

Revelation 20:1-15 | The End of Evil

Ever since humanity can remember, there's always been this sense of a struggle between good and evil. In fact, our most epic stories always have this struggle right at the centre. Recently, our youngest son has been reading the Harry Potter series and inspired some family-movie binge-watching over March Break. And isn't that the heart of the Harry Potter story? Constantly wrestling through the question of who will win: *Harry or Voldemort? Good or evil? In this episode? In this battle? Within our very souls?*

As we near the end of our journey through the Book of Revelation, this is the same epic struggle that reaches its climax in the biblical story. But we have to remember, Revelation isn't a stand-alone book, but part of the ancient library of books we know as the Bible. And while Revelation uniquely paints a picture of the biblical *story to come*, it also serves as an ongoing telling and re-telling of the epic *story so far*, all while providing a unique camera angle on *our stories* right now – all in fantasy-drama Harry Potter-like fashion! So, with all that in mind, to help us understand our passage today in Revelation 20, we actually need a brief review of the very beginning of the story where the Bible first provides its answer to the questions: *Where does evil come from? And: Will good or evil ultimately prevail?*

Right at the beginning of the story, after God fashions all creation and emphatically describes it as “very good”, we come to the first line of the third chapter of the Bible that says:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.

Genesis 3:1a

If you're familiar with the overall story, this becomes the moment when evil enters the picture through the character of the “serpent.” Now, to be clear, this story isn't about debating the legitimacy of talking snakes (any more than we debate talking snakes in Harry Potter).

But is about making us aware of a distortion and deception that emerges early in the story of God's good creation, in ways that, at times, are tangible and personified. This is the entry of evil into the story through the serpent that deceives Adam and Eve into believing they can't fully trust the goodness of God, and therefore find themselves falling into humanity's first act of rebellion against God, all in the midst of God's otherwise good and perfect creation.

Now, this raises the question: *Why would a good and perfect God allow something like this to happen? Why would evil be allowed to slither its way into God's good world in the first place?* While these are complex questions, I believe the answer the Bible points to is that out of God's good and perfect love, God made all creation with the capacity to exercise and enjoy radical free will – capable of either reciprocating or rejecting God's love – and thus, making all manner of things, including evil, possible in our world.

But to further prepare us for our passage in Revelation today, what we also need to know from the beginning of the story is that before evil is even a day old, the Bible includes a promise that points toward the *story to come*, where it says in **Genesis 3:14-15**:

Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this... I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; and he will crush your head."

The crafty and deceptive serpent will be crushed. Nearly as fast as evil arrives on the scene we encounter a promise that good will eventually and ultimately triumph over evil.

So, with that backdrop from the *third* chapter of the Bible, let's now turn to the *third last* chapter of the Bible to look at Revelation 20 together today, where the chapter begins with John writing:

And I saw an angel...

Revelation 20:1a

Now, let's stop right there for a moment because this is a key phrase that we've seen before in Revelation. In fact, we've seen it six times before and now this is the seventh time John writes, "*And I saw an angel...*" And this phrase and the number of times John uses it is actually a clue to remind us that Revelation isn't a prediction of literal or linear future events, but a description of overlapping heavenly visions that John saw. And John's recurring segue lets us know that John isn't trying to map out a sequence of historic events, but is simply describing what he saw in the heavenly realm as he saw it – as one scholar says, with this seventh vision representing the symbolic conclusion to the interrelated and overlapping visions we've seen so far in the first six.

So, what did John see in this seventh vision? Well, it says:

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.

Revelation 20:1-3

Now, doesn't that sound straight out of *Harry Potter & The Goblet of Fire*?!

But here's the cool thing: in John's apocalyptic writing style, this is John's vision of the Genesis 3 promise of the serpent – the source of evil – being crushed! As he says that he sees "***the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan***" bound and locked away. These are the words and descriptions throughout the biblical story for the source of evil. Introduced as "the serpent" in Genesis 3. Named as "the devil" – meaning *deceiver* – or "the Satan" – meaning *accuser* – in Jewish tradition. And depicted as "the dragon" throughout Revelation. Making clear that this is the moment that good ultimately triumphs over evil as the one who comes down from heaven seizes and locks away the serpent who has been the deceiver and source of evil.

Now, one of the great debates about this passage has to do with the ‘when’ of these events, specifically around the phrase “*a thousand years.*” But this is where it’s critical to remember that John’s visions are saturated with symbolism, hinting as much toward what God has *already done*, as to what God will do *one day*. And in that light, we can actually see and understand this cosmic defeat and crushing of the serpent as something God has *already* accomplished in Jesus. In fact, many scholars make this very observation in how Jesus himself spoke of his earthly ministry as an act of binding Satan in **Matthew 12:29**. Or in how Jesus described the mission of his disciples causing Satan to fall like lightning in **Luke 10:18-19**. And most significantly, through what the early church understood Jesus accomplished on a cosmic level through the cross, based on how Jesus said he would drive out the “ruler of this world” through his crucifixion in **John 12:31-33**.

To help us picture this, check out this 14th century painting, sometimes referred to as the [Harrowing of Hell](#). What you can see here is the risen Jesus in the midst of the darkness taking Adam and Eve by their wrists to pull them out of the clutches of death, all while the saints – followers of Jesus – both past and present, look on with anticipation. And specific to our passage today, notice the disfigured looking reddish-brown character beneath Jesus’ feet, bound and tied amidst the broken locks of hell, symbolizing Satan being bound and chained. In fact, some medieval portrayals of this scene show the gates of hell falling in the shape of a cross on top of the devil as the symbol of how Jesus’ death on the cross crushed the serpent.

Then, as John continues, he describes another remarkable cosmic feature of what Jesus has accomplished through his death and resurrection. He says:

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge... they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

Revelation 20:4a, 6b

If we go back to the ***Harrowing of Hell*** painting for a moment, notice what we see on the heads of the saints to the left of Jesus – crowns. While this may seem like odd symbolism given that most of Jesus’ original followers (and John’s audience) were severely oppressed and impoverished by the rulers of the Roman Empire, during his earthly ministry, Jesus announced that he was starting a new kingdom and that by his Spirit his followers would play a key role in establishing it on earth. That’s why John saw Jesus-followers who had been killed because of their faith now reigning with authority in heaven, and Jesus-followers alive on earth serving as “priests of God.” All as a renewal of God’s original mandate in **Genesis 1:28** for humans to lovingly ***“rule over”*** creation, and as a symbol of how the apostle Peter described the church as ***“a chosen people and royal priesthood”*** (**1 Peter 2:9**).

With all that, let’s recap what we’ve heard – or more accurately, *seen* – in Revelation 20 so far. That through his death, Jesus has crushed and bound the serpent, the source of evil. And by his risen Spirit, Jesus has given his followers a servant-ruler role in establishing his kingdom of goodness and love on earth. All as a revelation of the biblical *story so far*.

But this then begs the questions: *What about the evil that still rages around us? And what about the evil that so often slithers its way into our own hearts? And where is all of this going in the story to come?* Let’s keep reading:

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

Revelation 20:7-9

This is one of the more startling scenes in Revelation. But let’s remember, John’s visions are symbolic and metaphoric to help us see truth beyond the surface.

With that in mind, to our questions about the evil all around us – especially if Jesus has already crushed the serpent – what we see is that, according to the larger biblical story, we find ourselves in the midst of what scholars call the “already and not-yet.” That God has *already* triumphed over evil through Jesus *AND* God has *not-yet* fully established his kingdom of goodness which is promised one day through Jesus’ return. Having some describe the age we live in as though the devil is like an imprisoned mob boss, locked away and having lost the battle, but still with enough influence to cause plenty of havoc beyond the walls of his cell.

And out of that understanding, that’s where today’s passage begins to paint a symbolic picture of the not-yet part of the *story to come*. Suggesting that any influence Satan currently has is only enough to eventually culminate in self-destruction. As once again, we see a picture of an emerging battle – just as we’ve already seen in Revelation 16 & 19 – with Satan unleashed for one final deception of God’s enemies. But once again, with the recurring surprising twist of *no battle being fought*. Instead, seeing the finality of the divine destruction of evil as the full and final crushing of the serpent, already initiated and guaranteed through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The battle that has already been won in God’s *story so far!*

All of which leads to the final scene in Revelation 20 with more of the *story to come*.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

Revelation 20:11-12

Here, we have a picture of what’s often described as the “final judgment.” That God will one day raise all people to fulfill his good and perfect judgment. It’s a reminder that what we do in this life matters. That what we do in this life has eternal significance. Either contributing to the goodness of God’s eternal kingdom or the destined-for-destruction evil of the serpent.

And this can be an unnerving thought. Cause who among us doesn't contribute to evil from time to time? And yet, that's what makes it so critical for us to notice another clever detail in John's vision. As first, he writes that "**books were opened.**" As in, lots of books. Enough books for everyone who has ever lived. Biographies and stories of every human life. What Jesus described as "**all that is hidden being disclosed**" (Luke 12:2). A record of all we've ever done to be reviewed and evaluated according to God's standard of goodness and love.

But then it says: "**Another book was opened... the book of life**" (1:12b). That the countless records of humanity's deeds don't have the last word. That, while God indeed has a *standard* that he's called us to embrace, God also has a *salvation* that is eager to embrace us all. In fact, this isn't the first time we've heard of the "book of life" in Revelation, as we saw a more detailed description of this book much earlier in **Revelation 13:18**, saying:

[T]he book of life... belongs to the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

You see, while the "books" of the final judgment of Revelation 20 reveal the deeds we've all done, the "book of life" in Revelation tells a story since "the foundation of the world." The story of the Lamb. The story of Jesus. The story of salvation which forgives and redeems humanity of sin and evil. And *the story* that will one day deal with and destroy all evil for good!

And that's how Revelation 20 concludes:

Afterwards, death and its kingdom were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. Anyone whose name wasn't written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:14-15

Now, two important notes on this part of the *story to come*... First, that what is crystal clear is that John sees a future where God will one day destroy death and evil for *all* eternity. That death itself – as evil's last line of defense – will suffer its own death, never to live again!

And then second, that anything else that could threaten or steal *life* – anything not contained within God’s story of salvation in “the book of life” from the foundation of the world – will be consumed as though in fire so as to never rear its ugly head again!

And friends, I want to say that I know this can also be an unsettling image. But while the Bible isn’t as crystal clear on how exactly this might play out for “anyone” – as our English text reads – who exercises their radical free will to reject God’s goodness and love, one final fascinating note about this passage (that also reminds us it’s not yet the *end of the story*) is how the images of *fire* and *water* overlap in this scene. And not just here, described as a “lake of fire”, but quite frequently throughout the larger story of scripture. Most notably for Revelation, as in one of John’s favourite Old Testament texts to quote from Daniel 7, where Daniel sees a “**river of fire**” flowing from the throne of God (**7:10**), but that John then re-envisions as a “**river of the water of life**” flowing from the throne of the Lamb in **Revelation 22:1**. And perhaps most significant, in what we’ll see in our final week in Revelation just a few weeks from now, where John concludes the *whole story* of the Bible with an invitation that seemingly always remains on offer, saying:

Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.

Revelation 22:17b

That what we see in this picture – this good versus evil vision from John – is that whether through fire or water – and more specifically through the Jesus who’s been described as both – both in the *story so far* in what Jesus has already accomplished, *and*, in the *story to come* of what Jesus is yet to do, what doesn’t change the whole way through from the *third* chapter of the story to the *third last*, is that God, through Jesus, is only ever always in the process of refreshing, restoring, renewing, and redeeming the life of creation, all as part of his first-things-first promise that God’s goodness will ultimately triumph over evil once and *for all!*

And friends, that is the good news of our story today!

So then, I suppose, the final question is: *What about your story? And how might Jesus be inviting you to trust your story with his today?*

To trust that Jesus wants to deliver us from any and all of the evil that could tempt us or threaten to consume our lives. And that, by his Spirit, Jesus wants to empower us to be part of seeing the goodness of his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. To trust that evil and death don't get the last word. But that God's eternal gift of life, available through Jesus, can redeem, restore, and forgive anything we've done, and in the process, make us agents of sharing his forgiveness with others, just as we've been forgiven.

And friends, not only are we all invited to trust our stories with God's story today, but we have the incredible privilege of hearing the stories of a number of people across our community who have done just that and are now experiencing God's goodness, renewal, restoration, and redemption in their lives in a fresh new way. Letting God lead and guide their stories with all the good news of his story. And we especially get to celebrate all of this together this morning, not only through their stories, but through the celebration of the life-giving waters of baptism! A beautiful reminder that, in Christ, good triumphs over evil!

Let's check out these baptism stories!