

*And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain.<sup>2</sup> He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.<sup>3</sup> He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.*

*<sup>4</sup>I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.<sup>5</sup> (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection.<sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:1-6)*

### **Jesus Came to Defeat the Devil**

Is the world getting better or worse? One could argue that it's getting better. In the past, almost every family had children die. But vaccinations and health care have made childhood deaths fairly rare. Heart transplants would've seemed like miracles to our forefathers. People once worked like dogs from sunrise to sunset and barely survived. But pesticides and fertilizers and farm machinery have created the greatest and cheapest food supply in history. In many ways, life is better. But what about racism and terrorism and third rate countries like North Korea testing nuclear weapons? What about 9/11 and Afghanistan and Iraq? Millions of Americans live without health insurance. Drug addiction and human trafficking corrupt the fabric of our society. The UN announced this week that 1 billion people on earth live with chronic hunger – 100,000,000 more than last year.

Is the world getting better or worse? You can't answer that question based solely on economic or technological input. This world is infected by sin. That means that suffering will always be a part of it. That is the work of the devil. In the Garden of Eden, he poisoned God's creation and introduced all that pain and suffering into this world. But God sent his Son into this world to conquer evil. **Jesus came to defeat the devil.**

#### **I.**

The devil is real. And he is the driving force behind all evil in this world. Every lie that enslaves us comes from the evil brain of the devil or from people who are his slaves. Every human being that dies is one more murder chalked up to the devil's account because the devil brought death into this world. That is the enemy we face. But the book of Revelation was written to comfort us as we suffer through life in this world. **Jesus came to defeat the devil. He came to bind him with his Word.**

The six verses of Revelation that we have before us are some of the most debated verses in the whole Bible. You could fill a library with the things that have been written about these verses. John saw an angel descend from heaven and bind the devil with a chain and cast him into hell and seal him there. Then he saw the souls of those who had died rather than submit to the devil seated on thrones. Twice, he speaks of a thousand years. That reference to a thousand years has given rise to a term: the millennium. A millennium is a thousand years. Many books about these verses argue that Jesus will reign for 1,000 years on this earth.

But is that really what this chapter teaches? You can find the answer from the very first words of verse one. John says, "And I saw." What does that mean? John was seeing a vision. God came to him and showed him things in his mind. The whole book of Revelation is a series of visions. The Bible records a large number of dreams and visions which God shows to people. Some of them are easy to understand. Others are more challenging. But we have to interpret what all of them mean. To find God's meaning, our interpretation has to agree with what the rest of the Bible teaches. The rest of the Bible does not teach that Jesus will reign for a thousand years on this earth. Quite the opposite, it teaches that he will reign from heaven until he returns on Judgment Day and then he will reign here not just for a thousand years, but forever.

So what did John see? An angel descending from heaven. The angel has the key to the Abyss. The Abyss is hell. And in the very first chapter of Revelation, John says that Jesus has the key to Hades or hell. This angel is Jesus. And he comes with a chain and he binds the devil and then seals him in hell. What does

that mean? Well, do you remember the gospel lesson we had today? It was talking about demon possession. Jesus talked about driving demons out with a metaphor: tying up a strong man so you can rob his house. Binding Satan is an image of setting people free from his power. How does Jesus do that? That's easy: with the gospel. The Bible tells us that the gospel is the power of God. The chain Jesus holds is nothing more or less than the good news that our Savior has come to take our sins away. That breaks the devil's kingdom and binds and seals him in hell.

When John saw this vision, he was an old man. He was the last of the original twelve disciples. The Romans had killed all the rest. John himself was a prisoner on an island in the Mediterranean Sea. He was cut off from his beloved congregation. The Romans were brutally persecuting the church. Many people had died. Many more were losing their children and their property and their freedom. It felt like the devil was winning. So God showed him a vision of what was actually happening: Jesus had come down and bound the devil and sealed him in hell.

Does that seem contradictory? If the devil is in hell, how can he be here? That's exactly the way the Bible speaks of him. The book of Jude says that the demons are chained in everlasting darkness in hell. But 1 Peter says that the devil is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Both things are true at the same time! It might help if you consider how you picture the chain. Don't think of something that keeps him from moving. Think of a dog on a chain that keeps it in one general area. The chain of the gospel greatly limits what the devil can do. But he can still do enormous damage to those who come near him.

So what can't he do? Jesus bound the devil so that he can't deceive the nations anymore. The nations were the Gentiles. For 1500 years, God dealt exclusively with Israel. The nations were under the devil's power. But when Jesus bound him, he set us free because almost all of us here today are Gentiles. Our ancestors were slaves of the devil's lies and died without faith. But when Jesus ascended into heaven, he gave his Spirit to his Church and sent it out to proclaim the gospel to the world. For two thousand years, that gospel message has been going forward. It has opened untold millions of eyes. Today, Christianity is the largest religion on earth. Still it goes forward. In every nation under heaven, Jesus is rolling back the empire of Satan.

That was a huge comfort to John as he struggled with what he saw in his life. We, too, can take comfort when it feels like the devil is winning. God has plan – a thousand years of Satan being bound. Not a literal thousand years. In the book of Revelation, the numbers are symbolic. 10 is the number of completeness. 1000 is 10 times 10 times 10. Nothing happens by accident. God is ruling all things for the good of his church. He has already determined how long the devil will be bound. During that time, the gospel will spread throughout the world.

But that time will end. Satan will be released for a short time and then the Lord will return. So how do we know if we live during the thousand years or the short time when the devil's off his chain? We can't know. But every time we see a Christian church lose its way, every time we see the unbelievers win, every time we see people turn away from Christ, we need to remember that the devil's time is coming. Maybe it's already here. If so, that means that Jesus can come at any moment. Isn't that what Jesus told us? He can come at any moment. We don't need to know where we are on the clock – God knows. So we live as if it could be either way. We keep preaching the gospel, because that's the power that binds Satan. And every day, we wait for our Lord to return.

## II.

While we wait, we will suffer from the power of the devil here. The devil knows his time is short. He wants to get in as much pain and sorrow as he can before the Lord returns. That is the devil's worst moment because he knows Jesus didn't come here just to make things better for this life. **Jesus came to defeat the devil. He came to free us for eternal life.**

John saw the souls of believers on thrones. He says they were the souls of those who died for the gospel. They refused to join the devil. He made them pay with their lives. But God had a greater destiny in mind for them. They would reign with Christ. Now, sometimes, people point to this section and they say, "See, they reign for a thousand years with Christ. This has to be that thousand year reign of Christ on earth." But this doesn't say anything about how long Jesus reigns or where. It's the saints who reign for a thousand years. My wife lived for twenty years with her parents in Madison, Wisconsin. How long did her parents live in Madison? I haven't told you. Obviously, it was at least twenty years. But was it more than that? I didn't say. In point of

fact, it was more. In the same way, in this vision these saints who gave their lives for the gospel reign with Christ throughout the era of the gospel. But Jesus reigns for much longer than that.

Now, the way our Bibles translate this verse creates some confusion. They say that these souls “*came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.*” That makes it sound like John was seeing something here on this earth. That translation is possible, but it isn’t very accurate. Souls don’t die when our bodies do. So they don’t come back to life. What the Greek literally says is simply these souls “*lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.*” John did not see resurrected bodies. He saw souls that were living after their bodies died, souls that reigned with Christ throughout the entire period of the gospel binding Satan. He was looking into heaven.

That explains the rest of the passage. John says, “**(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.**” “The first resurrection” is what happens when we believers die. Our bodies are buried or burned. But our souls live with Christ in heaven. We reign with him there. The second resurrection is when Jesus returns and he raises the dead. But what is the first and second death? And why don’t the unbelievers live after they die? Aren’t their souls in hell? Yes, they are. But the Bible never uses the word “life” to describe the existence of anyone in hell. It’s just too horrible to call that life. In fact, the Bible often calls it “death,” not meaning that they don’t exist, but meaning that they have lost all contact with God and his love. So the first death is when our bodies die. At that moment, the souls of those who don’t believe go to hell. The second death is hell.

Neither death has any power over us. Instead, God promises us is that we will be priests of God and of Christ throughout this thousand years. Day after day, we can come into his presence and bring every hardship and every difficulty that we face to him and he will hear us. When our life here ends, we will be with Christ in heaven. When he returns, we will rise and live with him forever

John knew how hard life is. He knew it because he suffered it – loneliness, grief, loss and persecution. We have been blessed. John could not have imagined a country where churches are tax exempt and there’s a church building on every street. He could not have imagined living under a government that let us reach out with the gospel and train pastors openly in seminaries. We have been blessed more than we know – because Jesus bound Satan and he sent his gospel forward.

But is our world changing? Does it feel today like the devil is winning? Have we reached that time when the devil is released? It’s no longer politically correct to refer to the United States as a Christian nation. Most surveys indicate that non-Christian religions like Islam and Wicca are growing faster than we are. Most Christian churches today are losing their grip on the gospel. More and more they focus on getting along and less and less on making disciples. Most Christians today believe that they are basically good people who just need a little help from God to behave themselves. That is not Christianity. If the trends continue, the day may come when we face open persecution for what we believe. Every day, the newspapers have stories that make me cringe. But every day, Jesus is still in control. His word is still going forth and still making disciples. It still is the best weapon to keep the devil from deceiving the nations. And one day soon, Jesus will return. And we will live with him forever. It doesn’t matter how bad it gets here. The Lord is in control. And he is coming back for us. Amen.