

THE RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST

EPILOGUE

THE BINDING OF SATAN

“Then I saw an angel descend down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while”.

(Revelation 20: 1-3)

Every Easter we remember the fact that Christ's tomb, which had been closed and sealed, was powerfully opened by an angel from heaven whose face was like lightning and whose garments were of a dazzling whiteness. The appearing of this angel reminds us of another angel who came from heaven, this time not to open what was sealed, but to bind Satan, and to close and to seal the "bottomless pit" into which he was thrown.

You see the contrast. A sepulchre opened and the seals broken, but also a pit closed and sealed. Christ emerging in victory, but Satan going down to defeat. You will realize that these two events are closely related. And so, from the opening of the tomb we go to the sealing of the pit.

The binding of Satan is a popular topic. We live in an age and culture which thrives on speculation. One of the widespread speculations is that of the great millennium which – according to many – is to come at the end of time, and which will constitute a literal thousand years' reign of Christ in which the present state of Israel is to play a major role.

You can understand that during and after the Gulf War in the Middle East speculations about this so-called millennium were again rampant. There are, moreover, some similarities with the "new age" philosophy, which has also gained many adherents. According to that theory a "golden age" is coming soon, a time in which a "grand millennium" (in whatever form) will be realized. This causes optimism about the immediate future among many. They think that we stand on the brink of a golden era of peace and prosperity.

A MILLENNIUM?

Against this background, it is important for us to take a closer look at what the Bible reveals about this "millennium" and its significance for the church of Christ.

Let it be clear that we, too, believe in the existence of a "millennium," a time before judgment day, when Christ rules supreme over all the earth. In that sense, I am not ashamed to say: I am a millennialist. The main issue is, however, when this millennium begins and how it takes place.

For a proper understanding of the book of Revelation it is important not to see the events described in the various chapters as taking place in a chronological order, but rather to realize that the *same* events are being described from various aspects, from different angles. The book of Revelation has one very clear theme: the risen Saviour, Jesus Christ, is Lord over all, and He directs history to its end, the perfection of the kingdom of heaven.

ONE THEME; TWO ASPECTS

This theme, which is given in visionary form and symbolic language, has two aspects. We see the world being prepared for judgment and the coming to the ultimate manifestation of evil. We also see the church being gathered and preserved for its eternal glorification. So Revelation is a book which is truly meant for the comfort of the church of Christ in the last ages.

The binding and loosing of Satan must be understood within this framework. Amidst all the turmoil and the carnage of the latter days in which the church finds itself, we are fully assured: Satan is bound, and he cannot prevent the realization of the final outcome, which is Christ's glory in the gathering of His church. We see in this passage, then, how the risen Lord Jesus Christ comforts His church of the last ages by the vision of the binding of Satan. We will pay attention to the moment and the power of this binding.

TOWARDS THE GREAT DAY

Throughout the book of Revelation you can read of the great day of judgment. I think of Revelation 11: 18, "...the nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged..." (echoes of Psalm 2?), and of 14: 20, about the treading of the wine press, and also of chapter 19, about the fall of Babylon and the lake of fire.

Everything is moving toward that great day. Time and again the theme is picked up and not merely repeated but deepened. Every time we receive further information about the flow of the last period of history and the forces which exert their influence.

Now a key line in the book of Revelation is that two beasts, that is two powers, are emerging on earth (Revelation 13). We cannot go into detail about that issue now, but let us get a brief picture, for it has everything to do with a proper understanding of this passage.

TWO BEASTS

One of the beasts is emerging out of the sea (the nations) and represents political (and military) power. This beast uses all its power against the saints to the advantage of the Serpent, Satan. Call this the power of the fallen, secular world.

The other beast, emerging out of the earth, represents the cultural and apostate religious institutions of this world, or as some would say, the apostate church, which causes everyone to worship the first beast. Now these two beasts – secular world and apostate church – form a mighty coalition which seems invincible. John will have shuddered when he saw it. How can the faithful church of Christ survive the brutal power and refined deceit of these two beasts who pool their resources?

Well, the downfall of this coalition is described in the chapters 18 and 19, which speak of the fall of Babylon the great, the harlot who committed fornication with the kings of the earth. This leads to the announcement of the marriage feast of the Lamb and the supper of the last judgment. We read in chapter 19: 20, "... and the beast was captured and with it the false prophet. . ." Apostate world and false church are defeated, judged, and cast into the lake of fire.

Then follows chapter 20, the first verses of which form our text. Chapter 20 describes how the dragon, the ancient serpent, Satan, is bound. Now this is not meant as a new development which takes place after the defeat of the two beasts. We are simply given another aspect of the same process. In the destruction of those

two beasts is included the binding and judgment of their master and leader, the devil. In all that is described in the book of Revelation we see not just the undoing of those two beasts, but also the binding of Satan and ultimately his total, final defeat.

THE UNDERLYING STRUGGLE

This new vision gives us further background information, deepening our knowledge of what we already know. For behind that corrupt world and that apostate church is the devil. History simply cannot unfold without his being bound, nor can it be completed without his downfall. And as John has described various events, all leading to the same final judgment, so he now describes the development from its ultimate vantage point, namely that of the struggle between Christ and Satan.

John writes, “Then I saw an angel coming . . .” It says literally, “After this, I saw. . .” Which means: John now sees a new sequence of events, which further explain the preceding. There is a strong connection with the preceding, but also a progression of thought.

We read about an angel coming from heaven, “holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon. . .and bound him for a thousand years.” Our question is: when did or does this binding take place? Of what moment in time does our text speak?

The vision itself, as it stands, does not give a clear answer. But within the context of the book of Revelation it is evident that the two beasts mentioned earlier could not have been destroyed without the binding and downfall of Satan. He is the unseen power behind the powers. He is called the “prince of this world”, the ruler of darkness. He is the principal character with whom the church and its Head, Jesus Christ, must contend, not only in the last ages but throughout the history of the world. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that we do not have to contend with flesh and blood but with the spiritual hosts of wickedness! That evil spiritual host is led and dominated by the devil.

So, when was Satan bound? Or must this binding still take place, and will it be followed literally by a period of a thousand years, as millennialists say? You can only find the proper answer to this question when you compare Scripture with Scripture. And I want to mention a few important texts which underscore that we are not faced here in Revelation 20 with a chronological sequence of events but with a further explanation of the underlying struggle.

WHEN WAS SATAN BOUND?

This binding of Satan has everything to do with the earthly ministry of Christ. When He came into the flesh, He manifested Himself as the Son of God. In Him the Kingdom of Heaven decisively broke through, and this is the time when Satan was bound.

We read of this in Matthew 12, where it is described how Christ cast out a demon. The Pharisees claimed that Christ casts out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. But Christ shows how ludicrous this suggestion is. How can someone cast out a demon if he has not first overpowered the lord of the demons? Christ says, “How can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man”? The word binding is used there, the same as in our text. That strong man who is being bound by Christ is Satan. Indeed, how could Christ cast out demons, if He had not first overpowered and bound the prince of the demons?

In Luke 10 it is described how the seventy disciples, who were sent out to preach, come back to Christ jubilantly, saying, “Even the demons are subject to us in your Name.” And Christ answers, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven!” The demons are subjected because their master, Satan, has fallen.

In John 12, when a voice is heard from heaven, Christ says, “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out, and I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” And finally, in Revelation 12, we read that Satan is cast out of heaven, when the child (Christ) is caught up to God and His throne.

So the binding of Satan, the fall of Satan and his being cast out of heaven is connected to the earthly ministry of Christ. Then it started. And it is an accomplished fact when Christ rises from the grave and ascends into heaven. In the completion of Christ’s earthly ministry, His victory over sin and death, lies the essence of the binding of Satan.

When the apostle John in chapter 20 receives background information concerning the break-up of the coalition of the beasts, he sees how an angel comes from heaven and binds Satan. This binding takes place at the time of the resurrection and ascension of Christ and it sets the tone for the entire latter days. Throughout the latter days, from Christ’s ascension to His glorious return, Satan is bound.

IN THE MILLENNIUM

The so-called “millennium,” therefore, is not a time that is yet to come, but a time in which we at present find ourselves. The great millennium is now.

The comfort of the church is not that there will come a time when Satan will be bound, but precisely that He is already bound! That is why the diabolic coalition of the fallen world and the apostate church cannot succeed against those who are faithful to Christ. They are unsuccessful because the devil is restricted. The church of the latter days, in John’s time as well as in our own, may know: Satan is bound, and he can really do nothing against Christ and His church.

Connected with this understanding is our interpretation of the number 1000. We read in our text that the dragon is bound for a thousand years. You know that in the book of Revelation numbers often have a symbolic meaning. The root of 1000 is ten, the number denoting fullness and completion. When multiplied by 10 times

10 it denotes entirety. So the number 1000 simply means the whole period of the time, the full span of time, that God has allowed for the last ages. It means the time from the resurrection/ascension – with which the book of Revelation begins – to the period just before the return of Christ, when the final act of history will unfold. Throughout this time, Christ rules supreme and Satan is bound.

So we may know, whatever happens throughout all the terrors of the latter days, Satan does not exercise power and authority. Did not Christ say when He ascended: to Me is given all power in heaven and on earth? This is evident in the binding of Satan, as described in Revelation 20.

CHRIST'S GREAT POWER

In order to be comforted by this all the more, John may see the great power with which Satan is bound. For you must be impressed by this vivid description. The angel, it says, seized the dragon. This word indicates power. He grabs him, as it were, by the throat and instantly immobilizes him. Some explainers see in this “angel” the Lord Jesus, but I think that when the Lord Himself appears (also in Revelation) He is usually depicted in a different manner. This angel is obviously endowed with the strength and the power of the Lord and so manages to subdue the devil.

Notice how we are told that the angel has in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. Of course, it is Christ who holds all the keys, to the Kingdom of heaven and to the bottomless pit. The key is a symbol of authority. The great chain is symbolic of the power which comes with the authority. With that chain, I presume, the angel binds the dragon. It is not just a rope which may be broken, but a chain so strong that its shackles can never be undone.

Satan is subsequently cast into what is called “the bottomless pit.” Literally it says: the abyss. An abyss is an endlessly deep hole, an old form of prison, from which it is impossible to escape. It seems to be the place where God keeps the fallen angels which have become demons or evil spirits, to restrict their movement.

Let me give you another reference to this “abyss.” In Luke 9 we read that Jesus casts out demons from a possessed man in the region of the Garasenes. When Jesus asks the demon what his name is, he says “Legion,” for many devils had entered the man. We also read, “And they [the demons] begged Him not to command them to depart into the abyss.” They beg not to be locked up. This request is granted, and the demons enter, as you know, into a herd of swine. So the abyss is the place where demons were kept and restrained so that they cannot do on earth as they please.

Some explainers see in this abyss the same place as Sheol, where the unbelieving dead are kept until the day of judgment. But that is not clear from Scripture. It is also not the place called “hell,” for that is described later as “the lake of fire.” You may see this abyss as being a specific place where evil spirits are curtailed. It is also the place where the prince of demons, Satan, is cast, thrown down with great power.

Notice how John lists all the names by which the devil has become known through the ages: the devouring dragon, the ancient serpent who misled mankind from the beginning. In case it is still not clear, the names “devil” and “Satan” are also included. “Devil” means the one who continually causes havoc and deception, a name which shows the evil methods of the evil one. “Satan” means opponent or antagonist, and it shows the evil character and purpose of the devil: to oppose Christ and His church to the bitter end. Well, no matter what he is called and what power he may have manifested in the past, now he is bound and cast into the bottomless pit.

SHUT AND SEALED

And this pit, as we read, is shut and sealed. The devil will not get out of this prison until he is let loose. He is chained in a pit with a sealed entrance. He is gone, powerless, and cannot exercise his demonic power until someone lets him out. This shows you again one of the themes of the book of Revelation: also the devil, as a fallen creature, is at all times subject to the power of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. The power of this binding is definite and effective.

Now the objection to this interpretation is always the same. People say: if the millennium has already started and the devil is presently chained and bound, how is it that he still exerts so much influence? What do we really see of this binding of Satan? It looks much more like a future event than a present reality. Why is the devil still going about, as Peter writes, like a roaring lion, seeking whom he can devour? In Revelation 12 we read that the devil goes to the earth to make war on the woman and her children, the church.

Therefore, does our understanding of this vision accord with reality? For a chained and imprisoned dragon, he still exerts a lot of power. If this binding has already taken place, how powerful, how effective is it really?

THE BINDING QUALIFIED

We should note that this binding of Satan is qualified in our text. It says that he was thrown into the pit which was sealed over him, in order that “he should deceive the nations no more” until the thousand years are ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while. The main thrust is here that “he should deceive the nations no more.” The binding of Satan does apparently not imply that he exerts no power whatsoever, but specifically that he can not anymore deceive the nations!

We must ask a few questions here. Who are meant by the nations? It is clear from Scripture that the text refers to the heathen nations, who did not (yet) know the Gospel. During the past centuries of world history, these nations by and large were in total darkness, in the grip of Satan. Only in Israel was the light of God’s grace. But that world-wide dominion of Satan has come to an end with the resurrection and ascension of Christ. In his missionary sermons the apostle Paul spoke about former “times of ignorance” among the heathens, which have come to an end through the resurrection of Christ (Acts 17: 30). If God previously let the

nations go their way, *now* they will be confronted with the claims of the risen Lord. He says the same in Acts 14, “In past generations he let all the nations walk in their own ways. . .,” but that is now no longer the case. Now is the time for the world-wide proclamation of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

WORLD-WIDE MISSION

The point is, then, that Satan cannot in any way prevent this world-wide mission. He will deceive the nations no more. The Gospel will be preached everywhere, and all over the world people will turn to Christ. Satan cannot keep the nations under in his deceptive lies, but must watch and see how the Gospel is preached throughout the world.

We find the same thought expressed by the apostle Paul in II Thessalonians 2, where we read about the man of lawlessness being restrained so that the Gospel may advance freely, all over the world. And when this has been accomplished, the son of lawlessness will reveal himself in all his ugliness and evil by the power of Satan, to be destroyed by Jesus Christ.

Here, in Revelation 20, we read also about the end of the thousand years – that is after the Gospel has been preached throughout the world and the church has been gathered. Then Satan will be let loose for a little while. He will not break loose, but be let loose, and only for a while. Then he will try once more, in a last-ditch effort, to destroy Christ and His church. He may even succeed in uniting all the world in this final campaign. But he will not be successful. When he is finally let loose, it is too late for him. He will go to meet his final destruction.

A COMFORTING VISION

You must remember that when all this was revealed to John on Patmos, there was much persecution and oppression of the church. The Christians could be tempted to doubt the power of Christ. What did they see of it? But John may comfort them with this vision: the Gospel *will* find its way victoriously throughout the world. Satan cannot prevent it. And we today know how true this vision has proven to be. The Gospel went, against all odds, from Jerusalem, to Rome, throughout the world, and it is still being preached everywhere. The amazing success of the mission work by which millions have been saved since this vision underscores the truth of the vision.

The church of John’s days was immensely comforted by the vision. It is still today our comfort and motivation. Christ rules, not Satan. And when Satan is loosed toward the end of the ages and unleashes his final terrible furore against the church of God, God Himself, said Jesus, will shorten the days, so that the elect may stand firm.

We do not know how far we have progressed in the millennium. But it is clear that the Gospel has been preached almost everywhere. Many have been called. Millions have heard the Gospel. Satan could not prevent the progress of the

preaching. And every day we come nearer to the time when Satan will be loosed, when the world will be steeped in global apostasy and lawlessness. In that sense we have no reason for false optimism and must be on our guard. We have no future here, but we look for the kingdom of heaven.

But the bottom line is: the risen Lord rules supreme throughout the latter days, and when Satan is loosed, Christ will crush him definitely. That is the reality of Easter and Ascension in which we live and work. Therefore we are never without hope, even when we see how much resistance demonic forces still exert in this world, in our own lives. Christ will fulfill His purpose in us, for us, and also through us. Therefore we can sing, looking to Christ,

The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him (*Hymn 41: 3, Book of Praise*)

I do not underestimate the devil. He scares me, rattling his chain from the bottomless pit. But I'm glad that he is chained and bound. We live under God's dominion. And under God's dominion have saints their triumphs won.