

THE FIGHT OF YOUR LIFE

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 20
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Revelation 20

In the second film in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Two Towers*, the king of Rohan is reluctant to go to war. An army is marching through the land, destroying villages, slaying women and children, bent on destroying the world of men. Still, Theoden balks: “I will not risk open war.” Aragorn, the ranger from the north, challenges him: “Open war is upon you, whether you would risk it or not.”¹

What was true for Theoden is true for us. Open war is upon us, whether we know it or not, whether we would risk it or not. We have an enemy who is bent on destroying the people of God. This is the fight of your life. It’s also the fight *for* your life—and the lives of other men, women, and children. Will we engage?

The day that I finished writing the manuscript for this sermon, I had a dream in which an obscenity and my name were scratched onto my laptop, which I had used to write the manuscript. John, the author of Revelation, by use of awesome and awful images, wants to wake us up and realize, not least, that we’re in the middle of a spiritual war. For me, going to sleep, and having a dream, awakened me to this reality. Will I engage?

In Revelation 19, John saw the final defeat of the two evil beasts: the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth, also called the false prophet. Yes, but what of the third member of the unholy trinity: the dragon?

Satan bound

Revelation 20:1-3:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

John records what he sees next, not necessarily what happens next to the world in history. In fact, what he sees in Revelation 20:1-6 is a flashback: the events it depicts precede the events depicted in the previous section, Revelation 19:11-21.² The bottomless pit is a domain of evil in the book of Revelation. In that the angel holds the key to the abyss, he acts with the authority of Christ, who is sovereign over evil (Revelation 1:18, 9:1).

This is symbolic language. John says the dragon “is” Satan—meaning, the dragon *symbolizes* Satan, not the dragon is *actually* Satan. John sees the angel seize and bind the dragon, but how can an angel literally seize Satan, a spiritual being, much less literally bind him with a literal chain?

Neither should we take the thousand years literally, any more than we should take the ten days of Revelation 2:10 or the one hour of Revelation 17:12 literally.³ The number 1,000 is a factor of the number ten, which is a number of completeness. Ten times ten times ten equals 1,000. Satan is bound for a complete and long, but indeterminate, amount of time.

The angel confines Satan to the pit so that “he might not deceive the nations” for a long but indeterminate amount of time. John further defines what he means by this in verse 8, where he understands that Satan will be released to “deceive the nations” who are opposed to Christ in order to marshal them for the final war against the people of God. While he is confined to the pit, Satan can deceive the nations; he just can’t deceive them in a way that preemptively marshals them for the final war. Moreover, John doesn’t see the angel binding any demons. We might imagine Satan still being able to direct them from the pit, much like an imprisoned Mafia boss.

Satan wants to destroy the people of God. Previously, he was allowed to deceive the nations in order to marshal them for the final war, but at some point, God stopped him from doing so. At some point, the dragon was confined to the pit, so to speak, a place from which he could still deceive the nations—and believers also, for that matter—but not in a final way. At what point was that? John doesn’t say, but the best explanation is

that Satan's confinement began with the first coming of Christ. The "1,000 years," then, began with the first coming of Christ.

In Revelation 12:13-17, John shows that the dragon, after the coming of Christ, is prevented from destroying the woman, who at that point in Revelation 12 symbolizes the New Testament people of God as a whole. Using similar imagery to that of Revelation 20, Jesus explains his ability to cast out demons: "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man" (Mark 3:27). Jesus bound Satan in order to free those who are oppressed by him, but the binding didn't completely restrict Satan. The apostle Paul likewise speaks of the present, but not permanent, restraint of evil (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).⁴

Satan wants to get on with it, but God says not yet.

Fight for your heart

Open war is upon us. The opposing army is made up of evil spirits led by an evil spirit: Satan. You can't see them, but they are just as real as a flesh and blood army, and they're even more dangerous because the stakes are eternal. Their tactic is deception: they want to convince men, women, and children to disbelieve what is true and to believe what isn't true.

The war, first of all, is for your heart. What will you believe? What will you feel? What will you devote your life to? These are questions of no small significance, and whether we know it or not, we are answering them every day, and whether we know it or not, we are being influenced by evil spirits to answer them in a certain way every day. Satan comes to "steal and kill and destroy" your heart (John 10:10).

Listen to Paul's words to the Corinthians, and hear him speaking them to you: "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). Remember, as John says elsewhere, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8b). Also remember that Jesus said the Father sent him "to proclaim liberty to the captives" and "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18-19).

Will you be devoted to Christ, or will you be led astray in devotion to something else? You are in the

fight of your life—the fight for your life. In this war for your heart, you need the Word of God, prayer, and the people of God—brothers and sisters in Christ who will fight with you for your heart.

First, pay attention to the way you're talking to yourself. Pastor and psychologist William Backus says,

If you practice you can develop constant awareness of the beliefs and misbeliefs running through your head at any given moment. When you feel bad, irritable, depressed, upset—stop and listen to what you are thinking or telling yourself.

Second, ask yourself if what you're telling yourself is true, especially based on what you know about the Scriptures. Third, practice telling yourself the truth. Backus again: "This means deliberately silencing our misbeliefs at the moment they're voiced within, 'thrusting through' these lies, as it were, with God's word of truth."⁵

Don't capitulate to every thought or feeling, as if everything you think and feel is based on truth. You are not necessarily who you think you are; you are who God says you are, for his thoughts are higher than your thoughts. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Who the Son sets free
Oh is free indeed
I'm a child of God
Yes I am.

I am chosen
Not forsaken
I am who you say I am
You are for me
Not against me
I am who you say I am ⁶

The poet James Wright, having lost his family and his job to drink in the 1960s was deeply moved when friends asked him to be a godfather to their baby. As they explained to him what the baptismal service would entail, they told him the pastor would ask, "Do you renounce Satan and all his works?" Although he was simply being informed about what to expect, Wright boomed, "Hell, yes!" His friends explained to him that a simple "I do" would suffice. Wright's preemptive answer, though, demonstrated his understanding that we're in a war.⁷

Christ, though, has already rescued us, as we see in the next verses.

Rescued for Christ

Revelation 20:4-6:

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who 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 for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Where are the thrones that John sees? All but three of the forty-seven uses of the word “throne” in the book of Revelation refer to heavenly thrones. The three exceptions refer to the throne of Satan (Revelation 2:13, 13:2) and the throne of the beast (Revelation 16:10). In Revelation 20:4, John sees heavenly thrones.

Who sits on the thrones? The words “authority to judge was committed to them” echo Daniel 7:22, where “them” is said to be “the saints of the Most High”—that is, believers. John sees believers on heavenly thrones. Every believer is destined to sit with Jesus on his throne (Revelation 3:21). Also, Jesus will give to each believer “authority over the nations” (Revelation 2:26-27). Judgment has been passed in favor of the believers whom John sees on heavenly thrones, and he now sees them reigning in heaven with Jesus and serving as judges.

Specifically, John sees two groups of “souls”: martyred believers (“those who had been beheaded”) and other believers who have died (“those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands”). John sees martyred believers and other believers who have died sitting on heavenly thrones.⁸

If these believers have died but now reign in heaven, how is that they “came to life”? When they died, they came to life in a figurative sense. After all, they are said to be “souls.” They came to life and reigned with Christ

in heaven for 1,000 years. While Satan is bound in the pit, these believers—that is, all believers who have died—reign with Christ and serve as priests in heaven, albeit for now without bodies. This is what John calls “the first resurrection.” John sees a vision of the so-called “intermediate state,” before the literal resurrection of the dead.⁹

The “rest of the dead,” then, would be unbelievers. They don’t come to life until after the thousand years. We learn of their fate in Revelation 20:11-15: they are subject to “the second death.” John never mentions “the second resurrection” or “the first death,” but they are implied.

The first death is the actual, temporary death of believers. The first resurrection is the figurative resurrection of believers. The second death is the figurative, permanent death of unbelievers. The second resurrection is the actual, permanent resurrection of believers:

First death: Actual, temporary
Second death: Figurative, permanent
First resurrection: Figurative, temporary
Second resurrection: Actual, permanent

Christ has bound the strong man and plundered his house: he has rescued us for himself, both now on earth and later in heaven—and for all eternity in the new creation. Christ has rescued us, but why has he rescued us?

The end of Satan

Revelation 20:7-10:

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 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.

Finally, Satan will be released from the bottomless pit, now called “his prison,” to gather all the nations from the four corners of the earth—that is, the whole

the earth—for the final war against God’s people. The nations are also referred to as “Gog and Magog,” which comes from Ezekiel 37-38.

The description of the war in Revelation 19:11-21, which also echoes Ezekiel 37-38, describes the same war, as does Revelation 16:12-16.¹⁰ In all three descriptions (Revelation 16, 19, 20), the conflict is called “the war.”¹¹

In the Revelation 19 description, “all” the nations are destroyed, “both free and slave, both small and great” (Revelation 19:18, 21). The war depicted in Revelation 20 is unlikely to be different from, and subsequent to, the war in Revelation 19, because after the Revelation 19 war, there would be no nations left to gather, much less a countless number like the sand of the sea.

John sees the countless horde surround “the camp of the saints and the beloved city,” two descriptions of the people of God, which evoke their temporary residence in this creation (camp) and their permanent residence in the new creation (city).¹²

On the one hand, Satan appears to have every advantage: his countless army has the camp/city surrounded. On the other hand, consider this: the people of God are described as “the camp of the saints,” God’s holy ones, and “the beloved city,” loved by God. If they are God’s holy ones and if they are loved by God, then they have every advantage. Just as in Revelation 16 and 19, the war is over before it starts. In this case, fire from heaven consumes the nations.

Finally, the devil is thrown not temporarily into the bottomless pit but permanently into the lake of fire and sulfur, where he will experience unceasing torment, joining his two henchmen, the beast from the sea and the false prophet, also called the beast from the earth (Revelation 19:20).¹³ What Jesus told Peter is true: Jesus will build his church, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18-19).

None of this need be taken literally. If the visions of Revelation 16, 19, and 20 depict the same war, they do so in different ways. These are different visions of the final coming of Christ. The apostle Paul gives us yet another vision of the same event, saying that the Lord Jesus will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). But if it hasn’t happened yet, who knows what’s to be taken literally and what’s to be taken figuratively?

The beloved city

As believers in Christ, we are God’s holy ones; together, we are the beloved city. Christ has bound the strong man and plundered his house in order to rescue us. Why? Because he loves us. We are the beloved of God. As Paul says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

As Christ died for us, what did the Father do? What did Christ do? Rather, what didn’t they do?

As Jesus was dying on the cross, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). What didn’t the Father do? He didn’t rescue his Son. He is able to move heaven and earth, but he didn’t do it. Why not? There can only be one answer. God didn’t rescue his Son because he was rescuing us. That’s love.

As Jesus was dying on the cross, his enemies taunted him: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross . . . He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him.” (Matthew 27:40-43). Jesus was the Son of God, of course. He could have come down from the cross, but he didn’t do it. Why not? There can only be one answer. He didn’t come down from the cross because he was rescuing his enemies, including us, for as Paul says in Romans, “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). That’s love.

Who am I that the highest King
Would welcome me?
I was lost but He brought me in
Oh His love for me
Oh His love for me¹⁴

Christ has rescued us for heaven because he loves us. What has he rescued us from?

Standing before the throne

Revelation 20:11-15:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave

up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

After the final war comes the final judgment. We've already seen a different vision of this in Revelation 14:14-20. Here John sees God, or perhaps Jesus, or perhaps both, sitting on "a great white throne," poised to judge the dead.

Notice the absurdity if this is taken literally. Are we to take it that the earth and sky fly away but that the sea remains, without earth or sky, so that it can give up the dead? Moreover, we have already seen these kinds of cosmic disturbances in the book.¹⁵ In each case, they indicate the seriousness of the judgment that's taking place. The imagery suggests that if the earth and sky have flown away, there's no place for the dead to hide (Psalm 139:7, Revelation 6:16).

The "great and the small"—that is, every unbeliever—will stand before the divine judge. The sea, Death, and Hades, different images of the same reality, serve as temporary abodes for unbelievers, just as heaven serves as the temporary abode of believers, before the final judgment.¹⁶

Those whose names are written in the book of life are those who believe in Christ, for in Revelation 13:8, it's called "the book of life of the Lamb who was slain." Those who do not believe in Christ will be judged without respect to the book of life and solely on the basis of the other books, which contain records of their deeds.¹⁷

That everything that everyone has ever done is recorded in books indicates that God knows not only everyone's deeds but also everyone's motives. As such, the deeds written in the books reveal whether a person was loyal to God or not, whether someone did well because he or she loved God or not. God welcomes those who love him, not those who do just well enough so that God if he happens to exist, will keep his nose out their business and give them a pass in the end.

God wants people to receive his love and to love him in return. He wants people to believe in his Son and receive his Spirit. He wants people to do good deeds because they love him. Good deeds, it turns out, can be every bit as sinful as bad deeds. It depends on why you're

doing them, because you love God or because you want to be free to do what you want without his interference.

It is no doubt one of Satan's greatest accomplishments: he has convinced the world that God, if he exists, accepts people based on their deeds, when in reality, for most people, their deeds, even their good deeds, indicate that they want nothing to do with God.

Eternal spiritual torment

What happens in the end? Death and Hades, which are temporary places, will be no more. The sea will be no more either, according to Revelation 21:1—not that there won't be any more sea in the new creation, but there won't be any place for evil in the new creation.

God will not give those who don't believe in his Son a pass in the end. Instead, he will throw them into the lake of fire, so to speak, to suffer eternal spiritual torment, joining the beast, the false prophet, and Satan (Revelation 14:10-11). Jesus uses similar language, proclaiming that he will to unbelievers, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). God did not prepare hell for humans; he prepared it for the devil and his angels. But if humans choose against God, he will send them to hell, which in the end is giving them what they prefer.

Paul, who says that both believers and unbelievers will be resurrected from the dead, uses more literal language to describe the fate of unbelievers: "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (Acts 24:15, 2 Thessalonians 1:9). For believers, it will be a "resurrection of life," and for unbelievers, it will be a "resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29).

The PBC doctrinal statement puts it this way: "We believe that all human beings will be raised from the dead, at their proper time, to participate either in eternal life prepared for those who have been redeemed, or to participate in eternal punishment reserved for the devil and his angels" (pbc.org/what-we-believe).

It is a terrifying prospect to stand before God when all you have to commend yourself to him is your deeds. When the books are opened, there will be no place to hide.

Craig S. Keener was an atheist but chose to immediately consider the claims of Christ, once they

were thrust upon him rather than deferring the decision “because the doctrine of hell made the stakes too high to ignore.” His consideration first led him to Christ and then led him to be a biblical scholar. One of his works, by the way, is a commentary of the book of Revelation, which I have consulted from time to time during our study.¹⁸

If you don’t yet know Jesus, do you think you too should consider the claims of Christ immediately?

Christ has bound the strong man and plundered his house: he has rescued us for himself, both now and eternally, but what has he rescued us from? He’s rescued us from hell. As Paul says, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Romans 5:9).

Fight for each other

Now what? Fight! It may seem as if evil has the advantage, but in reality, those of us in Christ have the advantage. Jesus has bound the strong man. Because of Christ, we are the holy ones of God. We are the beloved of God.

Fight for your heart. Also, fight for the hearts of other men, women, and children.

The statistics of what happens to children who grow up in the church after they graduate from high school are not promising. Most give in to Satan and fall away from the faith. There’s a group in our church, called We Care, that meets once a month on Sundays during the second service to pray for those young adults who came from our church. They’re fighting for hearts.

I’m inspired by folks in our Recovery Ministry. They know they’re in a war. They get into each other’s lives and fight for each other. They’re fighting for hearts.

When I was with some brothers a few weeks ago, I opened up about something I was going through, and one of them broke into a long, beautiful, and heartfelt prayer for me. He fought for my heart.

Let us be a church that fights for each other.

What is your answer?

At this point in the book of Revelation, let us rejoice. Satan is finished. Death, what Paul calls the “last enemy,” is destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). Those who embrace

and promulgate evil are vanquished. We are now ready for “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1–22:5).

And until then? Fight! Christ has rescued you from hell, and he’s rescued you for himself. Fight for your heart. Fight for the hearts of other men, women, and children.

In *The Two Towers*, Aragorn approaches the weak-kneed Theoden, king of Rohan, and informs him that a neighboring kingdom is under siege and calling for aid. Earlier, Theoden retreated. This time, he searches deep inside himself, and finally answers, “And Rohan will answer.”¹⁹

Open war is upon us. What is your answer?

Endnotes

- ¹ *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Directed by Peter Jackson. 2002. USA: New Line Cinema, 2002. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaBdoLVJQag>. Web.
- ² In two cases in the book where the word translated “then” (*kai*, more literally translated “and”) is followed by angelic descent, the words introduce a vision that reverts to an earlier time (Revelation 7:2, 18:1). In the other case, the words introduce a vision that reflects on an earlier scene (Revelation 10:1).
- ³ Moreover, John says in Revelation 20:7 that Satan will be released literally “whenever” the thousand years are ended. The word implies an imprecise period of time. Furthermore, the number 1,000 is used elsewhere in the Scriptures symbolically (Psalms 50:10, 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8).
- ⁴ See also Matthew 16:18, Luke 10:17-18, John 12:31-33, Colossians 2:15.
- ⁵ William Backus, *The Hidden Rift With God* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), 152-53.
- ⁶ Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan, “Who You Say I Am” (Capitol Christian Music Group).
- ⁷ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).
- ⁸ Earlier, John saw a vision in heaven of “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Revelation 6:9).
- ⁹ Elsewhere the New Testament speaks of a non-physical resurrection that precedes an actual resurrection (John 5:24-29; Romans 6:4-13, 8:10-11). Jesus says that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who have died physically, are alive spiritually, before the final resurrection of the dead, observing that God “is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 25:32).

- ¹⁰ Revelation 20 recapitulates Revelation 19, just as Ezekiel 38 recapitulates Ezekiel 37.
- ¹¹ The article “the” is omitted from the ESV translation in Revelation 19:19.
- ¹² Elsewhere, the New Testament says that believers are already residents of the heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 12:22). In Revelation 21, John sees the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven (Revelation 21:2, 10).
- ¹³ Because Revelation 19:17-21 and Revelation 20:7-10 are two visions of the same event, the beast, the false prophet, and the devil are most likely cast into the lake at the same time.
- ¹⁴ Fielding and Morgan.
- ¹⁵ Revelation 6:14: “The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.” Revelation 16:20: “And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.”
- ¹⁶ The sea, Death, and Hades are the same as Sheol in the Hebrew Scriptures (1 Samuel 28:13, 2 Samuel 22:5-6, Job 26:5, Psalm 69:15).
- ¹⁷ This is not to say that the deeds of believers have nothing to do with how God evaluates them in the end (Psalm 62:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Matthew 16:27; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:23, 22:12). It is to say that the evaluation of believers is not what John is writing about in Revelation 20:11-15. However God evaluates the deeds of believers, he tells us this through the writer of Hebrews: “I will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12). Especially in view of their faith in Christ, believers can have confidence that the servants of God will be rewarded (Revelation 11:18). Not least, the reward for all believers is envisioned in Revelation 21:1-22:5.
- ¹⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation: The NIV Life Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 382.
- ¹⁹ *Two Towers*. Jackson.Web.