

THE DEFINITE DESTRUCTION OF THE DEVIL

“And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city; but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

(Revelation 20: 7-10)

We have now for a while followed the Word of God as expressed in the vision concerning the binding of Satan during the great “millennium,” which I have characterized as the time from Christ’s ascension to His return on the clouds of heaven.

We have drawn two major conclusions. First, during this time Satan cannot deceive the nations, that is, he cannot hinder the progress of the Gospel and prevent the gathering of the church out of all nations (20:1-3). Second, Christians who during this time die in persevering faith may rule with Christ in heaven, there already enjoying a foretaste of the glory which will be received in full on the new earth (20: 4-6).

THE COMFORT CONTINUED

This vision has been and still is of immense comfort to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. But we know from verse 3 that this binding of Satan will come to an end. It says there: after the thousand years are ended, Satan must be loosed for a little while. And the vision now takes up that element: how in the last phase of world history, Satan will be loosed to deceive the nations.

It is obvious from this passage and from other parts of Scripture that this will be a difficult, almost devastating time for the church of Christ. At the same time, the outcome of this phase of history is never in doubt. The struggle will be severe, but the triumph is certain. Therefore we know that this section of the vision is not meant to frighten us, but to encourage us all the more. Even Satan’s last concerted campaign will not be enough to overcome the power of Jesus Christ and to devour the church. In keeping with the entire line of this vision, we see how the church of Christ is comforted by the sure knowledge of the definite destruction of the devil. Even though Satan gathers all the nations for battle and goes so far as to surround the camp of the saints, he meets the fire of God’s final judgment.

TWO DESCENTS?

Let us at this point refresh our memory with respect to the so-called “millennialist” view of this chapter and passage. Millennialists believe that Christ will come down to earth to rule for a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, that all Jews (all Israel) will then accept Christ as Messiah, and that at the end of this period Christ will ascend again to heaven so that Satan will gain world control.

In fact, then, according to millennialists, Christ will retreat to heaven after the thousand-year period and give this world over to Satan. This also implies a second descent in glory for the great final battle, often referred to as the battle of Armageddon (see Revelation 16: 16).

But let me ask: where do we read that Christ will return to heaven after the “millennium”? Where do we read in this whole chapter of two descents? Only one return of Christ is mentioned in Scripture. And, we may add, even in this phase when the thousand years come to an end and Satan is loosed, Christ certainly does

not give him free reign on earth by retreating to heaven. That would indeed take the comfort out of this vision. Imagine the devil having a free hand on earth.

CHRIST IN CONTROL ALWAYS

We read something quite different. From the beginning to the end of this vision there is a clear affirmation that Christ is also fully in control when Satan is loosed. He exercises this government *from heaven* where He is seated at God's right hand. Throughout the millennium and at its conclusion Christ rules sovereign and supreme, and when He lets Satan loose, this has a specific purpose.

We read in verse 3: Satan must be loosed. This is a divine necessity, a decision from above. It is not Satan who decides that he will have freedom to act. It is not Satan who after much struggle manages to break out of his prison. Throughout this vision, it is evident that Satan never takes the initiative, is never in control, and never has the ability to win. It is Christ who fulfills the counsel of God and completes the divine work of salvation from beginning to end.

UNCHAINED YET UNCHANGED

Satan is *let* loose. It says, "When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison. . . ." Just as it is upon God's command that Satan is bound, so it is also upon God's permission that he is loosed. Now, when Satan is loosed, it appears that he has not changed at all during his imprisonment. It says that he will come out "to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth. . . ."

There is a sense of urgency and purpose here. The devil has not changed at all. Note that point. You'd think that after a "thousand years" in jail, even the devil might have "reformed" or mellowed a little. Satan, however, would have *us* mellow and relax in the course of our life, but he does not change in his hatred of Christ. The choice of Satan and his fallen angels is irreversible. Satan's frustrated anger has increased throughout the time that he was restricted. And so, upon being loosed, he wastes no time but proceeds immediately to recruit and muster his forces for a final battle.

Now when Satan was bound, the emphasis lay on the fact that he could no longer deceive the nations. When he is loosed the opposite is true: Satan is enabled to deceive the nations. He now gets the opportunity to realize a global campaign of deception to unify the world against Christ and His Church. In passing, I want to point out how the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians charts the extent of this deception. Satan will be successful in achieving a world-wide delusion, leading all nations astray for his cause. A global wave of fanatic intolerance will wash against what is left of the Christian Church.

DECEIVING THE NATIONS

We read here particularly that Satan will succeed in deceiving the "nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. . . ." We should inquire as to what is meant by these nations, especially

by Gog and Magog. And this leads us to the prophecy of Ezechiel 38 and 39, where Gog and Magog are mentioned in a similar role against Israel, the people of God.

Actually the name “Magog” is mentioned for the first time in the genealogy of Japheth in Genesis 10. It is widely accepted that Gog and Magog should be taken as the names of the nations that were the farthest removed geographically from Israel. Therefore also in our text we find the expression “the nations which are at the four corners of the earth,” that is, the most removed to the north, west, east, and south.

These far-away nations – descendants of Japheth – were not traditionally enemies of Israel. Israel usually had to battle with the descendants of Ham (Canaan). The immediate and constant enemies of God’s people were such nations as Moab and Edom, brother-nations, or regional super-powers like Egypt, Syria, Babylonia, and Persia. At no time was Israel threatened by such far-away peoples as Gog and Magog. These nations were in the background, at the periphery of the circle of nations surrounding Israel.

GOD’S DESIGN

But already Ezechiel prophesied that one day these remote nations would unite with Israel’s traditional enemies and form a coalition against God’s people. This would happen *after* the great restoration and unification of Israel described in Ezechiel 37. Now, this concerted attack was not by accident or human design. From Ezechiel 38 and 39 it is clear that God calls up these nations, that is – in terms of the text in Revelation 20 – that He lets Satan gather these nations. Ezechiel 38 says, “Thus says the LORD. . . I will bring you forth and all your army. . . a great company. . . Persia, Put and Cush are with them. . . many peoples are with you. . . you will bestir yourself. . . a great host, a mighty army. . . you will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the land. In the latter days I will bring you against my land. . .”

What has not happened before, says Ezechiel, will happen. Far-away peoples will come to attack the city of God in great number and force. Now it is not easy to identify exactly which nations are meant in Ezechiel 38 and 39. The main attack seems to come from the north-east (the north being the great “unknown,” uncharted area of that time): Persia, Iran, India, Mongolia. But it will also come from the south, the black nations from Ethiopia and farther down will be involved. And it is clear that this attack is to be expected in the “latter days” when Israel has been restored, that is, in the time when the great Messiah rules. The battle against Gog and Magog was therefore seen by Israel as the last and definitive battle, when all the world would be massed against them. So we come again to Revelation 20 where this prophecy of Ezechiel obviously finds fulfillment.

WHICH NATIONS?

Millennialists have gone to great lengths to identify exactly which nations are meant. At one time it was fashionable to think of the Russians and the (communist)

Chinese. Recently the attention shifted to Iran and Iraq. It was Saddam Hussein who got things going by styling himself a new Nebuchadnezzar and referring to “the mother of all battles,” but, as we now know, it turned out to be “the mother of all retreats.” It is usually the perceived enemy of the day that is identified as Gog and Magog.

It is better not to make such hasty connections. We need not think only of military power, for the power of spiritual deception and delusion will also be used. Let it suffice to say that all the world will be involved. Satan will mobilize even the nations which have perhaps not yet played a major role in world history. From far and wide they will come to attack the people of God. To know this is enough; we need not speculate, but should believe that also this massive attack will be unsuccessful.

AN OVERWHELMING NUMBER

Satan succeeds in gathering the nations for battle. And, as we also saw in the prophecy of Ezechiel, the number of the enemy is simply overwhelming. Ezechiel spoke of a great company, a mighty host, armed to the teeth. Our text says that “their number is like the sand of the sea.” In other words, an innumerable horde, a sea of men and armour.

As massive military campaigns go, this one is initially very successful. We read in the text that “they marched up over the broad earth. . . .” Over the broad earth means that they could move forward from all sides without any resistance. The earth was for this mighty host like a flat terrain over which they could advance unopposed and at great speed. We get the picture of a real “blitzkrieg,” column after column of armored divisions rolling forward to one focal point.

For the record, we read about this same battle in Revelation 16, where the place of battle is called Armageddon, and it says there that “the great river Euphrates was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east.” This means that nothing could stop this army, not even mighty rivers or high mountain ranges. We can put it this way: God just lets them move on and on to that one destination, taking away even natural barriers so that they may progress freely.

Obviously it has to come to a point of battle. We read that “they surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city.” This mighty army encircles the city of God and everything is moved into position for the ultimate slaughter. Surrounded, the saints are. Cut off from all sides, with no way out.

THE BELOVED CITY

Of course, the question is: what is meant by “the camp of the saints” and “the beloved city”? To begin with the “city,” this obviously refers to Jerusalem. You get the impression that the “saints” have previously gathered in Jerusalem or retreated in the face of this massive onslaught and have camped in and around the city of Jerusalem. So “city” and “camp” are really congruous. Imagine the retreat to the

city in and around which the saints will make their “last stand.” And it *will* be a last stand, for there is no way out, no way to win. It looks like a real massacre in the making.

Now some millennialists think of the literal Jerusalem in Palestine. All remaining Christians will come from everywhere during the “millennium” to gather in Israel and seek refuge in and around Jerusalem, where the final battle is to take place. What to think of this “literal” interpretation?

It is important for us to note that in the New Testament “the beloved city,” Jerusalem, no longer means the earthly Jerusalem. Did not Christ Himself say to the Samaritan woman, “. . .believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain (Samaria) nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (John 6: 21)? Christ specifically prophesied to His disciples the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple as places of worship, when He said, pointing to the temple, “. . .there will not be one stone left upon another.”

The New Testament tells us that “Jerusalem” as the place of the great King, to which we direct ourselves in worship, is the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4: 26). From Revelation 21 we know that the holy city Jerusalem comes down from heaven. So we should not think here in this text literally of Jerusalem in Palestine, for that is incompatible with New Testament teaching.

FINAL ATTACK ON THE CHURCH

It can then only mean that Christians everywhere will be under attack, wherever they are. For Jerusalem is manifest here on earth in the believers, the saints. Jerusalem, the heart of the kingdom of heaven, is apparent in the gathering and assembly of the church on earth. This text simply tells us that the persecution of the church of Christ will be extreme and worldwide. Christians everywhere will be outnumbered and surrounded, relentlessly hounded, boycotted, and persecuted. Christians will be on the defensive, accused, and robbed of rights. The great discrimination and tribulation will break loose as never before.

Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke of that time in these terms, “then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24: 21,22). United and directed by Satan, the world will seek to destroy the church in a last concerted effort. And the enemy will come very close to succeeding.

VISIONS OF GRANDEUR?

Millennialists sometimes have visions of grandeur: they see the millennium as a golden era for the church with world-wide acceptance of Christianity and millions of converts flocking to Christ. Evangelism Explosion. Church Growth Movement. I am not at all against organized evangelical activity and outreach, but we should realize that much modern evangelism is rooted in this false millennialist idealism.

“All the world for Christ by the year 2000” is a typical slogan in this connection. I hear this theme repeated constantly on television. Evangelism 2000. Some television preachers are convinced that we stand on the brink of the great millennium with church expansion world-wide.

But the Bible really shows us something different. The church will be fully gathered, but the opposition will steadily grow and the numbers of believers dwindle, so that Christ can ask, “When the Son of man returns, will He still find the faith on earth?” The message, method, and expectation of evangelism must be guided by Scriptural reality and not by false optimism, which is more idealistic than biblical.

The nations will gather all right, but not for baptism but for battle. Our comfort remains that in the end Satan, who has been loosed for a little while, will be cast into the lake of fire.

UNDOUBTED OUTCOME

I wrote earlier that the outcome is never in doubt. We are being prepared for the struggle but also assured of the triumph. That is God’s way. Actually, there is in this text almost a sort of an anti-climax. It does not really come to an outright battle. Just when the stage is set, by way of speaking, the curtain falls. The enemies surround the beloved city, poised for the final attack, but, we read, “fire came down from heaven and consumed them.” Not only the nations are destroyed, but we read that the devil himself is thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where his cronies, the beast and the false prophet, are.

Notice that this fire comes from heaven. The “saints” do not break out in a courageous attack to surprise the enemy and gain an unexpected victory. For at the end of history it is the same as at the beginning: the victory is the Lord’s. Soli Deo Gloria! Numbers are not important. The saints may be outnumbered, just as the prophet Elijah once was when they came to arrest him, but fire comes down from heaven and consumes the enemy. We see here at the close of history what has really preserved the church throughout history: the sovereign grace of the Almighty God who reveals His glory in Jesus Christ.

Notice also the suddenness of the ending. All things seem to be going the way of Satan and his army. He is ready for a great victory. His golden era is about to begin. He’s ready for a millennium of his own. But the end is sudden and swift, unmistakable and decisive. Last opportunity. Time is up. The day of the judgment of God has come. He is treading out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.

FINAL CONCLUSION

Now we do not necessarily have to think of one single event. There have been numbers of times when the church was in great peril. But it will go to one final conclusion.

The church is greatly comforted here. For being cast into the lake of fire is more than being chained in the bottomless pit. The bottomless pit was a temporary

prison. The lake of fire is an eternal hell. It does not say without reason: “and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Strictly speaking, there is no “day and night” in hell. It simply means: constantly, without any interruption, and so, eternally.

A last question. Why does God give the devil this final opportunity? Why this great tribulation and trial for the church and this vain attempt of Satan and the nations? Why let Satan loose for a short time?

Why? There are two reasons. First, the power of lawlessness must come to its zenith. Sin must become manifest in all its maturity and ugliness. What is inside the devil and the nations must come out. So that the righteousness of God may be fully apparent.

Secondly, the victory of Christ must be demonstrated as complete and final. Satan was not defeated at his weakest moment. Satan was destroyed when he was at the peak of his power. He received all opportunity and was given access to all the power of this world. But it was not enough. For the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory belong to God and to His Christ, forever and ever. This is what must be conclusively demonstrated at the close of history.

We see it in faith, do we not?

“ . . . the depths of hell before Thee
trembling and defeated bow”

And we? We shall seek the things that are above! Await the city of God, the new Jerusalem from heaven. Do that, while knowing that we shall be tried like ore in the furnace, that we will be surrounded and outnumbered, but also that we will be brought into a spacious place (Psalm 66). We shall sing of the miraculous escape, the song of sudden and total deliverance. Psalm 124: if the LORD had not our right maintained, we’d surely have been swallowed up alive. But blest be the LORD who made us not their prey. He gave us escape and freedom. Forever.