enemies. In one sweep they all go up in a puff of smoke.

Nothing and no one can stop the returning King, Jesus Christ, when he continues his final clean-up. He did away with the beast and the false prophet and now he also successfully removes Satan himself, the ultimate source of all evil.

John sees how *the devil was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur*. He ends up where his evil cronies are, never to come out again. Here, in this most horrible place of hellish darkness and never-ending destruction and agony, all three of them will be tormented, and torment each other, for ever and ever.

Do you recognize this? Here is the complete fulfilment of what God had promised Satan in Genesis 3:15, *he will crush your head*.

Our God is true to his Word. He will reach his goal. Jesus wins!

selves and about our perception of the biblical testimony to the character of God?

3. According to v.8 the Bride's wedding dress is made of 'fine linen,' described as 'the righteous deeds of the saints.' At the same time it says that this dress is given to her. How does this help you understand what Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13?
4. What difference does it make for your daily life if you either do, or do not believe in heaven or in a life after this earthly life?

### **Chapter 28 – Revelation 19:11-21**

1. The Rider on the white horse is Christ and he is called "the Word of God". How does this help you to understand John 1:1-5 and 14?
2. Christ, the rider on the white horse, is called "The Word of God" and has a sharp sword coming out of his mouth. How does Hebrews 4:12 help you to understand what this part of the vision tells us about how Christ operates?
3. We like to stress how important it is to have a personal relationship with Jesus, who is full of compassion. We teach our children to love Jesus, because he loves them. We sing 'what a friend we have in Jesus'. Here we meet Jesus as a fierce warrior in a robe, stained with the blood of his enemies, master of the horrifying scene in v.21. What does that do to your relationship with him?
4. In Rev. 19 and 20 we read four times about "the lake of fire" (and sulphur). What is this lake of fire? Should we think of it as a literal fire? What are other images that the Bible uses to describe this place?

### **Chapter 29 – Revelation 20:1-10**

1. Few parts of Scripture have been so hotly debated as what we read in Rev. 20 about the 1000 years that Satan is bound and that Christ reigns, joined by the souls of believers who have died. Many evangelical Christians in North America hold to the premillennial or postmillennial view of these events. Explain these views and discuss what the implications are for our expectations of the end time?

2. Read Matthew 12:22-30 [in particular v.29], and also Luke 10:17-18, and John 12:31-32. Could there be a possible link between Rev. 20:2 and these passages? How would that help you to understand the 1000 years period?
3. How can we see that today we live in this period of a thousand years and that Satan's power is indeed restrained?
4. What does this passage mean with: the 1<sup>st</sup> resurrection; the 2<sup>nd</sup> resurrection; the 1<sup>st</sup> death and the 2<sup>nd</sup> death?

### Chapter 30 – Revelation 20:11-15

1. How do passages like Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6-10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 connect with Rev. 20:11-15?
2. In Rev. 19 and 20 we read how all the enemies of Christ are systematically eliminated. What is the significance of this for us today and for the future?
3. Today the reality of 'hell' as a place of never-ending punishment is not only rejected by those who do not believe in God or in an afterlife, but it is also heavily disputed by many Christians. How can a loving God punish eternally? What about the view that in the end everyone is going to be okay?
4. Those who do not believe that hell is a place of eternal punishment have sometimes turned to the idea of *annihilation* or to *universalism*. What do these terms mean and why are they consistent or inconsistent with Biblical teaching?

### Chapter 31 – Revelation 21:1-8

1. The new heaven, the new earth, the new Jerusalem are obviously the very opposite of the old heaven, the old earth and the old Jerusalem. Explain the differences between the 'old' and the 'new', and also how the 'new' versions relate to the 'old' ones.
2. What kind of connection do you see between Rev. 21:1 and Genesis 1:1?
3. The saying *I am the Alpha and the Omega* is also found in Rev. 1:8. What does this tell us about the Book of Revelation and about the visions in this book?