

## What About Revelation 20? (Part III)

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### ***The Binding of Satan***

The vision of Revelation 20:1-6 is divided into two sections. The first, in verses 1-3, describes the binding of Satan for a period of one thousand years. The second, in verses 4-6, describes the reign of the saints with Christ during this millennial period and includes a reference to the saints who participate in the first resurrection and are not liable to the second death.

Now that we have considered some of the broader issues of interpretation relating to Revelation 19 and 20, we are in a position to take up directly the interpretation of the vision itself.

The vision of Revelation 20 begins with a striking portrayal of the binding of Satan:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time (*Rev. 20:1-3*).

Though interpreters differ as to how far the details of this vision are to be pressed, the main emphases are little disputed.<sup>1</sup> The Apostle John sees an angel descending from

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<sup>1</sup> The hermeneutic or method of reading Revelation that always insists that the text be taken literally (for example, Dispensationalism) runs into obvious difficulties when it

heaven in order to carry out God's will and purpose. The whole vision suggests that this angel's divine authorization and power to carry out his assigned task is invincible and unassailable. He is equipped with the key of the abyss, language which suggests the power to open and to close, to unlock or to lock (see *Rev.* 3:7, *Matt.* 16:19). The abyss is elsewhere described in the book of Revelation as the dwelling place of the demons. Revelation 9:1-6 depicts a bottomless pit out of which demonic locusts swarm forth to afflict those who dwell upon the earth. It is into this place that the angel comes to cast Satan according to Revelation 20. In addition to the key, representing the power to loose or unloose Satan, the angel has in his hand a great chain. Some have suggested that this chain represents the Word of God (see *Rev.* 19:13, 15), though its precise identification remains uncertain.<sup>2</sup> What is clearly represented by the key and the great chain together is that the angel is properly equipped to execute God's purpose to bind and restrict the activities and wiles of Satan.

The focus of this first section of the vision is fixed upon the actions of this angel in laying hold of Satan who is variously named 'the dragon, the serpent of old . . . the devil'. The angel seizes Satan, casts him into the abyss, and seals it over him. The language of sealing is symbolic of the complete and sovereign control that is being exercised over Satan (cf. *Dan.* 6:17, *Matt.* 27:66). Thus, when Satan is released for a short time after the period of one thousand years, the language of the vision makes clear that this will occur only by the permission and under the complete control of God. This emphasis is underscored by the expression, 'After these things he must be released for a short time'.

The key question for the interpretation of this first section of the vision concerns the exact nature and implications of the binding of Satan. Historic and dispensational premillennialists as well as postmillennialists all concur that this binding must be understood as an action that completely curtails the actions of Satan. The restriction implied in this binding represents an unprecedented limitation upon Satan's activity, one that distinguishes the millennial period from all previous redemptive history. Though premillennialists argue that this millennial period commences after the return of Christ and postmillennialists argue that it occurs before, they agree in their insistence that the

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comes to the vision of Revelation 20. This vision portrays events in the form of images and symbols, many of which can hardly be interpreted literally. Are the key and chain used by the angel a literal key and chain? Is the abyss a literal place of confinement for Satan in the depths of the earth? Simply to ask these questions exposes the problems of a literalistic hermeneutic. A similar difficulty emerges, as we shall see, with the expression 'one thousand years' in this passage. See Vern S. Poythress, 'Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36/1 (March, 1993), pp. 41-54. Poythress helpfully suggests that we read the visions of Revelation at four levels of communication: the linguistic (the textual record itself), the visionary (the visual experience of John), the referential (the historical reference of the vision), and the symbolic (what the vision connotes about its referent).

<sup>2</sup> For example, G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (The New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 284-5.

binding of Satan during the millennium cannot be identified with the entire period between Christ's first and second advents. The vision of Satan's binding is too powerful in its implications for that to be the case. Who would dare maintain that the present period of history is one in which the millennial binding of Satan is a reality? Is there concrete evidence today of the limitation upon Satan's activity that this vision of his binding requires?

Though this objection initially sounds rather powerful, upon further reflection it loses some of its punch. There are good biblical reasons to conclude that the present period of history — taking the vision of Revelation 20 as a description of the period between Christ's first coming and his second coming at the end of the age — represents the period of Satan's being bound so as not to be able to deceive the nations.<sup>3</sup>

Considering the biblical story of the history of redemption, significant change from the old covenant to the new becomes evident in terms of the nations of the earth. Whereas in the old covenant, the Lord called Abraham from Ur of Chaldees and dealt primarily with the nation of Israel, in the new covenant the gospel is being preached in the whole world (*Matt. 24:14*) and the nations are being discipled (*Luke 24:47, Matt. 28:16-20*). This difference in covenant administration does not affect the substance of the covenant of grace — the Lord who created the heavens and earth and all peoples, already in the first promise to Abraham spoke of the blessing that would come to all the peoples and nations — but it does affect the way in which the good news is being preached to all the nations of the earth.

Compared to the extension of the kingdom of God in this present age, prior to the coming of Christ in the fullness of time the nations of the earth remained predominantly under the deception of Satan. Though the Lord's dealings with Israel were never narrowly ethnic, they were restricted in ways that, in the present age, are no longer true.<sup>4</sup> Those who are members of the new covenant church of Jesus Christ are apt to forget the greater richness of saving blessing that has been poured out upon the nations of the earth in these last days. The light of the gospel that has shone among the nations of the earth in the present age contrasts vividly with the darkness in which the nations dwelt during the period of the old covenant.

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<sup>3</sup> See R. Fowler White, 'On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-3: A Preconsummationist Perspective', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 4211 (March 1999), pp. 53-66. White argues that the language is that of an 'epic idiom of victory over the dragon'. Such language, found elsewhere in the Scriptures, does not require the literalistic conclusion that Satan no longer has any power or room to carry on his rebellious purposes in history. See Strimple, 'Amillennialism', p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Contrary to popular opinion, Israel was never an ethnically defined people. Abraham was called from Ur of the Chaldees. Among his descendants, the children of Israel, were many who were gathered from the Gentile nations (such as Rahab and Ruth). Provisions were made in the law for the incorporation of aliens into the people and inheritance of Israel. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Old Testament does not have the same missionary impulse as is found in the New.

It is vitally important to note that the language describing the binding of Satan in Revelation 20 associates this with a restriction upon his activity such that he 'should not deceive the nations any longer'. This is the one great purpose and effect of Satan's binding, so far as the explicit language of Revelation 20 is concerned. Satan is bound so that he can neither prevent the spread of the gospel among the nations nor effectively deceive them. This vision confirms the teaching that the period between Christ's first coming and his second coming is one in which the gospel of the kingdom will powerfully and effectively go forth to claim the nations for Jesus Christ. It confirms the confidence and authority with which Christ, after his resurrection, commissioned the disciples to go into all the earth and make disciples of the nations. This commission was given in the context of Christ's having been given all authority in heaven and on earth (*Matt. 28:18*). It was also concluded with the promise that Christ would be with his disciples until the end of the age. Consistent with Christ's confident declaration to his disciples that 'they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at table in the kingdom of God' (*Luke 13:29*), the vision of Revelation 20 declares that the great obstacle to the evangelization of the nations — Satan's deceptive hold over them — has been removed.

Furthermore, if the vision of Satan's binding is interpreted in the broader context of the book of Revelation and the teaching of the Gospels, it corresponds quite closely to the biblical understanding of the present period in the history of redemption.

In an earlier vision in the book of Revelation, the Apostle John saw a great war in heaven that was concluded with the casting down of the dragon, the serpent, to the earth (12:7-12). In this vision, Satan is described as the one who deceives the whole world. But now that Satan has been defeated in heaven and cast down, a loud voice in heaven is heard to say, 'Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been cast down . . . And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death' (12:10-11). Though the language of this earlier vision in Revelation is different from that used in Revelation 20, it seems to describe the same realities of which the latter vision speaks: Satan's ability to deceive the nations and prevent the coming of the kingdom of God has been effectively destroyed. Now has come the kingdom of God. Now the nations are being disciplined. Now the power of Christ's gospel is being revealed in the earth.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Premillennialists typically regard Revelation 12 as referring to a different event and history from Revelation 20. See John E Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), pp. 191-2. Historic and dispensational premillennialists as well differ in their understanding of it. Because the loud voice in heaven goes on to speak of Satan's being cast down to the earth, 'having great wrath', it is argued that the situation is substantially different from that in Revelation 20, where Satan is cast into the abyss. However, the meaning of the two visions, though different in their imagery and symbolism, seems to be identical: Satan has been decisively defeated and rendered incapable of deceiving the nations any longer. Contrary to the claims of premillennialists

In the Gospel accounts of the preaching and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, the language of some passages finds an echo in the vision of Revelation 20. These passages provide the biblical context within which the vision of Revelation 20 becomes clear.

The Gospel of Matthew contains an account of Jesus healing a demon-possessed man who was brought to him. When the multitudes hear of this miraculous healing, they are amazed and wonder whether Jesus might be the Son of David (*Matt.* 12:23). However, the Pharisees, upon hearing of this healing, are reported to have declared, 'This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons' (verse 24). In response to this unbelief and blasphemy on the part of the Pharisees, Jesus notes that no kingdom divided against itself can stand. He then claims that his power to cast out demons is a demonstration of the presence of the power and kingdom of God: 'But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house' (verses 28-29). In this response to the Pharisees, Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God has come and is among them in his person and work. The healing of this demon-possessed man illustrates the presence of the kingdom and confirms that Satan has been bound so that he is no longer able to prevent the plundering of his house. It is interesting to observe that the word used to express the restraint placed upon Satan, 'to bind', is the same word used in the vision of Revelation 20 to describe the binding of Satan.

On another occasion in the Gospel accounts, we are told that he sent out seventy disciples, two by two, to go ahead and proclaim the nearness of the kingdom. In the charge given to the seventy, Jesus commissions the disciples to go into the field of harvest which is plentiful and heal those who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near you' (*Luke* 10:9). When the disciples return from fulfilling this commission, they return with joy, reporting, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name' (*Luke* 10:17). In his reply to their report, Jesus says, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall injure you' (verse 19). In this and other Gospel passages, Christ's coming and ministry is a concrete realization of the coming and presence of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that plunders and destroys Satan's household and releases those who are captive to sin and the demons. Christ has now been given all authority in heaven and on earth, so that the

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(and some postmillennialists), nothing in the vision of Revelation 20 demands the conclusion that Satan is no longer capable of doing any harm. The only thing that is specifically emphasized in the text is that he can no longer deceive the nations. And that is certainly true of the period of history since Christ's first coming and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 658-61.

demons flee before him, the captive are set free, the sick are healed, and the nations disciplined.<sup>6</sup>

In another significant passage in the Gospel of John, the coming of Christ is associated with a dramatic curtailment of Satan's activity among the peoples of the earth and the missionary expansion of the church. Predicting his death, Christ declares, 'Now judgement is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself' (12:31-32). This passage speaks of a casting out in judgement of the ruler of this world, and it speaks of the crucified Christ who will draw to himself all men, Jew as well as Gentile, from among the peoples of the earth. In these ways it parallels the thought of the vision in Revelation 20, that the kingdom of Christ will be realized through the binding of Satan and the gathering of the nations. Furthermore, as was true of the passage in Matthew 12, the language employed to describe Satan's judgement is very similar to that employed in the vision of Revelation 20. In John 12, we read of the 'casting out' of Satan. In Revelation 20, we read of the 'casting down' of Satan.<sup>7</sup>

If it is a standard rule of thumb in reading the Bible that Scripture should interpret Scripture and that the more obscure passage should be interpreted in the light of the more clear passage, the conclusion that best fits this evidence is: the vision of Satan's binding in Revelation 20, so that he is no longer capable of deceiving the nations, is a representation of the events coinciding with the coming of Christ in the fullness of time. Christ has come and won a decisive victory over the evil one. This victory is variously revealed to us in the Gospels and throughout the New Testament. With his victory over Satan's temptations in the wilderness, his declaration and exhibition of the power of the kingdom in casting out demons and plundering the enemy's stronghold, his vanquishing of sin and death upon the cross, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension to the Father's right hand, and his pouring out of the Spirit of Pentecost — in this entire complex of Christ's saving work he has won a decisive victory over Satan. No longer is Satan able to deceive the nations. The promise of Psalm 2, that the nations will be given by God the Father to his Son as his rightful inheritance, is being fulfilled (verses 7-9). Between the time of Christ's first coming and his second coming, the millennial reign of Christ upon the earth is being manifested for all to see.

### **'FOR A THOUSAND YEARS'**

One of the intriguing features of the vision of Revelation 20 is its reference to a period of one thousand years. For most premillennialists, this language must simply be taken

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, see the following passages that also speak of Satan's defeat before the power of Christ expressed in the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom: *Matt.* 13:24-30; 47-50, *Acts* 2:14-36; 4:23-31, *Rom.* 16:20, *1 Cor.* 15:20-28.

<sup>7</sup> The verbs used in these passages, *ekballo* in John's Gospel and *ballo* in Revelation 20, are virtually identical, the former simply having the prefix *ek* ('from') added.

literally as a reference to a distinct period in history after the return of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Particularly within the context of Dispensational Premillennialism with its commitment to a literalistic reading of the Bible, the language of Revelation 20 is regarded as sufficient to prove the error of Amillennialism and Postmillennialism. Because these two views treat the language of one thousand years in Revelation 20 non-literally, as referring to a long period within God's superintendence during which Satan is bound and the kingdom of Christ is manifested, they are charged with wrongly spiritualizing the meaning of this language. Furthermore, if it is objected that this is the only passage in Scripture which speaks of a one-thousand-year period, the premillennialist response is typically that one passage should be more than adequate to make the point. If this passage clearly teaches a literal millennium of one thousand years, who has the right to deny its teaching?

Before looking at the expression 'one thousand years' more directly, two general observations are to be made regarding this premillennialist claim. First, the insistence that the language of Revelation (and of all Scripture) be taken literally betrays a way of reading the Bible that we have earlier contested. A book like Revelation, with its rich symbolism and use of biblical types and figures, gives no obvious reason to take literally the term of one thousand years. If much of the book is written in language that is clearly not literal, some reason needs to be given why this must be the case in the vision of Revelation 20 with its use of 'one thousand years'. Second, there is reason to pause before conceding the argument of Premillennialism here precisely because no other passage of Scripture speaks of a literal period in history of one thousand years (whether before or after Christ's return). One of the great difficulties in the case for Premillennialism is the relative lack of support for its doctrine of the millennium from other passages in Scripture. This suggests that before we concede as self-evident the claim that one thousand years must mean one thousand literal years, we consider whether Scripture might not support a different reading of this expression.

Those who argue that the thousand years is not to be taken literally often note that it is a perfect cube of ten, ten being a number of completeness. This would suggest, then, that the reference to a one-thousand-year period should be taken as symbolic of a perfect and complete number within the purpose of God. This is a plausible way of reading this language, but it tends to be too abstract. It still remains to ask, Do the Scriptures elsewhere use the number one thousand in a symbolic way which might cast some light upon Revelation 20?

As a matter of fact, the use of the term 'one thousand' in the Scriptures seems quite pertinent to the interpretation of Revelation 20. Though in some instances the number may be quite literal (for example, *Gen. 20:16*, *Ezra 1:9-10*) or possibly literal as well as

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<sup>8</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 293, makes a representative comment: 'The expositor is not free to spiritualize the interpretation of the vision but must accept the interpretation in its ordinary and literal meaning. If this is done, there is no alternative to the premillennial interpretation, which holds that at the second coming of Christ, Satan will be bound for a thousand years.'

symbolic (for example, *Judg.* 15:15-16, *1 Chron.* 29:21), in other instances it has a clearly symbolic meaning. In Deuteronomy 7:9, the Lord is described as a 'faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love him and keep his commandments'. In the summary of the law given in Exodus 20, a contrast is drawn between the Lord's visiting of judgement upon the third and fourth generations of those who hate him, and his 'showing lovingkindness to thousands' who love him and keep his commandments (Exod. 20:5-6). Similarly, in the Psalms we read that the 'cattle on a thousand hills' belong to the Lord (*Psa.* 50:10-11). The Psalmist also speaks of how a 'day in Thy courts is better than a thousand' (*Psa.* 84:10). In the well-known words of Psalm 90, the believer confesses that 'a thousand years in Thy sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night' (verse 4). Responding to the mockers who mocked the promise of the Lord's coming, the Apostle Peter notes that 'with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day' (*2 Pet.* 3:8).<sup>9</sup>

What these passages indicate is that the number one thousand is often used in the Scriptures to refer to an extensive period of time. The use of one thousand years in Revelation is, when interpreted against the background of this usage of the symbolism of one thousand, likely a reference to a period of fullness, completion and perfection so far as God's redemptive plan is concerned. This expression is not meant to teach that the millennium will be a period of 365,000 days, not one more nor one less. Just as God's faithfulness is perfect and never failing (unto one thousand generations), so the times within his redemptive purposes are perfect and never failing. The most that can be concluded, then, from the use of the number one thousand in Revelation 20 is that the period of Satan's binding will be great and full, not small and empty, of years. That this is the sense of the vision is only reinforced by the contrasting language that describes Satan's season of rebellion as a little season, suggesting that it is a meagre and limited period of time within the will of God.

To summarize: in this first section of the vision of Revelation 20, we have a representation of that period of history between the time of Christ's first coming and his return at the end of age, in which Satan has been bound so as no longer to be able to deceive the nations. The millennium is now, the period in which Christ's kingdom is advancing by his Spirit and Word and the nations are being disciplined. This period is not a literal period of one thousand years, but the entire period, perfect, complete and extensive, between the first and second comings of Christ. Compared to the vast expanse and power of the kingdom of Christ, the period of Satan's rebellion at the end of the age prior to Christ's return, will be pathetically small and limited in scope.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the Lord's rebuke to Elijah, that there were still seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal, could be mentioned here (*1 Kings* 19:18). This number, whether to be taken as a literal reference to seven thousand or not (not one more nor less), clearly has symbolic significance. The Lord is saying to Elijah, 'I have many, many more than you realize, who are faithful' (cf. *Rom.* 11:4).

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