

The Book of Revelation

Session 8: The Reign of God (chpts 20-22)

These last few chapters of the Book of Revelation are some of the most challenging to understand and even worse to interpret. Until this point the entire book has focused on the judgement of the world and the final demise of the great accusers. Now we switch focus and bring the terrors of this book to a happy and rightful conclusion.

The 1000 year reign of the dragon (Chpt 20)

Although this final session was designed to focus on the recreation of all things and the culmination of all things in Jesus, the beginning of this end point is the final destruction of the final beast. Recall in chapter 19 that the war against God ended and the beasts were thrown into the eternal fiery abyss. All except one of the beasts: the dragon. Much of this chapter doesn't make much sense. The dragon came first as a fallen archangel in chapter 12. After the Messiah was born, the dragon opened the great abyss and called forth the beast and the false prophet. The Book doesn't explain the origin of the beast nor the false prophet whereas the dragon is quite clear. Regardless, the dragon was the first beast and will be the last of the beasts. Given the previous chapter explained the demise of the beast and the prophet, we expect this chapter to follow suit. Instead the dragon's final demise has two parts. The first part is the shackling of the dragon. An angel holding the key to the abyss locks the dragon and chains him in the abyss for 1000 years. The reason for a thousand years is unclear. Since 1000 is the largest number in the Greek language, this could be symbolic for a really long time. The number 1000 is also 10 times 10, or a perfect number times a perfect number, the perfect amount of time. The dragon is locked up for a period of time or until the necessary time of his new reign. The last details about the dragon's imprisonment is the sealing of the abyss. The imagery of a "seal" has been common throughout the Book of Revelation. The seal is used to entrap or confine the Devil as opposed to unveil something. The sealing of the dragon indicates that only God can open the seal and therefore his authority is both the force that confines the devil but also the force that gives him his authority.

Millenarianism: Throughout the centuries many people tried to interpret or understand the millennium of the dragon's imprisonment and the millennium of his reign. The early Christians has a strong sense that Jesus would be coming back very soon. Therefore their understanding of the millennium of his reign was that it had just concluded. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, had ended the reign of the Devil and ushered in the new Kingdom. As the new millennium unfolded, many Christians changed their view and turned towards the end of the first millennium. Many thought that at the end of the first millennium after Christ's death, Jesus would be back and the Devil's reign would be over. During the middle ages many Protestants believed that we were in the millennium of the Devil's reign. With plagues, wars, and insurrections common throughout the middle ages, it seemed like Jesus' prediction was coming true. Yet, those times passed as well. Since almost all of the numbers used throughout the Book of Revelation are allegorical, we should also assume the number 1000 to be allegorical. The Catholic Church has always held that this number is a symbolic number indicating both the

completion of his reign but also the fullness of time. Once the time of fulfillment is over, then the new era begins and the Devil's reign ends. The idea of millenarianism, as noted at the beginning of this section, is the term for those who believe in the actual value of 1000 years.

Then the dragon is released after his 1000 years of imprisonment. Why? The answer is the context underlying this entire book: to allow the people of the world to choose and, more importantly, to choose God. Without the Devil present in the world, the only choice people make is to choose God. Therefore the Devil gives them a true choice: the seduction and manipulation of the Devil or the laws and order of God. The exact meaning of these two passages is unclear. Some people try to argue that the time of the Devil is now and that we are awaiting his final demise. The book seems to indicate that the Devil's imprisonment has already happened and that the final times are coming. Very few people dismiss this passage as pure allegory. If we follow the time line of the book, then the Devil is free now and is waging war against God. He fell in chapter 12 with the Woman and the Dragon. He reigned for a short while until he was banished from the abyss. Once the angel opened the abyss, then he brought forth the other two beasts and they reigned until the final war. The last we hear about the final war is in Revelation 20:7-10. Implying that the dragon is free now and the war is happening or about to happen.

In the midst of the dragon's imprisonment and then freedom, John interludes these two passages with the judgement of the just. Those who judge the world, or more specifically the dragon, are those who had been beheaded for Christ. This seems very specific given the general nature of the book. If we follow the general trends of the book, those who are beheaded would be anyone who witnessed to Jesus. Those who witness to Jesus came to life as this point to judge the world and the beasts. This "coming to life" sounds similar to the harvesting that happened in chapter 11. Notice that the book develops themes but not in the order to which we are used to. Instead themes come in where they make sense in context. The context of this passage is the first resurrection of the dead, the first harvest. Those who reign during this time would also reign during the time the dragon reigns and during the time of the great trials and judgments. Therefore we should assume that the 1000 year reign of the dragon as indicated in the previous passage is the time span after Jesus' Resurrection and before his second coming; this time of great trials and persecutions in which we live.

The second death. The first death is the natural death that we all suffer. The second death is the eternal death, namely the condemnation to Hell or the fiery abyss. Throughout the Book of Revelation many passages mentioned that people died. The looming question is, how many died? Did those who die not experience the calamities of God's judgment? The best way to understand both the first and second death is in relation to God's judgment. All people will be judged; no one can escape God's judgement. Similarly, the first death doesn't excuse a person from judgment. The only ones who aren't "judged" are the holy ones who witnessed to Jesus. Their judgement already happened by the people who killed them. The rest of the world experiences God's judgement. Therefore we could interpret the Book as though no one died throughout the book. Those who are killed during the plagues are brought to life to experience God's judgment. Or those who "died" really didn't die but instead were so tormented they might as well have died. At the very end of all things, God doesn't allow anyone to completely die and dissolve into

nothingness. He loves each and every creature and wants them to be with him eternally. Those who “died a second death” are those who are thrown into the fiery pit which is their lot.

The Great War: After the pouring of the sixth bowl, the war began. This war is identical to the war described in verses 8-10. However, the context of the passage indicates that the Devil tried one more attempt to attack and thwart God’s plans. This war becomes his last. At last the Devil is thrown into the pit for the final time and the great accuser of the people of God is no more.

Tormented day and night: What do we mean by these torments? What happens in the pit of fire and sulfur that cannot be quenched? The answer is simple. Remember when God was pouring his bowls upon the earth? What was in the bowls? God’s judgment. God’s justice and mercy are strongly connected so that his mercy is greater than his justice. The substance in the bowls of God’s wrath is his love. His deep, fiery love that consumes everything in its path and purifies the world from all uncleanness. Therefore the wrath of God, as indicated by the plagues of the bowls, showed people their sinfulness and made them reflect on their own misdeeds. The fire and sulfur in the pit is still God’s love. The Devil, the beast, and the false prophet have all cultivated a life so contrary to the will of God that his love burns in them like an eternal fire causing torment and great pain.

The final judgement. Notice in this passage how everyone is judged. John makes a point of it: the great and the lowly, even those lost at sea. No one is outside or has circumvented God’s judgment. Everyone is judged according to their deeds. Those here have already chosen God or they would have been cast into the fiery pit. These are the holy ones who have chosen God and therefore are about to get their reward. Notice the details. As long as your name is written on the scroll, you do not suffer the second death as indicated by the judgement of the churches in chapter 1-3. Even if your name is written in the scroll of life, you don’t necessarily have the same judgement as another person. First death or life; second, judgement based on deeds. After this judgement, death dies and hades is no more. Only life reigns from this point into the future or ever present now.

The New Heavens and the New Earth (Chapter 21)

The imagery of this next chapter and a half is some of the most stunning in the Book of Revelation. Although John does not describe these images in great detail, a little reflection on them would reveal a great deal of beauty and wonder. We start this chapter with a new creation. This should not be surprising to us. God basically destroyed the world through the many plagues and destructive events. I can’t image much of the world is left intact. Everything is destroyed so that it can be made anew. Even the holy city is made anew. Instead of simply creating a new city, God’s holy city, the Heavenly Jerusalem, descends and becomes the new city. In addition to a new city, this new city is a return to the Garden of Eden where God dwelt with his people. Now the fullness of everything has been revealed: the long awaited holy city returns, God dwells with his people, sin and death are no more, and God is the sole ruler of the world.

The next paragraph reiterates the blessings bestowed on the churches in chapters 1-3 for those who are faithful. Notice the language. The words John is told to write are “trustworthy and true.” Why does he need to state this? We already know that God is trustworthy and true and has made

this point throughout the Book. This reiteration of a known quality of God is emphasizing that God has accomplished his plan and done as he has promised. This theme occurred several times. The great questions that both a Jewish and Christian audience would be asking regarding these revelations is “was God faithful to his promises?” These final chapters emphasize his fidelity to his promises and show his trustworthiness. The final part of this passage will be repeated at the end of the book. The long list of the sins that cause the eternal damnation are a constant refrain in this book.

The New Jerusalem

This passage is beautiful and returns to themes we have already encountered throughout this book. We start with the command and a vision: “come.” The word “come” or “come here” was also the command given to the four horsemen as they began their destruction of the world. The central idea is that God beckons the person to him not that we choose to come to him. The final culmination of all things is a marriage and marriage banquet, which is not a new theme. The angel shows John the bride, but then the image switches to the image of the city Jerusalem. Which is it? Its both. God planned to marry his people who are personified as a woman, the woman Israel. We saw this image in the Woman and the Dragon in chapter 12 and throughout the books of the prophets. Now this woman is not only fulfilling the intended or arranged marriage but gleams with the splendor from her connection to God. The final details about the city are the same details that described the city of Jerusalem. When the city was built, the city had 12 gates for each of the 12 tribes of Israel with three facing each of the cardinal directions. This new city has the same schematic. The only major change between the original schematic of the holy city and this new one is the foundation being built out of the 12 apostles thus bringing together the Old and New Testaments and reiterating the importance of the 24 elders. The act of measuring the city was done by Ezekiel and then by John earlier in the book. This act shows to the reader that it is truly the holy city with the proper dimensions as outlined by God. The dimensions are a little obscure. Essentially the height, width, and length are the same measurement creating a cube. The Holy of Holies was also designed as a cube: 20 cubits by 20 cubits by 20 cubits. Thus the entire world fits within the Holy of Holies; all people are now in the most holy part of the whole world. Thus the final detail is the 12 stones. This detail may seem strange to us but these 12 stones represent the 12 Tribes of Israel and are also the 12 stones on the ephod of the high priest. Thus the holy city is connected with the high priesthood and the summation of the 12 tribes.

Unlike in several places in the Book of Revelation, the Temple is now perpetually open. Why would you need to close the Temple or open it if everyone is inside? The Temple is now perpetually open to allow people to freely come and go; God’s grace now gives complete freedom to encounter him in the Temple or elsewhere calling all nations to himself. This “opening of the Temple” reverses the closing of the Temple at the beginning of the plagues in chapter 16 showing that God’s fury is at an end and peace reigns forever. Normally the gates of a city would be closed at night to keep marauders and thieves out. But this Temple never sees night since God is the light and the light never dims or sets. Therefore they have no need to close

the Temple gates since nothing unclean can enter nor can someone deceptively sneak in during the night.

The final image of the Temple and the New City is the flowing water. This image has been used throughout Scripture to show God's super abundant grace. Ezekiel received this same vision as the abundant water that flows from the side of the Temple welling into a giant stream too large to swim across. Here the same image applies. This water is "life-giving" water like the water Jesus promised to give to the woman at the well in John 3. Notice the directionality of the water. The water starts from the throne and God. The water's source is God himself. This isn't some geological feature or a part of Heaven. This water comes directly from God who is both its source and the content. The water is so life-giving that it causes trees to grow unusually fast and produce food in greater abundance than normal: 12 times a year. Thus providing not only water for the people to drink but also an abundance of food so that no one ever goes hungry. But there is only one tree: the tree of life. If you recall the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, there were two trees in the Garden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Humans have already eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thus giving them God-like wisdom and the gift of free-will. God always intended for the greatest of his creation to eat the tree of life, but the time had not come until now. Now that we have chosen God and understand the gift of free-will, the gift of life that comes from the Tree of Life make sense and can be appreciated. Thus we can now eat freely from the tree that gives us eternal life while using the gift of free-will without the consequence of death. The detail of medicine shows that no sickness or disease can be found in this holy city.

Epilogue (chapter 22)

After all the visions, John ends the Book of Revelation with a challenge and a warning: "Jesus is coming soon." His words set the tone of this book from the beginning and remind us of the immanence of God's return. This whole book centered on preparing us for Jesus' return that we may be ready and enter the promised kingdom. Did we learn the lesson and keep the prophetic message of this book?

As John's final act of the book, he screws up again and begins to worship the angel. The angel reiterates the same rebuke he made earlier when John did this action before reminding us that we ought to focus on God and worship him alone. The great challenge of fighting against idolatry and choosing to fully comply with God and God alone continues to haunt us from the background.

How ought we to react to this book? John tells us: let the wicked do their wicked thing and the righteous their righteous thing. Our goal is not to change the world or to bring about God's kingdom on our own. Our goal is to be faithful to God and follow his commands. Everything else God will take care of; we are not meant to be the judges of the world or to become the gods of this world. We also must turn to Jesus and allow him to wash us clean in his blood so that we may have clean, white robes and be ready for his coming.

The final command is to come. Jesus and the bride both beckon the people of the world to come. Those who want God's gifts will come. The rest will go to eternal damnation.

The final paragraph has caused a rather difficult debate. Did John intend for the command to not add anything to this book to be for only the Book of Revelation or for the whole Bible? I argue that John intended for this command to be only for the Book of Revelation. Namely that we are not allowed to change, add, or reinterpret the visions of this book to fit our own desires and designs. This conclusion matches with John's language for the Book. The Church, however, saw that this passage as the end of the Bible itself as a warning against anyone who would like to add or change the content of the Bible. If we see the Bible as one whole unit, then we must understand that the warning applies to the entirety of Scripture, which is God's word. Thus we know that we are not the arbitrators of Scripture neither do we have authority over it. This is God's word and must be kept as he intended it.

Finally, John gives us a farewell, Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus. Maranatha has two possible meanings. Mara natha – Jesus has come, and Maran tha – Jesus will come. This word summarized this book beautifully: Jesus has already come and will come again. Be ready for both.