

Session 6 – Chapters 17 to 22 – Babylon falls, and the new heaven and new earth are revealed

The prostitute on the beast (ch17)

Contrast the woman in ch17 (great prostitute, adulterer, sitting on a scarlet beast with blasphemous names, 7 heads & 10 horns, drunk with the blood of God's holy people) with the one in ch12. She clearly represents the demonic forces that seek to persecute the Church (cf ch13).

The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life will be astonished by the beast – in ch13 that meant they end up worshipping the beast and the dragon.

The 7 heads are 7 hills. Immediately recognisable as the Roman Empire and all it stands for.

v10 The heads are also seven kings... Attempts to pin these down to specific emperors or even kingdoms/empires do not yield satisfactory answers – so it might be best not to take them literally.

The fall of Babylon is not the end of all wickedness. Although evil forces may turn on each other (17:16-17), the most powerful remain. Their end is yet to come. Who will bring about that end will be answered in ch19&20, but first we get another parenthesis in ch18 & the first part of 19.

Lament and joy over Babylon's fall (18:1-19:10)

Kings, merchants, sea captains and sailors all bewail the impact the city's fall will have on their own wealth and security. The fall of Babylon is a metaphor for what happens when God finally judges all the oppression, corruption and godlessness on which the world's wealth has been built and maintained.

Allusions to prophecies and images in the OT –

18:2 – Isa 21:9; 13:21; 34:11-14; Dan 4:19-32

18:3 – Isa 23:17

18:4-5 – Jer 51:1-58; 50:8; Isa 48:20; 52:11; Gen 19:12-15

18:7b-8 – Isa 47 (esp v7-14)

18:9-19 – Ezk 26-27; 28:13-19; 16:13-24

18:20-24 – Jer 51:48f, 63f; Isa 24; 47:8-10; Nah 3:1

19:1-6 – Ps 104:35; 79:10; Ezk 43:2

19:7-10 – Ps 118:24 (& Mt 5:12); Ezk 44:17; Isa 61:6-10; Hos 2:14-20; Isa 25:6-7; 65:13-17

Alongside the laments come encouragements for God's people to rejoice that the world is finally being judged in the way the people of God had been judged and found guilty by the world. These culminate in 19:7 and the anticipation of the wedding feast of the Lamb – his bride has made herself ready.

The rapture

The idea that, near the end of time, Christ will come unexpectedly and whisk his followers off to heaven. Afterwards a Great Tribulation will affect those left on the earth – i.e. only unbelievers.

Based on a misunderstanding of 1 Thess 4:15-17.

Greek word used for '*the coming of the Lord*' (v15) describes the return of a victorious general/king to his home city. The city's inhabitants would line the road leading to it to greet the king and follow in procession after him into the city. An occasion of great joy and celebration. In 1 Thess Paul is painting a picture of Jesus returning to Earth to be greeted by his followers and enter the place where they live. This Jesus coming to reign on earth - which is also the picture painted in Rev 19-22.

'caught up in the clouds' – an experience of God's presence on earth (think Jesus' transfiguration Mt 17:1-5, or Moses meeting with God in the wilderness Ex 33:7-10) .

'meet the Lord in the air' – a metaphor for Satan's realm on the earth (cf Eph 2:2). So, 1 Thess 4:17 describes Jesus coming to meet his followers on what used to be the devil's territory. It's a picture of the fulfilment of all the OT and NT promises. The enemy has been eradicated. It is safe now.

For these reasons, the concept of a rapture is most likely a misunderstanding of Scripture.

The defeat of the beast and the false prophet (19:11-21)

The rider on a white horse – Faithful and True (see (1:5; 3:7,14). True and just (15:3; 16:5; 19:2). With justice he judges and wages war (Ps 9:8; 72:2; 96:13; 98:9; Isa 11:3-4; **Acts 17:31**).

v11-16 echo Isa 62:1-3 & 63:1-6 connecting Jesus, the new Jerusalem (representing faithful people of God) and their new names. Christ fulfils Isaiah's prophecies. He represents the true people of God.

Jesus' new name is unknown because it can only be fully known when everything associated with that name is fulfilled/accomplished.

He defeats his enemies by the sword coming out of his mouth, i.e., by word not military might, by truth. Contrast with the weapons of demonic forces and human beings. Cf Isa 11:3-4; 49:2-7; 63:2-6; Ps 2:9.

Chiasm in 19:12-16. 12&16 refer to his name, 13a&15b to blood/the winepress, 13b&15a to word. At the centre of the chiasm is v14 which is about the faithful people of God, vindicated by Christ's victory.

King of kings and Lord of lords cf Dan 4:37 – title for God.

The appearance of this Christ figure is taken by most commentators to refer to Christ's second coming to finally judge Satan and his demonic forces and all those who have followed them.

In ch18 we saw the end oppressive human rule and idolatry. In 19:17-21 comes the destruction of the beast and false prophet, the spiritual forces of evil. Compare Rev 19:17-18, 21 with Ezk 39:4, 17-20 and the defeat of Gog and Magog. The main purpose in that defeat was to make known the holy name of God both to Israel and to Israel's oppressors (Ezk 39:7, 21-29). The same applies here.

The same ideas are expressed in Rev 20:7-10 regarding the end of Satan - suggests those verses describe the same war.

The beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. Is this total annihilation? 20:10 suggests otherwise; 'alive' or 'while living' (19:20) suggests they remain conscious of their enduring punishment.

It only says those who follow them are killed. However, in 20:12 all the dead are raised and judged before the throne of God. And in 20:15 anyone whose name is not found in the book of life is thrown into the lake of fire. So, in the end their fate is the same as Satan and the beasts.

The thousand-year reign (20:1-6)

Does 20:1-6 describe what happens in time after the events of ch19, or is it a separate vision seen by John that describes what precedes the final judgment?

Greatest controversy is over the 1,000 years Satan is bound (v3) and the saints reign with Christ (v4). The 1,000-year reign or millennium (v4) is understood in 3 different ways:

1. Premillennialism - Christ will return before then reigning on earth for a literal 1,000-year rule. Sees 19:11 to 20:15 as describing a precise historical sequence that unfolds at the end of time. Many believe Jews will be given a special chance to accept Christ during those 1,000 yrs.
2. Postmillennialism - Christ's second coming will occur after a literal millennial rule of peace and righteousness by Christ from heaven. Many believe that rule will come as a result of worldwide success in the Church's mission.
3. Amillennialism – there is no literal millennium. What 20:4 refers to is figurative for the whole period of the Church from Christ's first coming right up to his second coming.

Bear in mind: (1) the language of 19:11-20:6 is still full of symbolism; (2) the sequence described may simply be the sequence in which John saw these visions rather than a strict historical progression; (3) Rev 20:1 '*I saw an angel coming down from heaven*' has previously (in 7:2; 10:1 & 18:1) introduced a new vision which suspends the temporal progress of the preceding section to communicate something relevant to it (e.g. sealing of the 144,000 in ch7 which interrupted the 7 seals to answer the question in 6:17 and referred back to a time before the judgments of ch6). Therefore 20:1-6 may go back to a time before Christ's return in 19:11.

The battle against Satan in ch20:7-10 is described in very similar language to the battle in 19:17-21 (including mention of Gog & Magog from the same Ezk 38&39 passage referenced in 19:17-21). Implies 20:7-10 recapitulates the events described in 19:17-21. As these things happened after the 1,000 years were over (20:7), the millennium seems to be before the appearance of Christ in 19:11.

If the events of 20:1-6 occur after 19:11-21, why would Satan be bound in 20:3 to prevent him from deceiving the nations any more, if those nations had already been killed in 19:21?

Logically, therefore, the battles in 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 describe one and the same event. And 20:1-6 describes what happened prior to that battle. Many take that to refer to the time of the Church.

According to 20:3, during all that time Satan has been metaphorically bound in the Abyss.

So, how come there is still so much evil, persecution and temptation? Why do people still get caught up in the occult? Why are they still led astray by all kinds of ungodly philosophies and religious beliefs?

Rev 20:3 does not say Satan is prevented from doing anything at all; only that he is prevented from deceiving the nations anymore. He cannot stop people from turning to God. You are evidence of that.

When the full number of those sealed by God are gathered in, then the binding will end, Satan will be loosed and allowed once again to deceive those who are not sealed into rejecting God and seeking to kill those who follow Christ. All Satan will be doing is to deceive those already inclined to reject God. He will deceive nations into seeking to destroy the Church – but that is all part of God's plan and purpose and is the final justification for the judgment of Satan.

God has restricted the time Satan can do his worst (Mk 13:19-22; Mt 24:21-24). Satan will fail in his attempt to crush the Church and it will instead be him who is crushed (see 2 Thess 2:1-12).

As those who have responded to the call to follow Jesus, our role is to continue to call others into his new covenant community, so the full number can be reached. Now, while Satan's power to deceive is constrained, is the time for us to make every effort to help others turn to Christ.

When metaphorically the abyss is opened and the beast rises from it, that time will be over, no more will be able to respond and the end will come shortly after.

What about the beheaded saints coming to life and reigning with Christ for the 1,000 years (20:4)?

Not meant to understand them as physically resurrected people sitting on actual thrones in heaven. It's figuratively affirming that those who've suffered for their faith are vindicated by God. Unlike Satan who seeks their destruction, they will live and reign with Christ (cf Lk 22:30; 1 Cor 6:2; Dan 7:23-27). The spiritual resurrection & reign of believers in Heaven during the 'thousand' years of the Church is the precursor to their physical resurrection & reign on Earth in the new age to come at the end of time.

There are many parallels in Rev 20:1-10 and ch21&22 with Ezk chapters 37-48 which point to a bigger fulfilment that involves resurrection (37:1-4), a messianic kingdom (37:15-28), a final battle against Gog and Magog (38-39) and a new temple and new Jerusalem (40-48).

The first resurrection is a *spiritual* resurrection/rebirth which takes place when we respond to God's grace. The second resurrection is the *physical* resurrection that takes place at the final judgment.

The first death is a *physical* one that happens when we die. The second death is a *spiritual* death that afflicts all those who have rejected Christ, which again takes place at the final judgment.

The judgment of Satan (20:7-10)

The judgment of Satan completes the picture of the destruction of all the forces of evil.

For a short time, Satan is allowed to deceive the nations once more. He does so by convincing them to join him in battle against God's people (see Ezk 38-39 for more on Gog and Magog, and also Zech 12-14 and Zeph 3). John's universalisation of Ezekiel's prophecy suggests the oppressed Israel in Ezk 38-39 is to be universalised in Revelation to represent the whole people of God.

Before Satan and the nations can attack the Church, the nations are consumed by fire from heaven. And Satan as the orchestrator of the attack is cast into the lake of fire.

This is the final victory. The satanic trinity of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet are crushed. No more suffering and death for those who have tried to remain faithful to God. No more lies and deception about the character of God or our standing before him. No more temptation to stray from God. No more doubts about whether God loves and accepts us. No more feelings of being a second-class Christian or not being good enough. They are gone forever.

The resurrection and judgment of the dead (20:11-15)

Back at God's throne in heaven where the final judgment is about to take place. For the earth and heavens fleeing and there being no place for them, see 6:14 & 16:20 (figurative for a radical change).

The dead being before the throne of God assumes a resurrection of both righteous and unrighteous.

Books are opened and all are judged according to what they have done. All will be found to have fallen short of what God requires of us as human beings. But v15 makes clear the sole criterion for what happens to each person is whether their names are in the book of life.

v13 The sea, death & Hades. All three describe the place of the dead and are associated with the realm over which evil forces have ruled. Note 21:1, in the new heaven and earth there is no sea.

The new heaven and new earth (ch 21:1-22:5)

What happens to the current earth?

2 Peter 3:10 *'the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be burned up'* seems to indicate the earth as we know it will cease to exist. But have we misunderstood it?

Rev 21 describes the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (v2). *'God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'* (repeated theme in Ex 29:45; Lev 26:11-12; Jer 24:7; 32:38; Ezk 37:27; Zech 2:11; 8:8; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 8:10. See also Ezk 34:30; 43:7). Like a theme song in a film that you hear strains of again and again but only grows into the fully orchestrated version at the very end.

According to Rev 21 God's plan is for heaven to come to earth and for us to be physically resurrected for a new life on a renewed earth. This is a consistent picture throughout the Bible, esp the prophecies in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel that describe a future that is very material and earth-bound.

In 2 Peter 3:10, in the most trustworthy Greek manuscripts, instead of the verb for 'burned up' we have one for 'is found' (rendered in modern translations as 'disclosed', or 'laid bare'). Same verb as in Mt 24:46; Lk 12:43. The idea is of the earth being tested to see if anything good can be found in it.

The 'elements' in 2 Pet 3:10 cannot refer to earth, air, fire and water as the last part of the verse makes it clear the earth is not destroyed. The destruction of the elements could be Peter's way of describing Satan and his demonic angels being burned up in the lake of fire, thereby purifying the earth. Like a metal worker's fire for refining precious metals.

This seems more consistent with God's view of creation (Gen 1). Why would he replace what he'd declared to be so good? Is it not more likely he would refine it to restore its original purity? Rev 21:5

This renewed earth would be where, according to Rev 21&22 (& parallels in Isa 65:17-25 & 66:22-23)

- God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev 21:4)
- there's no more death, or mourning or crying or pain (v4) –things that bring anxiety and fear
- God will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life (v6)
- it belongs to those who have overcome/been victorious through their faith in Christ (v7)
- there is no place for the unbelieving, the immoral, or the idolatrous (v8)
- nothing impure will ever enter it (v27)
- God's people will reign for ever and ever (22:5)

Christ's victory over sin & death and the judgment of everything opposed to God has made it possible for God to come and dwell among his people here on earth – just as he did in Eden - and for them to reign over the earth perfectly. This is what we are looking forward to. Doesn't your heart yearn for it?

And it is what we are to prepare ourselves for now, by learning the path of obedience to God's ways, so that we are ready to take up our role as rulers of the earth.

The language around the holy city, the new Jerusalem and the bride (21:2) comes from Isa 52:1-10 & 62:1-5. See also Gal 4:26-31 & Heb 12:22. But the imagery of the bride is also associated with the Church, with Jesus as the bridegroom (John 3:29; Rev 19:7). Ch21 brings together the two images of us as the bride and the city (see **v9-14**). The marriage metaphor is an expression of the intimacy of the relationship between God and his people that is the key characteristic of the renewed creation.

21:9-22:5 expand on what has been described in 21:1-8.

Because God's presence is with his people, there is no need for a temple (21:22). In the new creation, the symbolic concepts of the city and the temple are collapsed into one. The community of Christ are being built into a new temple (Eph 2:20-22), a new city (Heb 11:10,16; 12:22-23) See also Rev 3:12.

In v15-17 the measuring of the new city echoes Ezk 40-48 and symbolises God ensuring the security and protection of his people. The measurements are huge and clearly symbolic - 12,000 stadia each way make it ~1,400 miles square & high! Remember 12 & 10 both represent completeness. Note the inner sanctuary (the holy of holies) in Solomon's temple was a cube (1 Kgs 6:20).

The shape may not be a cube but a pyramid, like the Babylonian ziggurats. Remember the Tower of Babel, built to enable human beings to ascend to the heavens? God frustrated that attempt by humans to make themselves like the gods. In contrast, the new Jerusalem is built not by humans but by God. It is not for humans to reach from the earth to the heavens but comes down from heaven to earth.

The description of the new Jerusalem (v18-21) is a contrast with the city of the whore in ch17. Both are adorned with precious stones for very different reasons. The gems of the whore's city aim to seduce others to bow down to her. The gems of the new Jerusalem reflect the beauty of her faithfulness to God and the glory of the presence of God within her. Note the breastpiece of decision worn by Aaron bearing 12 precious stones for the 12 tribes of Israel and worn so Aaron might have the whole people of God over his heart when he entered God's presence (Ex 28:15-30). See also Isa 54 esp v11-12.

Final words of encouragement (22:6-21)

22:6 The words in this book come from a true and trustworthy God

22:7 Jesus is coming soon – so hold firm to your faith in him

22:8-9 Don't worship the messenger, worship God

22:10-11 Don't ignore the words in this book just because they're about a time in the future. Learn to live accordingly now.

22:12-16 Those words come from the one who is the Beginning and the End and controls everything in-between. Only those who have been washed by him and remained faithful to him (whose names are written in the book of life) will be part of the new Jerusalem.

22:17 Long for Christ's return. Expect it at any time. Thirst for him. Your reward is his gift of true life.

22:18-19 Take the warnings in this book seriously. Don't try and add to them to make them more palatable. Don't reject the bits you don't like.

22:19-20 Trust the one who has said he is coming.

Some key takeaways from our journey through Revelation

I want to...

- Recommit myself to remaining faithful to Jesus whatever the cost (Rev 2:9-10; 12:17)
Have I, have you, made a conscious decision that my relationship with God matters above anything and anyone else? Not that that then becomes an excuse to deprive others of my love and care, but that my love for them is motivated and fed by my greater love for God.
- Accept that God is God, and that I am not (Rev 6:1-8; 11:16-18)
Will I, will you, resist the temptation to shy away from the passages about God's judgment or wish and pray away the disasters that afflict so many parts of the world because I would rather have God's love without the necessity for judgment?
- Avoid getting distracted by attempts to identify specific images in Revelation as predictions of specific individuals, nations, companies, inventions, events or whatever
- Recognise that Satan's primary method of attack is through deception and his aim is to deflect us from proper worship of God (Rev 12:9; 13:11-15)
Where am I, where are you, most vulnerable to the attractions of security, approval, success, status & power? How can I make myself more accountable to others to help me resist them?
- Come to a better understanding of how suffering seems to be God's chosen way of defeating evil (Rev 13:9-10; Phil 3:10)
Am I, are you, willing to accept the likelihood there will be times in my life when I face suffering for my faith? Will I take steps to help ensure I persevere through such times?
- Be regularly reminded of the hope regarding the future that is there for those who remain faithful to God (Rev 21&22)
How confident am I, are you, in that hope? How will I draw on the encouragement and support of fellow Christians to sustain that hope through difficult times?
- Become increasingly familiar with the content of the Old Testament, so as to see more connections with the New Testament and grow in faith in God.
What could I, could you, do to help grow my confidence in reading and understanding more of the Old Testament? And how might I use what I do understand to help others?