

Easter 6C  
Revelation 19-21

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We are in the midst of a series on the book of Revelation, a letter that an early Christian leader named John wrote to seven churches at the end of the first century, encouraging and exhorting these Christian communities as they faced the issues of persecution, assimilation, and complacency. Pastor Chris masterfully gave us an overview of chapters 8-18 last week. My task today is much more manageable – only chapters 19, 20, and a bit of 21. This passage contains another series of “seven” -- we have seen that John likes to do things in groups of seven – seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls of wrath. These seven scenes are not numbered, but (with one exception) they all begin with the words “Then I saw...” The scenes are not a calendar with events in chronological order, but a tour through an art gallery in which the theme of God’s victory at the end of history is treated in seven different pictures, each complete in itself with its own message and with little concern for what order things happen in. Rather than read all seven scenes at once and have you try to keep track of them, we’ll read them one at a time and then pause for some comments.

*19<sup>11</sup>Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. <sup>12</sup>His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. <sup>13</sup>He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. <sup>14</sup>And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. <sup>15</sup>From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. <sup>16</sup>On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”*

**The Return of Christ** is sometimes called the *parousia*. John does not here specifically identify the rider of the horse as Christ, but imagery he uses for Christ earlier in the letter makes the identification clear: the flaming eyes (1:14), the sword of the Word of God from his mouth (1:16, 2:12), and the name “Faithful and True” (3:14).

Some people are bothered by this militaristic image of Christ, since it is so unlike Jesus’ earthly ministry. But note John’s emphases:

- The death by which Christ conquers is his own
- He destroys his enemies not with a literal sword, but with the sword of his mouth
- His only weapon is the Word of God (himself)
- The word for “rule” in v. 15 also means “shepherd”, which John used back in chapter 7 to say “the Lamb will be their shepherd”
- Before the battle begins, Jesus’ robe is already bloody (v. 13) — his own blood shed on the cross

The “armies of heaven” (v. 14) may be the angelic hosts or those who have died in the faith — note that these saints do not participate in the battle. They follow Jesus, but they do not do any fighting. This is not like a scene from “Lord of the Rings” where huge armies slug it out. The victory belongs to Christ alone and has already been achieved in Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection.

*<sup>17</sup>Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, <sup>18</sup>to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.” <sup>19</sup>Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. <sup>20</sup>And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. <sup>21</sup>And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.*

**The Last Battle** is a surprising scene because no battle is described. That’s because, for John, the decisive battle was long ago in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Christ and the heavenly army stand opposed to two groups: 1) rebellious human beings — not just powerful kings, but both free and slave, small and great (v. 18) and 2) the powers of evil, symbolized by the beast (a metaphor for the power of the Roman empire that claims for itself the place of God) and the false prophet (a metaphor for those who encourage worshiping the beast). (v. 20) Without a struggle, the powers of evil are taken and cast into the symbolic place of destruction, the lake of fire. Rebellious humanity is “killed” with the “sword” that comes from the mouth of Christ — that is, they are judged by the Word of God.

***20** <sup>1</sup>Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. <sup>2</sup>He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, <sup>3</sup>and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.*

In the preceding vision of the Last Battle, the beast and the false prophet are gone forever, but the dragon, Satan, the personification of the power of evil, is still at large. John describes the work of Satan in this world as “deceiving the nations”. “The nations” for John means “the Gentiles” or “the pagans”. The nations, like individuals, are not inherently evil, but the object of God’s love, so the nations are not just perpetrators of evil but its victims as well.

The binding of Satan is not just a hope for the future, but also has a present implication — there is no ultimate dualism, as if Satan were a god as well. The power of evil, strong as it is, is temporary and operates only by permission of the one God. God’s victory over evil and death in Jesus Christ, now seen only by Christians through the eyes of faith, will ultimately be recognized by all the world.

*<sup>4</sup>Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its 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 share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.*

**The Thousand Year Reign** is sometimes referred to as “the millennium”. Although this gets a lot of attention from some Christian groups, it is not an important part of John’s letter (mentioned only in these three verses and nowhere else in the New Testament). Those that John sees seated on thrones are Christians who have been martyred for their faith. They are depicted as royalty, not in the sense that they rule over someone (there are no others in this picture over whom to rule!), but they are royal in the sense that they now experience freedom from the earthly powers that enslaved them. John refers to this as the “first resurrection”, and while all the dead come to life to stand before God’s judgment in v. 12, he does not call that a “second resurrection”. John may be responding to claims of some in his generation that the resurrection had already happened. In both Ephesians (2:1-7) and Colossians (2:12, 3:1), the apostle Paul speaks of our baptism as a resurrection to new life and some may have misunderstood Paul’s metaphor to be a literal resurrection. In that case, John is emphasizing that there is no physical resurrection presently experienced, but that the “first resurrection” will occur at the end of time.

*<sup>7</sup>When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison <sup>8</sup>and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. <sup>9</sup>They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. <sup>10</sup>And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*

**The Defeat of Gog and Magog** is a rather strange image. The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel speaks of “Gog, prince of Magog” (38-39) as powers God would raise up in the last days as the ultimate representation of evil and then destroy as a demonstration of God’s power and glory. There is no historical nation of Magog. Ezekiel seems to have used it as a reference to Babylon and an analogy for ultimate evil. John follows Ezekiel’s imagery and uses Gog and Magog as antagonists to God that are larger than life. You may wonder why God would release Satan after throwing him in prison for a thousand years. (v. 3) One possibility is that John does this for literary consistency: since John is following Ezekiel’s story line and sees Gog and Magog operating under the power of evil, it is “necessary” that Satan be released so that he might deceive the nations and gather them for the “last battle”.

Notice that this last battle is no “battle” at all. No human armies are involved. Without any struggle, fire comes from heaven and destroys the enemies of God’s people and the devil disappears forever. As we acknowledge in the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, “deliver us from evil”, only God can win this battle, and the victory was won long ago in the cross of Christ the Lamb.

*<sup>11</sup>Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. <sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup>Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; <sup>15</sup>and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*

The Last Judgment scene is the only judgment scene in Revelation and everyone who has ever lived is there. The Christians of John's churches faced the possibility of standing before the throne of the emperor, but they are here reminded that God's throne is the higher court. Books are opened. Some record human deeds, taking human freedom and responsibility very seriously — this is John's way of reminding us that what we do is important to God! Alongside these books is the Lamb's book of Life which John referred to in earlier chapters (see 13:8, 17:8). The Lamb's book of Life is a picture of grace, for the names in it are recorded "from the foundation of the world." One gets one's name in the book of life by God's deeds, not one's own. In this picture image, John depicts the paradox of our relationship with God — we are saved by grace **and** we are judged by our works. Both are true.

*<sup>21</sup> <sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”*

*<sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. <sup>7</sup>Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. <sup>8</sup>But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”*

**The New Jerusalem** is the seventh and most important scene in John's vision of the end. Its description is not just the 8 verses printed here, but goes through the next chapter, which we will read next week. John had earlier described the forces of evil with the image of the whore of the city of Babylon, and here he balances that by depicting the redeemed heaven and earth as the bride of the new Jerusalem. To describe the indescribable in human language, John tells us what it is not— no sea (a symbol for chaos); no tears, death, sorrow, crying, or pain. John says there will be no vices or sins, and the vices he lists in the last sentence – being faithless, murderers, idolaters, liars – these are sins that John particularly associated with participation in the emperor cult and yielding to the pressures of pagan society.

For John, the “end” that awaits us is not an event, but a person — the God revealed in Jesus Christ. John then restates God's words from the beginning of the letter (1: 8), “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” God does not merely bring the End—God is the End. So what awaits us at the end? The Lord God, the one who created us and redeemed us in Jesus Christ. For that reason, we have nothing to fear.