

17. The world's last session

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[0 : 00] Speak, O Lord, as we come to you to receive the food of your holy word. Father, we are coming to a difficult and perplexing and disputed passage.

We pray that we may be less concerned with the details we don't understand and more concerned to hear the word you have for us today.

Because we believe that this, like all of scripture, is written for our learning, is written to challenge us and to encourage us and to lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. One of the great advantages of systematic exposition of the Bible is that you are forced to consider passages that you might ignore.

I imagine a preacher flicking the way through the Bible and looking for a passage to preach on would probably not light on chapter 20 of Revelation or if he did would rapidly shut the book and look for something else.

[1 : 10] Because this is the chapter about the millennium muddle, as it's sometimes been called. And indeed, many times I've heard this passage preached on in the past and earlier days by people who are more concerned to peddle a particular line about the millennium than to say, what is this word saying to us today?

Because the millennium is indeed a muddle for most people. I don't know if you knew that on the 1st of January 2000 AD, Moses turned up at the Mount Zion Hotel in Jerusalem.

They knew he was Moses because it said that on his briefcase. And he was apparently waiting for Elijah to join him to usher in the millennium. Like most of these stories, I don't know if it's true or somebody's idea of a joke, like most of these stories, of course, you never hear what happened after it.

But that's a fair indication of how people regard the millennium. Remember all this hype about 2000 AD. 2000 doesn't matter in the slightest.

What people should have been saying was not 2000 AD, but 2000 AD. AD is what matters. The year of our Lord. The year of his triumph.

[2 : 25] The year of his reign. However, having said all that, we have come to this one passage in Scripture that does mention the millennium. Verse 4.

They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. Generally speaking, there have been three views on the millennium. And let me mention them briefly.

I prefer not to mention them at all, but it would be irresponsible not to as we try and get into this passage. There's been what's called premillennialism, a view often associated with dispensationalism.

The rapture of Christ has taken place in chapter 4, the church taken to heaven. And now in chapter 19, Christ returns. And reigns in Jerusalem, where there is a rebuilt temple, literally reigns for a thousand years.

That's a view sometimes called premillennialism. Then there is amillennialism, almost the opposite. The argument that the thousand years are in fact the whole church period when Satan is bound.

[3 : 34] Now we'll come back to that, but it's often paralleled with chapter 12, where Satan is thrown out of heaven. The problem is that Satan is not bound in chapter 12.

Satan is free to deceive, to carry out his deadly work, and he's not bound in the way that this passage suggests. And then there is postmillennialism, which argues that the millennium is actually a period of great blessing, of great revival, just before the second coming.

None of these views are totally satisfactory. It's often been said, most British Christians are panmillennialists. They think everything will pan out all right in the end.

That probably is a fair thing to say. Once I had Don Carson speaking on this, and he said, of course we sneer at our parents' generation. They talked about pre-, post-amillennial.

They talked about the whole theories about the coming of the Lord. And then he said, of course, we're more enlightened, aren't we? We just don't talk about the coming of the Lord at all.

[4 : 43] So there's no point in saying that these things don't matter. They do matter, and I'm going to try and deal with them. But as I said last week, the book of Revelation is not a Rubik's cube, which you put together and then say, look, how clever I am.

I've solved the problems that for 19 centuries and more no one has solved. No, the book of Revelation is a word for today. Even if we could work out a totally convincing and irrefutable idea of the millennium, that would be just its temporal meaning, wouldn't it?

It's its eternal meaning we are concerned with. What is God saying to us through this passage? And I suggested last week that chapters 19 and 20 are parallel passages and deal with the events surrounding the returning glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And my suggestion is that Revelation 19 shows it as a dramatic crisis event, whereas chapter 20 is dealing more fully with the kind of process.

I'll come back to that as well. Because if we're going to understand this passage, we've got to understand it in the light of the whole book. This is the end of the third vision in the book of Revelation.

[6 : 04] Remember I said, well, you probably won't remember, but I did suggest a long time ago that the book of Revelation is best understood by the recurring phrase, in the Spirit. Chapters 1 to 3, the risen Lord among the churches.

Chapters 4 to 16, the enthronement of the Lamb and the judgments on the world and the protection of the church during that time. And then this section, chapters 17 to 20, the fall of Babylon, the fall of the world, and the events which usher in the kingdom of God, the new creation, which is going to be the subjects of 21 and 22.

And I suggested too that the book of Revelation is a picture gallery. You walk around, you look at the different pictures, sometimes parallel pictures, which show you different aspects of the same reality.

Although it's very obvious we have come here to the brink of eternity. We have come to what Milton, in his poem, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, which also looks forward to his second coming, called *The World's Last Session*.

That's my title for this morning, *The World's Last Session*. So, with all that in mind then, let me say three things. There are three great truths in this passage.

[7 : 23] First of all, Satan will be destroyed. Secondly, the saints will be vindicated. And thirdly, sentence will be passed.

That's the way we're going to look at the chapter. Satan destroyed, verses 1 and 3, and verses 7 to 10. This is an event associated with the coming again of Christ.

Now, what I've said throughout the whole series on Revelation is that if we're going to understand Revelation, we've got to see it as the culmination of the whole of Scripture.

And in particular, get light from the Old Testament on what's happening. And as we come to the final chapters of Revelation, there's a great deal of light to be found from the early chapters of the Bible.

And this is the point I want to make. Remember Genesis chapter 1. There is the great creating event. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

[8 : 30] The great creating word. But there's also the process. The days of creation. As the meaning, as the implications of that event are unfolded.

And what I want to suggest is that is a key to interpreting the end time events. Just as at the beginning, there is this great creating word and then the process which follows from it, so at the end, the word of God rise out of heaven.

The word which destroys, the word which judges, as well as creates, and brings about the new creation. As I said, chapter 19, much more a dramatic crisis.

Chapter 20, much more of a process. And that, of course, is true of all God's creating, whether it's old or new creation. But what Paul says in 2 Corinthians, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature, a new creation.

Old things are passed away. All things have become new. And people often ask the question nowadays, is conversion a crisis or a process?

[9 : 40] And the true answer is it's both. There has to be a crisis. There has to be a moment when a person comes to Christ. That doesn't mean it needs to be a dramatic moment. Indeed, some people come to Christ very gently, almost without realizing it.

Other people, particularly if they've lived a life of sin and rebellion, have a dramatic conversion experience. So it's both. And so it is here. So Satan is destroyed.

Now notice, first of all, that this is carried out by an angel coming down from heaven. Very probably the angel here is Michael, who is the author of Satan's defeat in chapter 12.

And we are reminded of the character of the enemy. He is the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan. He is that all his relentless hatred to God, the cosmic power opposed to him, the dragon, whom you meet in the Old Testament in various guises, as Leviathan, in the book of Job, the serpent on the waters, in Psalm 74 and so on, associated with the power of the raging sea, which you get right through Scripture.

The raging sea opposed to God, which is why, of course, we have that wonderful passage in Mark's Gospel and in the other Gospels, when the disciples say in awe, who then is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him, relentless in hatred since the beginning.

[11 : 14] That ancient serpent, reminding us of his activity in the Garden of Eden, the story of the fall and the story of death and sin entering the world.

He is the devil and Satan, the deceiver. Now, as I say, some want to parallel this with chapter 12, where he is cast out of heaven as a result of Christ's death.

He is defeated by Michael. But the problem is, in this present age, he is extremely active. Let me just mention one text. 1 Peter, chapter 5, verse 8.

Be sober, be vigilant, for your enemy, the devil, like a roaring lion, goes about looking for someone to devour. Now, that does not sound very like being bound in the abyss with a chain which renders him inactive.

Now, what's the point of all this to us? That we have a determined enemy who has not changed and who will not and who cannot change. There can be no compromise with him.

[12 : 19] We need, as Peter tells us, to resist him. We need to battle with him. But also to remember that he will finally be defeated. When we call Jesus Christ King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as we saw last week, what that means is you have the last word.

Not just the last word over the kings and rulers of the earth, but the last word over the powers of darkness. And then in verses 7 to 10, and by the way, I haven't forgotten about verses 4 to 6. I'm not trying to ignore the millennium. I'm wanting to take these two sections together because they are in some sense as parallel. What happens is parallel with the reign of the saints.

Then a thousand years are ended, verse 7. Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth and Magog to gather them for battle. Their number is like the sand of the sea.

Now, I think we want to understand these verses. We've got to go back to the book of Ezekiel and the end of that book where, in Ezekiel 36 and 37, there's that great passage which is one of the few passages well known in Ezekiel where the valley of dry bones, the bones are brought to life by the word and spirit of God.

[13 : 36] Israel is restored to its land, which is all, in the New Testament, sorry, in the Old Testament, Israel being restored to its land is always a picture of the new creation that is to come.

Obviously, Israel was restored to our land after the exile, but equally obviously, she did not hold on to that land. And it's not simply talking, of course, about ethnic Israel.

We saw this in our studies in Romans, didn't we? That it's ethnic Israel and there is the Israel of God, all of God's people, Jew and Gentile. So this is pointing to the new creation.

Now that is followed in Ezekiel by the battle with Gog and Magog. Gog, possibly the chief, possibly another name for Satan himself, and Magog, the nations who defy God.

And then that is followed in Ezekiel by the new creation, which is represented by, of course, the restored temple and the city, which is called the Lord is There.

[14 : 36] Now you see what I'm getting at. We've got these events at the end time, the coming of Christ. But we don't have a strict chronology. Just take the Old Testament prophecies, for example, of the coming, the first coming of Christ.

Wasn't one of the basic problems that even the disciples had to reconcile them all? When were they going to happen? How did they reconcile the suffering servant and the Messiah who would reign over the nations and so on?

And mistakes were made. People got it wrong. Instead of seeing that this was a tapestry of references about the great events that would centre around the first coming of Christ when he came in great humility, lending behind, incognito, behind the enemy lines and delivering a death blow to the serpent dragon.

Now, what John is saying here is that at the end of time, on the brink of eternity, there will be a sequence of events which will be associated with the second coming, the time when he comes, not in great humility, but in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

This is not so much chronology, as I say, it's a series of parallel pictures, different views of the same reality. It seems to me the point of this little section is to show that Satan is utterly unchanged and the human heart who succumbs to the beast and the false prophet and ultimately to Satan is also unchanged.

[16:12] You see, the main point, that seems to be the main point of this section. Verse 9, they march up over the broad plane of the earth. The broad plane of the earth is another term for the four corners of the earth. I think it talks about Satan's claims for universal dominion.

Remember, after all, back in the Gospels, Satan said to the Lord Jesus Christ, I will give you the kingdoms of the world if you will bow down and worship me. In a sense, that's a commentary on what's been happening through the whole book of Revelation by the beast and particularly by the false prophet.

Satan has been claiming allegiance. Satan will be finally defeated. There is no doubt about that. That will be part of what will happen. Just as at the first coming of Christ, Jesus Christ, by his dying and rising again, began the judgment which will one day defeat him.

So that will come to an end and we are given a series of parallel views of that end. So Satan defeated. Secondly, the saints reigning, verses 4 to 6.

And no passage in the book has caused so much controversy as this. Indeed, people's whole interpretation of the book and what they have to say about the rest of the book has been judged and what they say by this.

[17:29] So if there's any strong whatever variety of pre or post here, you may be thinking what I say about this sets aside everything else I've said about the rest of the book.

No, so be it. And remember two things. That these events here are in some sense parallel. The binding of Satan and the reigning of the saints are in some senses parallel.

And secondly, it has to be consistent with the Bible's big picture from creation to new creation.

Remember what's happening here is the new creation is about to be introduced.

Just as at the beginning, the Spirit of God brooded over, swooped over the darkness and desolation and chaos. So here that same Spirit is working to bring about the reality which we'll read about in chapter 21 a few weeks time he was seated on the throne and said, behold, I'm making, I'm creating all things new.

I said, well, where do the thousand years come from? Now people say it's not mentioned in the Old Testament. In one sense it isn't. I want to suggest that the thousand years here are taken very deliberately from the promise and the Decalogue in the Ten Commandments that God will be faithful to his people throughout a thousand generations.

[18:56] Now let me explain what I mean. That doesn't mean that God is going to stop being faithful in the thousand and first generation. The thousand generations is a way of speaking about God's consistent, eternal, undying and unending faithfulness.

So what I'm suggesting here is that the reign of the saints is related to the exodus picture of the people of God being kings and priests who will reign with him and developed in the New Testament of the church reigning with Christ.

I think it goes further back still. What was Adam created to be? What was Adam created to do? He was created to be the king of the earth, the vice-regent of the earth under the king of the universe.

He was created to be the priest, the one who would care for the creation for God. Remember what a priest is. A priest is someone who comes from God to people and from people to God.

And the original mandate to Adam and Eve was to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, reign over it by producing other little images of God eventually to fill creation with images of the creator.

[20 : 23] It was also Daniel chapter 7, the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom forever and ever. Now, I want to suggest that the thousand years is actually the beginning of that eternal reign of the saints.

Now, I haven't forgotten the bit about the rest of the dead and it did not come to life until the thousand years are ended. I'm going to come to that.

What I want to suggest is this. What this picture of the reigning is doing is reminding us that God's ancient mandate, God's ancient command, God's ancient purpose for humanity is going to be fulfilled.

And it will be, just as the mandate, appear to be destroyed by Satan but was not finally destroyed. So, the destroying of Satan will set free the saints to rule creation.

You get this in Romans 8, of course, once the creation will be freed from its bondage to decay, from its curse, and once the children of God are fully like Christ and able to resume that mandate to be kings and priests of the earth.

[21 : 43] this is the first resurrection. Now, part of the problem of this is that sometimes people talk about the second resurrection which the passage does not mention.

The passage only mentions the first resurrection. Now, I know, if you like, first implies second. Let me tell you what I believe these verses mean. Verses 5, the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.

what I want to suggest is this, that the beginning of the reign, the coming of Christ, the beginning of the reign of the saints on the new earth is a sign of the eventual judgment on those who did not believe in Christ, who did not accept their ancient mandates, preparing the way for the judgment of all, believer and unbeliever, at the great white throne.

And, you'll notice, you'll notice verse 6, blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection. Over such, the second death has no power.

That means that the second death has power over some, but not over others. And so the reign on earth, I'm suggesting, begins, which is to culminate in the new creation, Revelation 21 and 22.

[23 : 14] And verse 6 shows that this is the conquering of death as well as of Satan. Let me sum up what I've been trying to say. What we've got here is a poetic, vivid, powerful insight into what will happen when the Saviour returns.

One way, it's a tremendous crisis. He will come in glory to judge the living of the dead. That will certainly happen. In another way, these events are not time-conditioned.

And this fits once again with the Old Testament. Remember sometimes the Old Testament talks about the day, or the day of the Lord. That's to say, that's the event described in 19 when Christ returns, when the king returns, and his enemies are defeated.

Other times, for example, in Isaiah 2, the days are coming, when the nations will come to Jerusalem. And it's different ways of how that kingdom will come.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Crisis and process. And who are these people who reign?

[24 : 26] They are blessed. That is to say, they are enjoying God's grace, and they are holy. They are fit to be stewards of the new creation. Just as in chapter 19, the bride made herself ready, so here is it where earth and its stewards make themselves ready for the new creation.

Now, of course, that does not solve all the problems. I'm not pretending it does. What I'm saying is it does fit in with the general teaching of scripture, the crisis and the process, the beginning and the ending corresponding to each other.

And indeed, the work of grace which is done in people's hearts. The day when Christ, the light of Christ dawns, we pass from darkness to light, we pass from death to light.

But also the gracious process by which the living spirit of God has brought us to that point. And that merges then into the final picture, verses 11 to 15, which is sentence past.

Then I saw a great white throne, him who was seated on it. The scene changes and one reality now fills the picture.

[25 : 50] When the Lamb opened the seals, John was invited and a door was opened into heaven and he saw a throne. throne. Now this throne totally dominates the universe.

There is no room for anything else as God summons the world to its last session. Once again this fits in with scripture, doesn't it? Fits in with Psalm 139, where can I flee from your spirit?

If I go up to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I go to the uttermost parts of the sea, you are there. The reality of God fills the universe now.

And Psalms, such as 96, which tell us that he comes to judge the world. In Acts 17, God will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed.

So there's echoes of earlier scriptures as we come to the last asides, the world's last session. Now there have been earlier judgments. There have been the sevenfold judgments of the seals, the trumpets and the bowls.

[26 : 55] Now these have been the judgments in history. These have been the judgments throughout history. This is the judgment on history. This is the last judgment, the final judgment, which pronounces the final verdict and the final sentence.

Now, do these words, earth and sky fled away, do these words imply the dissolution of the whole universe? universe. They might not do that.

We'll come back to that. We come to chapter 21. It simply means that God is wholly present.

Nothing is more significant now.

The whole earth, said Isaiah, is filled with his glory. The whole universe is now filled with his glory.

There's only one sentence, only one verdict that matters.

Notice one or two things. There is no one too important to be there. Verse 12, I saw the dead great. No one will be able to say, I'm so important and so significant that I don't need to be there.

[28 : 07] I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. But notice small. No one will be able to say, I'm too insignificant. What I did doesn't matter.

Who I am doesn't, as if no importance, I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. This is universal.

Everyone who ever lived, everyone who ever will live, will be there at that judgment. Then this metaphor of the book, the books, verse 12.

The books were opened, then another book was 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. Now is that salvation by works?

Here at the very end of the Bible is John turning his back on everything that he believed in and saying no, it's actually justification by works. Now that's not what's being said at all.

[29 : 09] What is being said here is parallel to what was being said in chapter 19 verse 8. The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. In other words, the book of life of the saints, of the believers, show that they have been faithful.

Oh, they've got it wrong, they've made mistakes, they've done terrible things sometimes. Ultimately, though, this record says, yes, they did not worship the beast or his image, they did not listen to the false prophet, they turned their back on evil.

But notice how the books are parallel, the book in the book of life. There is a book which has the names of those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

So you see this, once again, what we have here is this parallel truth that runs right through scripture. On the one hand, God chooses, on the other hand, we choose.

Willie's dad used to say often when he was preaching on election and conversion. The question everyone must ask is not am I one of the elect, but will I believe?

[30 : 23] That's the question all of us need to ask this morning. Not am I one of the elect, but will I believe? I think the parallel of the two books, the book of life, which is the election of God, the guarantee that every child of God will make it, the guarantee that there will be no one missing, the guarantee of the spirit will bring all the sons and daughters of God to glory.

That's the book of life. The books that were written about our lives, these are the books that show how we responded to that grace which called us. This is the end of Babylon.

Remember, this is a section that begins in chapters 17 and 18. The world passes away. The old world order, energized by Satan, dominated by the beast and the false prophet, that is gone.

And all who supported it go with it. Verse 15, these terrifying words. Anyone's name was not found written in the book of life. He was thrown into the lake of fire.

Terrifying truth. But this is the consistent message of scripture, message of the two ways. Moses said long before I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing, therefore choose life.

[31 : 47] The Lord Jesus Christ talked about the two ways, the way that leads to life and the way that leads downward to death. And the question that remains with us at the end of this chapter is

the question from the letters of the Hebrews, is it not?

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? And then, as now, there is only one way to escape, by sheltering in the Lamb.

The Lamb who died, the Lamb who gave himself, the Lamb who took the judgment that no one else might, would need to suffer it. The Lamb who is Savior as well as judge.

I'll close with these words that we sang some moments ago. if our lives belong to him, if we are the sheep of his pasture, if our names are written on his hands, so he sang some moments ago, then that dread judgment day shall bring joy to our hearts instead.

Amen. Let's pray. And God, our Father, as we have looked at that throne before which heaven and earth leads away, how we praise you for the fountain that was opened for sin and for uncleanness.

[33 : 25] we pray that everyone in this room, everyone whom we love, will come to know that, that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace and that dread judgment day shall bring joy to our hearts instead.

Amen.