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Revelation Text 11: Chapter 20 (the Millennium)

Getting close to the end ... of series; we are looking at the end, and what comes after.

Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting									
Scene 1									
Scene 2									
Scene 3									
Scene 4									
Scene 5									
Scene 6									
Church Interlude									
Scene 7									



Where are we in the book? Well, this unit does not introduce a new series; it continues the previous one. We are right in the middle of the seven judgement scenes in section number six. The section shows us how God deals with the forces and structures of evil in our world, beginning with Babylon in chapter 18, continuing in chapter 19 with the two beasts and the kings of the earth, and now, in chapter 20, shifting focus to the dragon. We are shown how Satan himself will be dealt with and cease to be a player for all eternity.



There are some difficult theological questions that I need to talk about here (this is another difficult unit, and it is longer than average, even though it only covers one chapter), but one thing is not difficult. At the beginning of chapter 20, we get to see how easy the ultimate victory over Satan is. You are probably familiar with action movies. Normally, such a movie finishes with a long scene in which the hero fights the scoundrel. It tends to be a life-or-death struggle, and even though we know the hero will, of course, win, we still hold our breath at points when the hero is almost defeated and killed.

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Chapter 20 is the equivalent of such a scene, not just for the book of Revelation but for the whole Bible. Yet there is no such long, drawn-out battle scene. God does not fight for his life with the dragon. In fact, he does not even get up from his throne. He delegates the task to an angel. The angel comes down with a chain, grabs the dragon, binds him, and locks him up. That's it.

Okay, he is released for a little bit later, but only to be thoroughly defeated, and then forever. That is the easy part: Satan loses in the end. Now for the harder part.

Revelation 20:18 Key of the bottomless pit, 1st edition, from the Luther Bible, c.1530 (coloured woodcut),
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Millennium = 1000 years

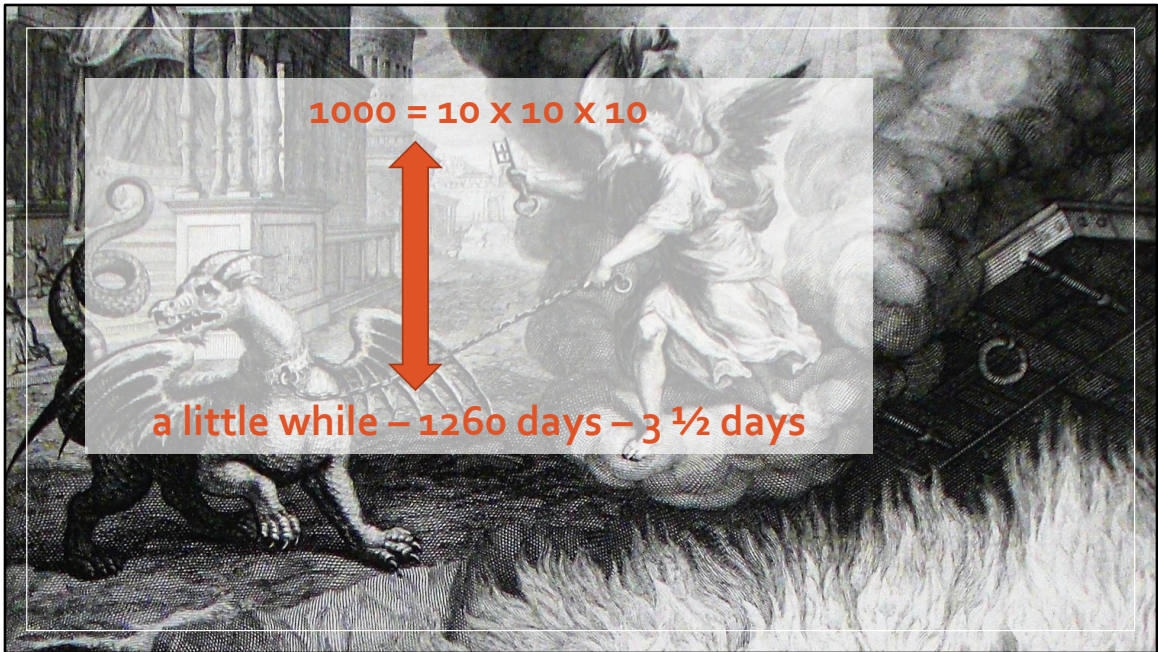


Two things, so we are told in this chapter, are for a thousand years: the binding of Satan and the reign of the martyrs and perhaps of everyone who has not worshipped the beast; the wording is unclear: is it martyrs only or all believers? Because the word *thousand* translates into Latin as *mille*, we often speak of the millennium, a period of one thousand years.

Apocalypse 29. Satan bound for 1000 years. Revelation cap 20 v 1. Mortier's Bible.

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However, considering numbers are consistently used symbolically in this book, it should be clear that the number 1000 is probably not used literally but stands for a very long time: $10 \times 10 \times 10$, the number of completion multiplied by itself.

As such, it forms a strong contrast to the “little while” of Satan’s release in 20:3 and to the 1260 days or $3 \frac{1}{2}$ years of the beast earlier in the book. It is also the counterpart to the $3 \frac{1}{2}$ days that the two witnesses are dead, before they ascend into heaven. (Chapter 20 shows what awaits them there.) The martyrs only suffer for a short time, and as a reward for their suffering, they reign with Christ for a very long time. Contrast.

Apocalypse 29. Satan bound for 1000 years. Revelation cap 20 v 1. Mortier's Bible. Phillip Medhurst Collection,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apocalypse_29._Satan_bound_for_1000_years._Revelation_cap_20_v_1._Mortier%27s_Bible._Phillip_Medhurst_Collection.jpg,
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Notice that in verse 4, John sees the souls of those who had been beheaded; these are the same souls he had seen earlier, in 6:9, where they were under the altar. Revelation 20 serves as a promise to those who lose their life for their faith: they will share in Christ's rule. From an earthly perspective, it appears they lose; from a heavenly perspective, they gain. Much.

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MILLENNIUM

That much is clear, but beyond this, it gets controversial. How do we understand the millennium: what is it, and where does it fit chronologically?

Traditionally, the millennium in Revelation 20 has been understood in three different ways, each leading to a different scheme or scenario for the end times and each named after the millennium:



1: PREMILLENNIALISM

2: POSTMILLENNIALISM

3: AMILLENNIALISM

They are called: Premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.

They differ in when they expect Christ to return: either before the millennium (premillennialism; *pre* means *before*) or after the millennium (postmillennialism; *post* means *after*). And they differ in whether they understand the millennium as a separate, still future era or as a symbolic representation of present reality (so amillennialism, from *a* meaning *none*).

There is a fourth view, a variant of premillennialism, which is quite different from its parent. It is also highly influential among evangelicals, even among those who have never heard its name. I will, therefore, include it in this overview as well.



1: PREMILLENNIALISM

2: POSTMILLENNIALISM

3: AMILLENNIALISM

4. DISPENSATIONALISM

It is called dispensational premillennialism or simply dispensationalism.

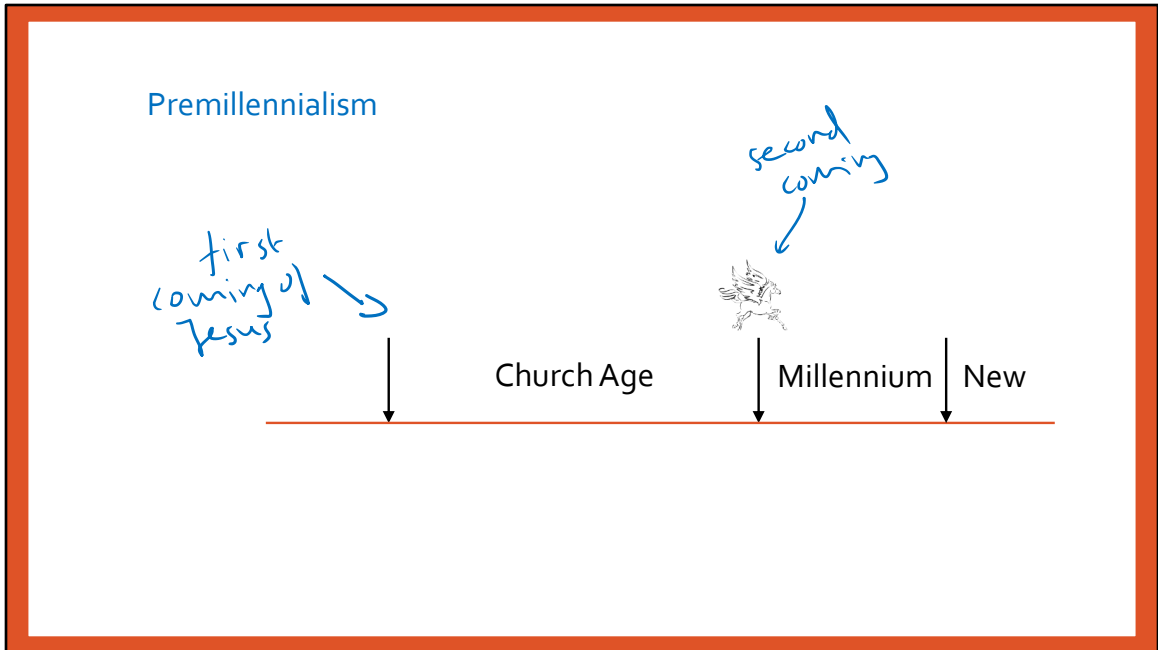
Order in Vision

White horse
Battle
Binding
Millennium
Battle

Order in History



Before I give a brief explanation of each of these four views, I should reiterate this point: Revelation is not chronological. Now, the vision John saw has a clear sequence, with one scene happening after the other, in chapters 19-20 as shown here: ... ; but the order of the visions is not necessarily the order in which things happen in real life. In fact, there is significant recapitulation in this book. We have often noticed that John goes back to an earlier point in time to once again cover some of the same ground from a different perspective. We therefore cannot simply assume that the scenes in chapters 19 and 20 foretell a series of events that form a linear chronological sequence.



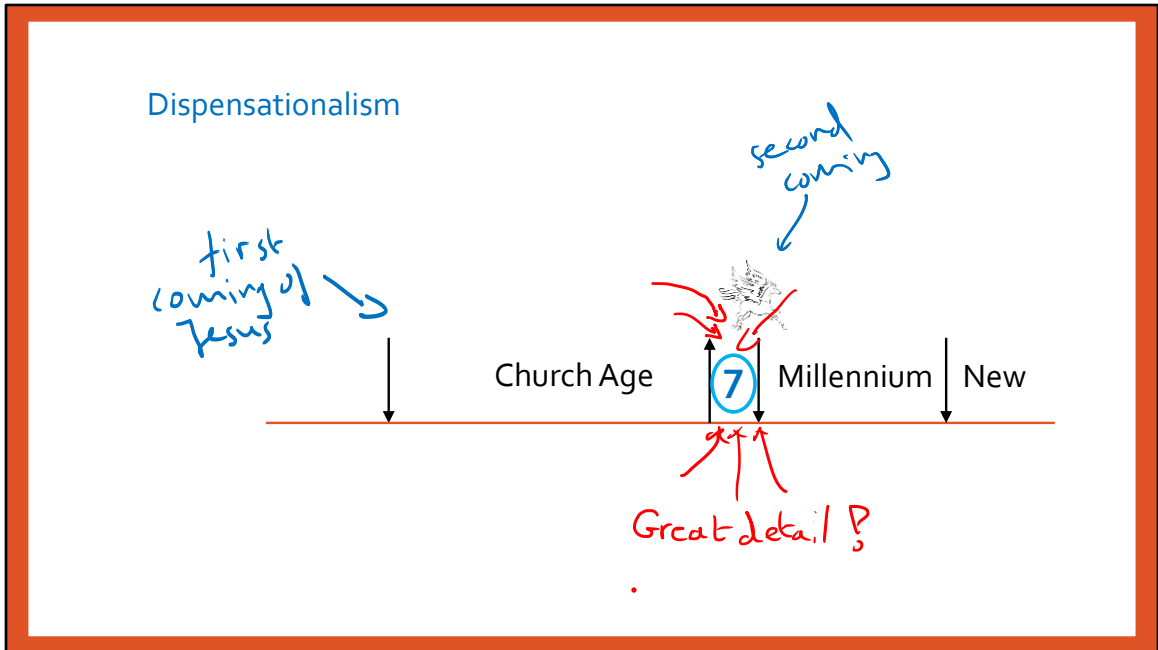
Premillennialism believes that Revelation 19:11-21 describes the second coming of Christ. It will be followed by a millennial kingdom on earth, during which Satan is bound and Jesus reigns from Jerusalem. It will, therefore, be an era marked by peace and prosperity. Premillennialism, then, argues that the sequence in chapters 19 and 20 is indeed chronological; the millennium follows the second coming.

Two Final Battles
Two Resurrections
Two last judgements
Two 'not yet' ages



In the end, Satan is released for a short while and a second “final battle” takes place, in which he is soundly defeated again, this time forever. In premillennialism, there also is a second resurrection of the dead: first, of believers at the second coming; second, of all people after the millennium. And a second last judgement (at the beginning and the end of the millennium), and a second intermediate age, a second ‘not yet’, of the millennium. Critics of premillennialism point out that this is not what we find in the rest of the NT. There appears to be only one general resurrection of all the dead at the second coming, followed by the last judgement, not by yet another intermediate period. Nothing in the preceding 65 books of the Bible and the preceding 19 chapters of Revelation has prepared us to expect a millennial age after the second coming, so the critics of premillennialism.

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Dispensationalism is a form of premillennialism. It first emerged around 1830 in the writings and teachings of John Nelson Darby. It is far more complex than “historic” premillennialism. For one, Darby proposed a “secret rapture,” seven years before the visible return of Christ, and went into great detail as to what would happen during those years. The events to take place include all the plagues and judgements described in the book of Revelation. In other words, dispensationalism works with a strongly futurist interpretation of Revelation.

Futurism

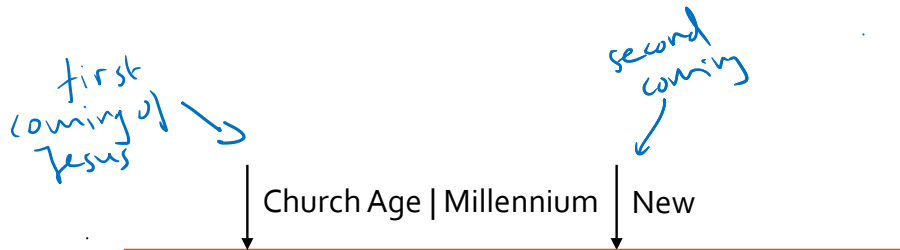
Speculation

Irrelevancy



This is the stuff most popular end-time books are made of. They tend to be quite speculative and have often offered predictions that do not come true. Dispensationalism also makes Revelation largely irrelevant for today's Christian readers (because they will supposedly be raptured before it starts happening), for the first readers (because they died long before any of this was to happen) and indeed for all generations in between as well. I find this the least convincing interpretation.

Postmillennialism



Postmillennialism believes that the second coming follows a long era of great peace and prosperity on earth, a golden age of humanity or, in other words, a “millennium” (although postmillennialists don’t always call this golden age a millennium). This age comes about as the gospel is preached to more and more nations, transforming them in the process. In this gradual way, the yeast of the kingdom is doing its work. The mustard seed grows to be a mighty tree and the stone rolling down and overthrowing the statue in Daniel’s dream (Dan. 2) becomes a mighty mountain filling the whole earth. This golden age will not be a perfect world, but it will demonstrate within history the power and the wisdom of the gospel – God does not win by the exercise of raw force at the very end, but by transforming human history through truth and love from within.

There is probably some truth to this (after all, Christianity has brought significant improvements where it was adopted), but the critics of postmillennialism suspect it is overly optimistic and expects too much. Evil continues to be a real presence in our world as well.

Amillennialism



Amillennialism understands the millennium as a symbol expressing something about the present age, not about a separate, still future era in salvation history. This reign does not take place on earth but in and from heaven. After all, where are the thrones mentioned in 20:4? And where are the souls of the martyrs? Most thrones in this book are located in heaven. Nothing in chapter 20 suggests that this reign takes place in and from Jerusalem, on earth. Quite possibly, then, we are to think of Christ's present reign from heaven, in which believers who have died share.

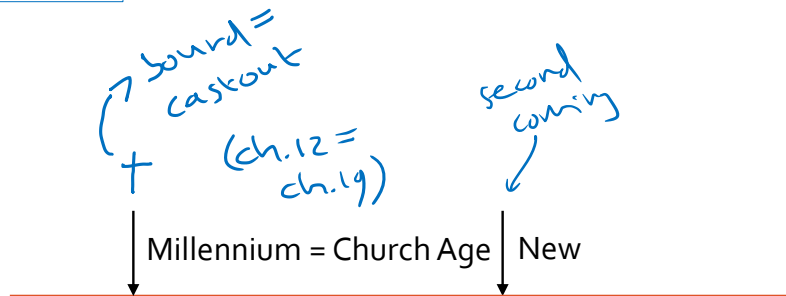


"BOUND"? DISARMED!

Critics of amillennialism will ask what it means that Satan is bound. Looking at the world might leave one with the impression that Satan is not bound at all! Amillennialists will answer that Satan is bound in a relative, not an absolute sense. They will point to passages like Colossians 2:15, which claims that God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ]" (ESV). They understand this to make the same point in different words. According to Matthew 12:29, Jesus bound "the strong man." In 20:3, Revelation makes clear in which sense Satan is bound: he is no longer able to deceive the nations. He cannot prevent the spread of the gospel.

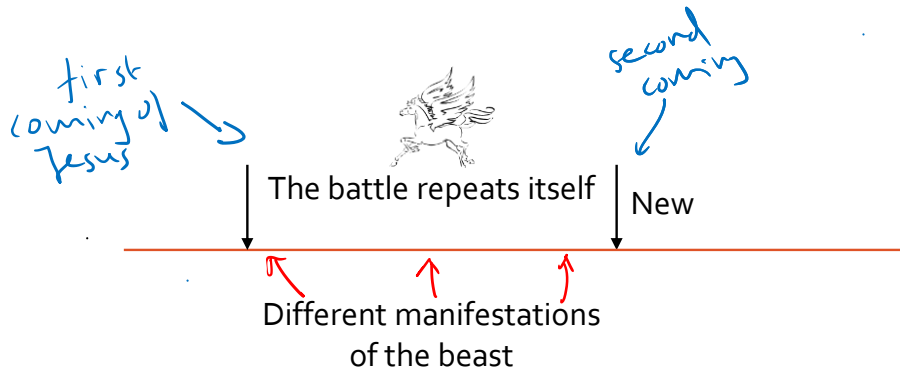
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Amillennialism



Many amillennialists see this binding as a parallel to chapter 12. In their view, it is a flashback or yet another example of recapitulation in the book. In 20:1, John takes us back to a much earlier point. The binding of Satan is what Christ accomplished on the cross. This would also explain why the final battle is repeated. It does not happen twice, even though it is described twice, first in chapter 19 and again in 20:7-10.

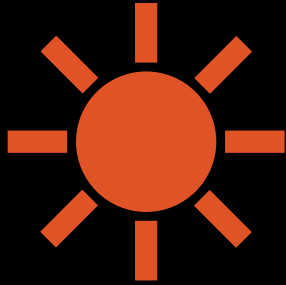
Amillennialism



It is also possible to think of the battle and the binding of Satan as a cycle or pattern in history, as something that repeats itself. This is based on a different understanding of the phrase “not deceive the nations any longer” (Rev. 20:3). Revelation 20:8-9 shows what this phrase means, what happens when Satan deceives the nations: they gather for war and attack the “camp of the saints.” To deceive the nations, then, is to entice them to an all-out attack on the people of God.

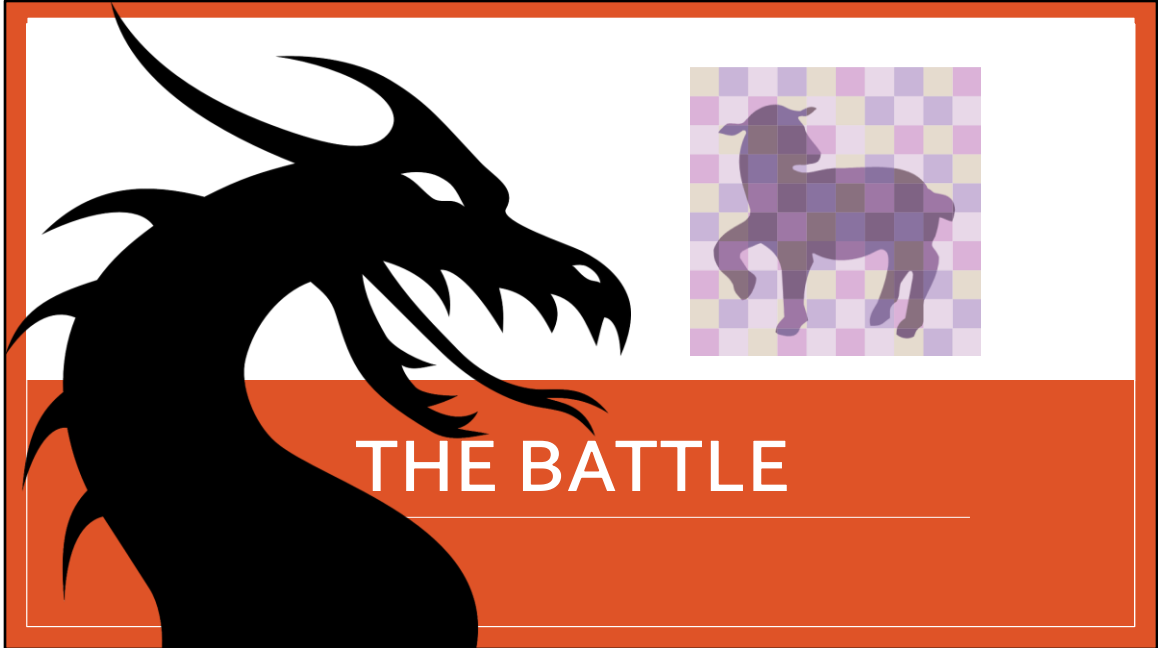
The climax of the battle takes place whenever human ideology and state power devote their considerable resources to eradicate the church. This is parallel to the way Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod conspired against Jesus. It is what the Roman Empire sought to do in the second and third centuries. What followed was a very long time (a “millennium”) of relative peace for the church, enabling it to firmly establish itself in Europe and from there in the rest of the world.

The Roman Empire failed in its attempt to destroy the church. Other governments and ideologies have tried since. In the end, the church survives, the ideology lies in ruins, and Satan’s power is reduced. And in this way, the battle takes place throughout history, not only at the end.



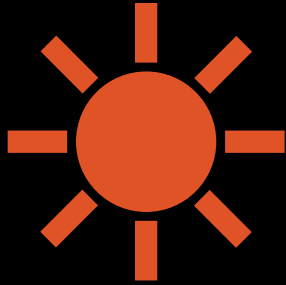
The millennium is now!

Either way, whether the binding took place at the cross or whether it is a repeated and perhaps progressive and cumulative event within the course of history, in amillennialism it makes sense to claim that the millennium is now. It is a present reality because Satan's power has been greatly reduced. And in the end, Satan is conquered completely and for all eternity.



As counterintuitive as it may seem, it is the lamb that conquers the dragon, not the other way around. So stand firm; we are on the winning side.

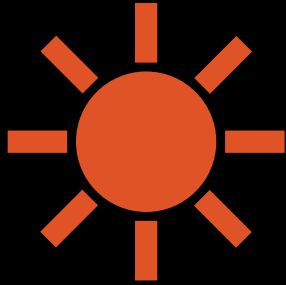
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First resurrection

Chapter 21

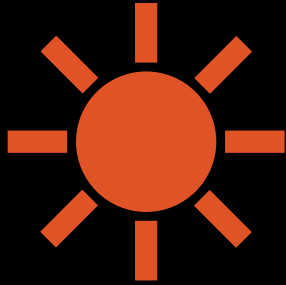
Two more things in this unit: a word on the first resurrection and on the beginning of chapter 21.



First resurrection

Second Death

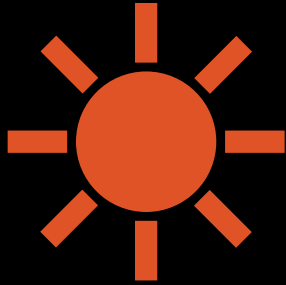
John speaks of the first resurrection and also of the second death; he never mentions the second resurrection or the first death. The second death is the lake of fire. It is permanent and spiritual death or destruction. By implication, the first death would be physical or natural death.



'First' and 'second':

Not rank or order

'First' and 'second' therefore do not simply rank the order of things that are essentially alike. The first and second death are not alike at all; there is an essential and qualitative difference. So why would the first and second resurrection both be literal and both point to a physical resurrection, as if this out-of-the-ordinary event is to happen not just once, but twice?



Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power (Rev. 20:6 ESV)

An important key is given in 20:6: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power.” This shows the first resurrection is much more than merely coming back to life: it protects from the second death (the second resurrection, as becomes clear later in the chapter, does not).

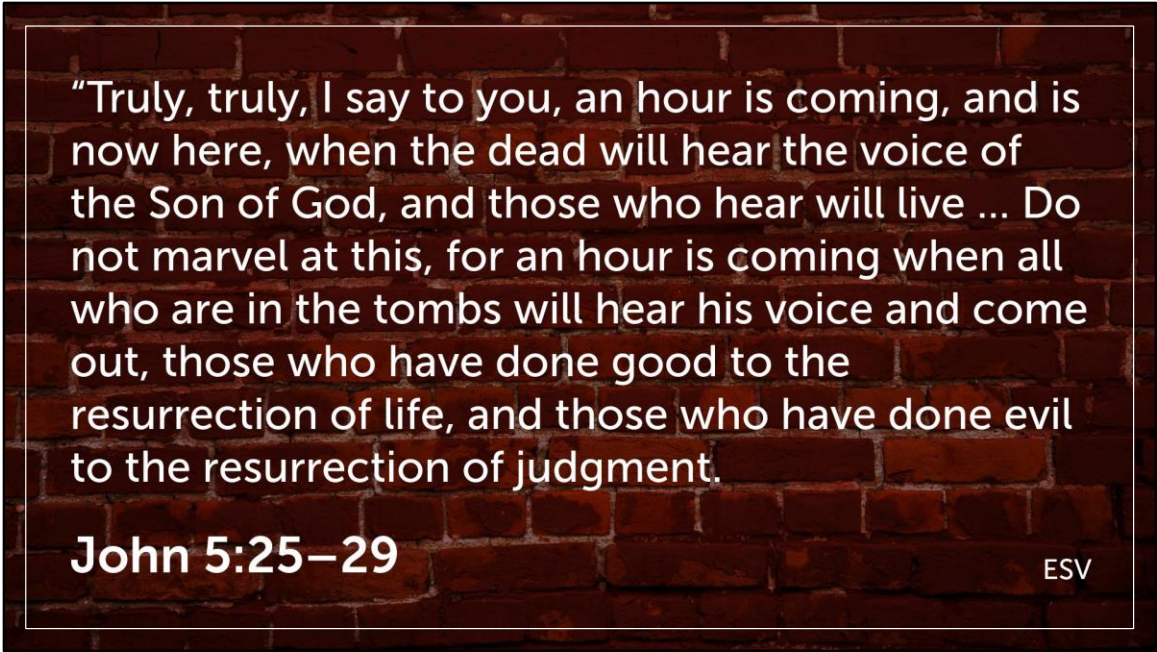
The first resurrection must be spiritual, not literal, and only the second resurrection is a literal or physical resurrection.



1. Regeneration

Over the centuries, interpreters who understood it as such, as nonliteral, have given three different explanations for this concept of a “first resurrection”. The Church Father Augustin believed it was regeneration: we experience the first resurrection when we are born again. In this case, Revelation 20:4-6 describes something that is true for all believers, even those still on earth. There is support for this in John 5, which implies a double resurrection:

Fra Angelico and workshop (circa 1395 –1455), La conversion de Saint Augustin (detail), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_angelico_-_conversion_de_saint_augustin.jpg, Public Domain



"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live ... Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

John 5:25–29

ESV

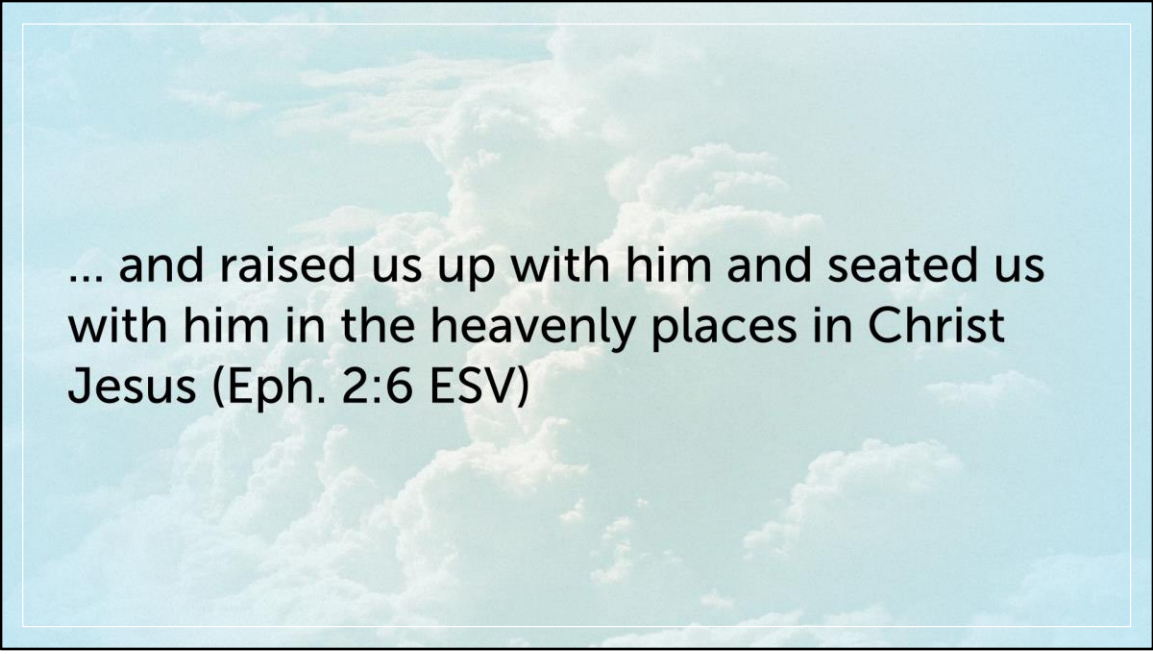
"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live [same verb as in Rev. 20, they will come to life; something already happening in the ministry of Jesus; then a little later] ... Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out [a future and literal resurrection], those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment "(John 5:25, 28-29 ESV). This is the second, literal resurrection.



1. Regeneration
2. Resurrected in Christ

Others believe it means we share in the resurrection of Christ. After all, this is what Ephesians tells us:

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... and raised us up with him and seated us
with him in the heavenly places in Christ
Jesus (Eph. 2:6 ESV)

God "... raised us up with him [the first resurrection] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (that is, seated us on the thrones in heaven in Rev. 20; Eph 2:6 ESV).



1. Regeneration
2. Resurrected in Christ
3. Intermediate state

Yet a third option is that Revelation 20 describes what happens at death: believers “come to life” in heaven and find themselves in the presence of Christ. In other words, this is the transition into the afterlife, the intermediate state between death and resurrection. Literally, the text speaks of beheaded souls coming to life. This is highly peculiar language. It is not used elsewhere to speak of physical resurrection.

Quite possibly, all three ideas are in view, seeing all three ideas find support elsewhere in the Bible and are different aspects of new life. A detailed look at the concept of a “first resurrection” therefore appears to support the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20.

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As for chapter 21, the chapter division is unfortunate. The first eight verses are really the concluding part of chapters 19 and 20, not the beginning of John's final vision. It is scene number seven. Revelation 21:9 makes for a strong structural marker that indicates the break between the two sections. The final scene in verses 1-8 does something that is done more often in the book: toward the end of a section, John introduces what will be the subject of the next section. He did this with Babylon in 16:19. Here, he introduces the city that is also a bride and that will be the main topic of the concluding section.

Following the defeat of evil in God's good creation, we will now get to see what his true design and intention for human life look like.

Credits

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Credits

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Fra Angelico and workshop (circa 1395–1455), La conversion de Saint Augustin (detail), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_angelico_-_conversion_de_saint_augustin.jpg, Public Domain

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Revelation Text 11: Chapter 20 (the Millennium)

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