

## Revelation Chapter 20 (Week 15)

Revelation 20 stands as one of the most important, fascinating, and hotly debated chapters in the entire Bible. Following the dramatic return of Christ and the defeat of the beast and false prophet in chapter 19, John now describes a powerful vision of Satan's binding, the thousand-year reign of Christ with His saints, the "first resurrection," and a final rebellion at the end of the millennium. This chapter is the primary biblical passage that mentions the "millennium" (the Latin word for "thousand years"), and it has become the focal point for differing eschatological views—premillennial, amillennial, and postmillennial. For many believers, Revelation 20 raises profound questions: Is the thousand-year period literal or symbolic? Is it a future earthly kingdom or a present spiritual reality? Has Satan already been bound, or will that happen in the future?

### Preterist:

Most of Revelation (chs. 4–19) was fulfilled in the events of AD 67–70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Chapter 20 continues this pattern but transitions into the long-term consequences.

- **Binding of Satan (vv. 1–3):** Occurred at Christ's first coming, especially at the cross and through the triumphant spread of the gospel (see Matthew 12:29). Satan is no longer able to deceive the nations as he once did in the Old Testament era, allowing the gospel to reach the Gentiles.
- **The Thousand Years (vv. 1–6):** A symbolic number (like 7 or 144,000 elsewhere in Revelation) representing a long but indefinite period — the current church age between Christ's ascension and His second coming.
- **Thrones and the First Resurrection (vv. 4–6):** The thrones are in heaven. The "souls" reigning are deceased believers who are now alive and reigning with Christ in the intermediate state. The "first resurrection" is spiritual — the new birth or the believer's entrance into heavenly life at physical death (cf. John 5:24–25; Ephesians 2:4–6).
- **Satan's Release and Final Battle (vv. 7–10):** Still future. Near the end of the church age, Satan will be briefly loosed for a final surge of deception before the return of Christ, final judgment, and new creation (vv. 11–15).

### Supporting Scriptures:

- Matthew 12:29; Colossians 2:15; John 12:31–32
- Revelation 1:1, 22:6, 10 ("things that must soon take place")
- 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 (Christ's present reign)

**Strengths:** Strong on the time indicators and apocalyptic symbolism; gives great confidence in the present victory of the gospel.

**Weaknesses:** Some feel it compresses too much of the future cosmic renewal into the past and struggles with a literal future new heavens and earth.

**Idealist:**

Revelation is viewed as a symbolic portrayal of the perennial conflict between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil throughout the entire church age. Chapter 20 is not tied to specific historical events but pictures spiritual realities that recur until Christ returns.

- **Binding of Satan (vv. 1–3):** Currently true throughout this age. Satan is bound from fully deceiving the nations so the gospel can advance (he can still tempt individuals but cannot prevent worldwide missions).
- **The Thousand Years:** A symbolic, perfect number ( $10^3$ ) meaning the complete, entire inter-advent period — the whole church age.
- **Thrones, Souls, and First Resurrection (vv. 4–6):** The thrones are heavenly. The “souls of those beheaded” represent all martyred and faithful believers who die physically but immediately “come to life” spiritually and reign with Christ now from heaven. The first resurrection is the spiritual resurrection that occurs at conversion or at death (the believer passes from death to life).
- **Satan’s Release and Final Battle (vv. 7–10):** A symbolic picture of the intensification of evil just before Christ’s return, followed by His decisive victory.

**Supporting Scriptures:**

- Ephesians 2:4–6; John 5:24–25 (spiritual resurrection and reigning)
- 2 Corinthians 4:16–18; 1 Peter 2:9
- Revelation is full of numbers used symbolically (e.g., 7, 12, 144,000)

**Strengths:** Highly practical and applicable to every generation; avoids speculative date-setting and highlights the book’s encouragement for persecuted believers.

**Weaknesses:** Some say it minimizes any future climactic fulfillment and makes the repeated emphasis on “a thousand years” feel overly spiritualized.

**Progressive Dispensationalist**

This view blends futurism with “already/not yet” kingdom theology. The kingdom has been inaugurated but awaits full earthly fulfillment.

- **Binding of Satan (vv. 1–3):** Partially true now (Satan is restrained from total deception), but the complete binding occurs after Christ’s return.
- **The Thousand Years:** A literal future period, yet the church age already participates in some kingdom blessings.
- **Thrones, First Resurrection, and Reign (vv. 4–6):** The first resurrection has both spiritual (believers currently reign with Christ from heaven) and physical dimensions (a future bodily resurrection for the millennial reign). Martyrs and faithful saints will reign with Christ on earth in a restored but not-yet-perfect creation.
- **Satan’s Release and Final Battle (vv. 7–10):** Literal future event at the end of the millennium, demonstrating that even a perfect environment cannot produce faith apart from the heart change of the gospel.

**Supporting Scriptures:**

- Luke 17:20–21 (“kingdom... in your midst”) and Acts 2:29–36 (already)
- Daniel 2:44; 7:13–14; Ephesians 1:10 (already/not yet)
- Revelation 20 read with both present and future fulfillment

**Strengths:** Balances present spiritual victory with future literal hope; shows more continuity between Israel and the church.

**Weaknesses:** Some view it as a compromise; the blending of “already/not yet” can feel less clear than a strict literal sequence.

### **Classical Dispensationalist:**

This is a consistently futurist and literal approach. Chapters 4–22 describe future events in chronological sequence.

- **Binding of Satan (vv. 1–3):** A future literal event after Christ’s visible second coming (described in Revelation 19). An angel physically binds Satan in the bottomless pit so he cannot deceive the nations during the millennium.
- **The Thousand Years:** A literal future 1,000-year period on the earth.
- **Thrones, First Resurrection, and Reign (vv. 4–6):** After the second coming, resurrected believers (especially tribulation martyrs) are physically raised in the “first resurrection” and reign bodily with Christ on a restored earth from Jerusalem. Old Testament promises of an earthly kingdom are literally fulfilled.
- **Satan’s Release and Final Battle (vv. 7–10):** At the end of the literal 1,000 years, Satan is released, deceives the nations (including many born during the millennium who never truly trusted Christ), leading to the battle of Gog and Magog. Fire from heaven destroys the rebels, followed by the Great White Throne judgment.

### **Supporting Scriptures:**

- Revelation 19–20 read as a strict sequence
- Isaiah 2:2–4; 11:6–9; 65:17–25; Zechariah 14 (earthly kingdom prophecies)
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 1 Corinthians 15:23–28

**Strengths:** Maintains a plain, literal reading and honors the many Old Testament kingdom promises; gives a clear timeline.

**Weaknesses:** Revelation is highly symbolic; a strictly literal approach to “1,000 years” may overlook the genre. Some see an overly sharp Israel/church distinction.

### Comparison Chart:

Aspect	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Disp.	Progressive Disp.
<b>Thousand Years</b>	Symbolic — current church age	Symbolic — entire church age	Literal future 1,000 years	Literal future, with present foretaste
<b>Binding of Satan</b>	Completed at the cross	Current throughout church age	Future literal after 2nd Coming	Partial now, complete in future
<b>First Resurrection</b>	Spiritual (new birth / death to heaven)	Spiritual (reign in heaven now)	Physical bodily resurrection	Spiritual now + physical in future
<b>Reign with Christ</b>	Believers reign spiritually now	Believers reign spiritually now	Future earthly reign after 2nd Coming	Present spiritual + future earthly
<b>Satan's Release</b>	Brief future deception before 2nd Coming	Symbolic final rebellion	Literal after 1,000 years	Literal after future millennium
<b>Overall Approach</b>	Mostly past (AD 70)	Timeless symbolic	Future literal chronology	Already/Not Yet Premillennial

### Discussion Questions:

1. Which view best handles both the symbolic language and the literal promises of Scripture?
2. How does your view of Revelation 20 affect daily Christian living and hope?

### Summary of Revelation Chapter 20 from M. Robert Mulholland Jr.'s Commentary (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, 2011)

Mulholland approaches Revelation 20 as a highly symbolic, visionary passage that emphasizes the victory of Christ and the security of His people amid ongoing spiritual conflict. He does not interpret the chapter as describing a literal future 1,000-year earthly kingdom (premillennialism) but sees it as a symbolic portrayal of realities that span the entire inter-advent period — the church age between Christ's first and second comings.

## Key Elements of Mulholland's Interpretation:

- **Satan's Binding (20:1-3):** The angel coming down from heaven with the key and chain represents divine authority (possibly Christ Himself acting through an angelic agent). Satan is "bound" so he can no longer deceive the nations as he once did in the Old Testament era. This binding occurred decisively through Christ's death and resurrection, limiting Satan's power to prevent the global spread of the gospel. The "thousand years" is symbolic (a large, complete period of time — like "a long era"), not a literal chronological timeframe. It depicts the current age in which the church carries out its mission.
- **The Thrones and the Reign of the Saints (20:4-6):** John sees souls (not yet bodily resurrected) of the faithful, especially martyrs, reigning with Christ. This reign is heavenly/spiritual, not an earthly political kingdom. The "first resurrection" is spiritual — the new life believers enter at conversion or, especially for martyrs, at physical death when they immediately enter Christ's presence and reign with Him. It is not a bodily resurrection (that comes later). The "thousand years" again symbolizes the full period of the church age in which believers participate in Christ's victory.
- **Satan's Release and Final Rebellion (20:7-10):** At the end of the symbolic "thousand years" (near the close of the church age), Satan is briefly released for a final outburst of deception, gathering the nations (Gog and Magog) against God's people. This culminates in swift divine judgment (fire from heaven), showing that evil's ultimate defeat is certain.
- **The Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15):** The chapter concludes with the final judgment of all the dead. Books are opened (including the book of life), and people are judged according to their deeds. Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire (the second death). This underscores the finality of God's justice and the security of those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life.

## Overall Emphasis in Mulholland's View:

Mulholland stresses that Revelation 20 is not primarily about future chronology or a literal millennial kingdom on earth. Instead, it reassures persecuted believers that:

- Christ is already reigning.
- Satan is already restrained in a crucial way.
- Faithful believers (especially those who suffer) are already sharing in Christ's victory and will be vindicated.
- Evil's final defeat is assured, leading directly into the new creation (chs. 21–22).

His approach is consistent with an **idealist/amillennial** perspective: the chapter portrays timeless spiritual truths and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom rather than a strict sequence of future events. The focus is pastoral and theological — encouraging endurance, faithfulness, and hope in the midst of opposition.