

The 1,000 Years of Revelation 20 (1)

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Revelation 20 is a battleground. It is a battleground for two different reasons. First, it describes the largest and the most important battle in the history of the world. You could call it the battle of all battles or the war to end all wars, for with its conclusion the world, with all its fighting, ends. Second, Revelation 20 is a battleground between the various views of the last days. All the different schools of thought on eschatology have their own distinctive interpretations of Revelation 20. In fact, the four main views derive their names from Revelation 20: amillennialism, premillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennial dispensationalism. For Revelation 20 is the only passage in the Bible that speaks of a “thousand years,” and it is from the Latin word for a thousand (*mille*) that we derive our English word “millennium,” a key component in the names of the four main eschatological schools.

I am not going to explain the positions of these four systems of eschatology, for that would take us too far afield. Nor am I going to critique the various schools of thought; that would be too much for this article. Instead, I will here set out what I believe to be the right view, the view of the mainline, historic Christian and Reformed faith, also called amillennialism. I will simply explain the passage, going through it bit by bit, and, here and there, I will make the occasional criticism of the other millennial schools.¹

So what does Revelation 20 mean? In the first three verses we will look at the binding of Satan. In verses 4-6, we will consider the reign of the saints. Verses 7-10 deal with Satan’s little season, Gog and Magog and the final battle. Then there is the judgment of Christ’s great white throne (11-15), but this last section is beyond the scope of this article.

I. The Binding of Satan (1-3)

The very first words of Revelation 20 are vital to its right interpretation. This chapter does not begin with the word “Then,” as if we are deal-

¹The speech from which this article is derived can be listened to on-line (www.cprc.co.uk/m3u/1000years.m3u).

ing with a temporal sequence. It does not start with “After that” either. It does not even begin with “It shall come to pass.” It simply begins, “And I saw.” “And I saw” tells us that here we are dealing with a vision. A vision is not history; a vision is not even prophecy, as such; it is a special type of prophecy.

Visions are characterized by symbols. By symbols, I am referring to such things as symbolic numbers, symbolic colours, symbolic names, symbolic metals, symbolic jewels, etc. Let us consider some visions or dreams, for in the Bible visions and dreams are very similar. Both visions and dreams contain what the seer “saw.” In Daniel 2, we have a giant statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and then iron and clay, which symbolize four great world empires. Daniel 7 presents the same reality, this time under the imagery of four beasts. Daniel sees a lion and a bear and a leopard and then the fourth beast, dreadful and exceedingly terrible. These creatures represent Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. Revelation 13 begins, “And I saw,” and then comes the beast with seven heads and ten horns and ten crowns, part lion, part bear, part leopard. “And I saw,” tells us that we are dealing with a vision. The book of Revelation, in general, consists of a sequence of visions.

The main figure in Revelation 20:1-3 is Satan. Satan is here described by four different names. Two of the names come from animals and two are proper names. He is called, first, “the dragon” (2). Earlier, he was called a “great red dragon” (12:3). In Revelation 12, he has a mighty tail, seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns. Does the devil really have these numbers of heads and crowns and so on? No, it is a vision. The point is that the devil is a powerful, ferocious and terrifying being. Not only is he called “the dragon,” but he is also called “that old serpent” (20:2). In that the serpent is called “old,” it refers to the serpent’s tempting Eve in the beginning of the world in Genesis 3. Satan is, therefore, the enemy of God and His people from ancient times. He is powerful like a dragon and he is subtle like a serpent. Third, he is called “the Devil” (2). As the devil, he slanders and falsely accuses. The fourth title is “Satan” (2), that is, the opposer of God and His kingdom. Putting those four names together, the devil is a powerful, subtle, slanderous opponent. He is all these things as a fallen angel, an evil spirit, who uses all his might and all his craft against Jesus Christ and His church. The saints hear God’s evaluation of Satan and believe His assessment of him. We must watch against Satan’s attacks and

look for all our protection in the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth (Ps. 121)!

Revelation 20 also proclaims that Satan is bound:

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan [the four names that we have just considered], and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season (1-3).

Is this binding of Satan absolute and complete or is it relative and in part? To express it a little differently, Can the devil, once he is bound, do absolutely nothing because of his binding or is he only bound with respect to a particular activity? Again, Is Satan's binding absolute and complete so that he is bound with respect to absolutely everything or is it a partial binding with respect to something specified in the Word of God?

What does Revelation 20 say? It tells us that Satan is bound "that he should deceive the nations no more" (3). Verse 8 informs us, more fully, that when he is loosed (which is obviously the opposite of being bound), the devil "shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle." Their battle is against Christ's church, as we shall see more fully later. Thus the binding of Satan is God's restraint of him that stops him from uniting all the nations together to destroy the church. This is what the passage says. The binding of Satan, as explained in Revelation 20, is not absolute and complete; it is relative and in part. Verses 3 and 8 specify that his binding concerns one particular thing, for Satan's binding means that he can not unite all the world in a full-scale attack against God's people. When, after his binding, he is loosed, he "shall go out to deceive the nations which are on the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle" (8). This is the thing he can not do while he was bound. But when he is loosed, he unites all the nations against the people of God.

The question is now: When does this binding of Satan take place? Here we need to understand what things were like in the days of the Old Testament. Hear Psalm 147:19-20:

He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel [i.e., the Jews received the revelation of God through the prophets in the Word]. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them.

Acts 14:16 makes the same point: God “in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.” In other words, in Old Testament days all the nations were in the thick darkness of paganism and idolatry (cf. Eph. 2:12). The light of salvation shone only in that little tract of land in Palestine. That is the way things were in Old Testament times.

Then, in Jesus Christ, God came into the world in human flesh, and He atoned for the sins of the elect not only in Israel but also in all nations. The church became catholic or universal, as opposed to being only in Palestine with a few people (like Naaman) converted in kingdoms round about. The gospel spread throughout the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa and is now being disseminated throughout the whole world. But, of course, Satan sought to crush the New Testament church. How would he do that? By deceiving all the nations to unite together against Christ’s bride to destroy her. This is where the binding of Satan comes in. Jesus Christ bound Satan by His cross and resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (which is the application of the cross). Here, you understand, I am taking Christ’s atoning death, burial, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as one complex of events.

Now we need to look at a few passages. First, in Matthew 12:28-29, Jesus says to the Pharisees,

But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man’s house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house.

This passage declares (1) that Satan is “cast out” by Christ—the same Greek word is used in Revelation 20:3 where Satan is cast into the bottomless pit—and (2) that the kingdom of God is come in Christ and this is proven by Jesus’ exorcising demons.

Second, in John 12:31, Christ declares, “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.” Note: (1) this word

“cast out” is virtually the same word as that used in Revelation 20:3 where Satan is cast out and (2) Satan is cast out “now.” The next verse goes on to speak of Christ being lifted up on the cross and ascending into heaven. That is when Satan is cast out.

Third, Colossians 2:15 states that Jesus Christ “spoiled principalities and powers [including, centrally, Satan],” at the cross.

Fourth, Hebrews 2:14 teaches us that Jesus came in flesh and blood to die on the cross in order that “through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil.”

Fifth, I John 3:8 proclaims this good news: “The Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.”

These five New Testament texts unitedly declare that Satan was cast out and spoiled by Christ at His first coming by His death, burial and resurrection. Of course! For if the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, the “power of God” (I Cor. 1:24), does not bind Satan or cast him out, then nothing in the universe could!

Someone might say, though, “This puts the binding of Satan in the past,” for the cross and the events that I have described are in the past. The answer to that is “Yes, that is exactly where I am putting the binding of Satan: in the past.” You say, “What’s that doing in the book of Revelation? Doesn’t Revelation 20 speak about things future to us?” Undoubtedly, there are things in Revelation 20 that are future to us, but some of the chapter refers to events which have already occurred.

This is not unusual in the book of Revelation. Revelation 5, for instance, speaks about Christ’s ascension and reign. This is the chapter in which the Lamb takes the book. This vision begins, “And I *saw* in the right hand ...” (1). Christ’s taking the book and beginning to rule over all things actually occurred in the past—for John too, because John penned Revelation in the AD 90s, according to most New Testament scholars. Christ took the book and began to exercise God’s rule over the whole universe in the AD 30s upon His ascension into heaven.

Revelation 12, is similar. It tells us what John saw: “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven ...” (1). Here we see a woman and a dragon and all sorts of wonderful signs. In this chapter we also behold Christ’s birth, His ascension, and His reign (2, 4-5). These things happened in the past from our perspective and they were in the past from John’s perspective when he wrote this book.

The obvious objection to this is: How can Satan be bound now when there is so much evil in the world? What about all the iniquity that surrounds us? Satan tempts us; he goes around as a roaring lion seeking those he may devour (I Peter 5:8); he blinds the minds of those who believe not (II Cor. 4:4). He appears as an angel of light (11:14), who uses false teachers and false doctrine to lead the church into apostasy. He is called the “God of this world” (4:4). He stirs up ungodly rulers to persecute the church. You can even see this in the book of Acts. So how can the devil be bound?

Here I remind you of what I said at the start of this article about the binding of Satan: the binding of Satan means that he cannot unite *all* the nations together at one time to persecute the church and wipe her out until the thousand years are ended (Rev. 20:3, 8). The binding of Satan does not mean that he does not tempt or stir up persecution against the church. The binding of Satan means that he does not unite *all* the nations from the four quarters of the earth to destroy the church at one time. So far this all-out assault upon the people of God has not happened. Why not? Because Satan is bound, for Christ bound him at his death and resurrection.

Revelation 20 was written, in part, lest anyone would have doubts, that maybe all the nations will unite to wipe out the church at some point prior to the Antichrist. What does the vision say? Satan is bound; he is bound by a great chain; he is bound by a great chain by an angel from heaven and cast into the bottomless pit. What a wonderful thing!

You understand, of course, that these things are figurative. You can not bind Satan with a chain; he is a spirit. The trap door, locked with a key, is likewise part of the vision. The point is that Satan can not get out; he can not unite all the nations against the church to wipe her out, until God wills to loose him in the days of Antichrist.

This teaches us something very important about the millennium, the thousand years of Revelation 20. It teaches us *when the millennium begins*. It begins at the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, which results in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is the power that binds Satan. The binding of Satan, then, occurs at the beginning of the millennium or thousand years spoken of frequently in Revelation 20, the beginning of the New Testament age.

This also tells us something about the *length of the millennium*. One thousand nine hundred and seventy years have now passed since Calvary and Pentecost. The millennium, therefore, the thousand years of Revela-

tion 20, is not and can not be literal because 1,970 years (which is more than 1,000 years) have passed. Psalm 50:10 says that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Who owns the cattle on the thousand and first hill? God's owning the cattle on a thousand hills means that He owns *all* the cattle; that is the point.

The book of Revelation is filled with symbolic numbers, which is exactly what you would expect, because it consists of visions. Six hundred and sixty six, the number of the beast, does not mean that you will be able to identify the Antichrist because he will have 666 tattooed on his forehead. The number, 666, the Bible says, is the number of *man* (Rev. 13:18). Antichrist is the epitome of man sinning and coming short (666) of the covenant perfection of God (777). Seven is also symbolic in Revelation: seven spirits of God, seven eyes, seven horns, seven speaking thunders, seven heads of the beast, etc. In Revelation 14, we see the one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, which is twelve times twelve (the number of the church) times a thousand.

In Revelation 20, what, then, is the symbolism of the *thousand* years? The answer is very simple: the number one thousand is ten cubed, ten times ten times ten. Ten in the Bible is the number of completeness. There were ten plagues—the fullness of God's wrath upon Egypt. We have ten commandments—the fullness of God's law, of all God's judgments. So ten times ten times ten, which is a thousand, is the complete and full New Testament age of the whole catholic church of Jesus Christ.

When does the millennium *end*? Revelation 20 says that it ends when Satan is loosed. Then you have Satan's little season (3) followed by the end of the world. Thus the millennium finishes at the end of the world minus Satan's little season, a tiny little sliver, immediately before the very end. Then comes the final judgment in which Jesus Christ will judge the world on His great white throne (11-15). Acts 24:15 teaches that there will be one resurrection, both of the just and the unjust, who are raised from the dead for the purpose of the final judgement.

Let us put all this together. The millennium begins with Christ's first coming, Calvary and Pentecost. It ends with His second coming, and then we have the final judgment. Thus the millennium is the New Testament age, the period from the first to the second advent of Christ (here, for simplification, I am setting aside the tiny little sliver at the very end before Christ returns when Satan is loosed). This period, between the first and

second comings of Christ, is pictured as a thousand years in the vision of Revelation 20 for a specific purpose. It emphasizes the completeness and fullness of the New Testament age.

This is how the New Testament age is complete and full: all the elect are saved from all nations. These are the days predicted by the prophets as the fulfilment of their hopes until finally the eternal state is ushered in. This is the era in which Jesus Christ personally rules from His throne in heaven over all things. This is the age in which the Spirit of Jesus Christ works in all the world and in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ is gathered. So the millennium covers the same period as the “last days” (another biblical phrase), the period from the first coming to the second coming of Christ. These days are called the “last days” because nothing comes after them but the eternal state. There is no intermediate period or halfway house between the millennium or last days and the eternal state.

Now we can see why Satan is bound at the very beginning of the millennium and why he is not loosed until the very end of the thousand years. For, to speak hypothetically, if all the nations were allowed to unite against the church, say, some fifty years prior to Christ’s return, then all the elect could not be gathered. Then all the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church could not be saved. What then about the predictions of the prophets? What about the rule of Jesus Christ from His throne?

Thus the message of the millennium is a message of comfort. It is comfort, first of all, because it proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord and that He is Lord even of Satan—not in the sense that the old serpent worships Him as his Saviour, but that He rules over the devil. He binds Satan and He looses Satan. “Satan,” Christ says, in effect, “I am going to see to it that you do not unite and destroy My church. I am going to bind you. And when I please, and when you fulfil My purpose, then I’ll loose you.” Satan just does what he is allowed to do, to serve the sovereign purpose of Jesus Christ. Second, this is also our comfort: Satan is defeated. Satan is bound now so he can not unite all the nations against the church, and then Satan will be loosed for a little while for one all-out assault on the church. Then, Revelation 20 says, he will be cast into the lake of fire forever and ever (10). All this means, therefore, that all the church will be saved.

Since the millennium teaches us that, no matter how fierce the persecution, the whole church will not be attacked by all the nations together until Satan’s little season, the millennium is the period of missions for the

church in which the gospel is sent out to all the world. The millennium, therefore, means victory for the church. This victory is not the victory of earthly peace or power or prosperity, as if the church were just another kingdom of this world. The millennium is a period of victory as a period of spiritual peace, power and prosperity. Christ's word that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) does not mean that His kingdom is somehow inferior to all the other kingdoms of this world. No, when He says that His kingdom is not of this world, He means it is a far better kingdom, a far richer kingdom—rich with the blessings of peace and fellowship with the true and living God. Unlike every other kingdom, this one is everlasting and indestructible. All its meek citizens will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5).

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