



THE LAST DAYS

3

RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

THE BINDING OF SATAN



The Binding of Satan (Revelation 20:1-3)

- 1 And I saw an Angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the Abyss and a great chain in His hand.
- 2 And He laid hold of the Dragon, the Serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world, and bound him for a thousand years,
- 3 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.

FROM "THE DAYS OF VENGEANCE"
BY DAVID CHILTON

1 The importance of the imagery in this passage is heightened by its centrality as the fourth of seven visions introduced by the expression **And I saw** (*kai eidon*; cf. 19:11, 17, 19; 20:4, 11; 21:1). St. John sees **an Angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the Abyss and a great chain in His hand**. Again, as in 10:1 and 18:1 (cf. 12:7), this is the Lord Jesus Christ, who as Mediator is the Angel (Messenger) of the Covenant (Mal. 2:7; 3:1). His absolute control and authority over the Abyss are symbolized by **the key** and the **great chain**. The author sets up a striking contrast: Satan, the evil star that *fell* from heaven, was briefly *given* the key to the Abyss (9:1); but Christ descended from heaven, having as His lawful possession "the keys of death and of Hades" (1:18).

2-3 St. John brings together the various descriptions of the evil one that he has used throughout the prophecy: **the Dragon** (12:3-4, 7,9,13, 16-17; 13:2,4, 11; 16:13), **the Serpent of old** (9:19; 12:9, 14-15), **the devil** (2:10; 12:9, 12), **Satan** (2:9, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9), **the deceiver of the whole world** (2:20; 12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20). But the terrifying power of this enemy only serves to display the surpassing greatness of his Conqueror, who has so easily rendered him impotent: Jesus Christ, in His mission as the "Angel from heaven," **laid hold of the Dragon . . . and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the Abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him**. As St. John declared in his first epistle, Christ "appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). In terms of this purpose, the Lord began "binding the strong man" during His earthly ministry; having successfully completed His

"The problem with evangelicals who turn the Bible into a kind of crystal ball is that they show very little historical awareness."

W. Ward Gasque, in "Future Fact? Future Fiction" Christianity Today, 15 April 1977

mission, *He is now plundering Satan's house and carrying off his property:*

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. (Matt. 12:28-29; cf. Luke 11:20-22)

Herman Ridderbos comments on the significance of this statement, and goes on to provide an excellent summary of the Gospel accounts of Christ's victory over the devil: "This passage [Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20] is not an isolated one. The whole struggle of Jesus against the devils is determined by the antithesis between the kingdom of heaven and the rule of Satan, and time and again Jesus' superior power over Satan and Satan's dominion proves the breakthrough on the part of the kingdom of God. This is already proved at the start by the temptation in the wilderness. There can be no doubt that in it the issue is Jesus' messianic kingship. Three times in succession it is Satan's point of departure, referring back to the divine words about Jesus at his baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; Matt. 4:3, 6; Luke 4:3, 9). Especially the temptation with respect to 'all the kingdoms of the world' (Matt. 4:8ff.; Luke 4:5ff.) shows what is at issue in the struggle between Jesus and Satan. Here Satan appears as 'the prince of the world' (cf. John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), who opposes God's kingdom, and who knows that Jesus will dispute that power with him in the name of God. Here, then, together with the Messiahship, the kingdom of God is at issue. At the same time it appears that the victory over Satan to be gained by the kingdom of God is not only a matter of *power*, but first and foremost one of *obedience* on the part of the Messiah. The Messiah must not make an arbitrary use of the authority entrusted to him. He will have to acquire the power that Satan offers him only in the way ordained by God. That is why Jesus' rejection of the temptation is already the beginning of his victory and of the coming of the kingdom, although this victory will have to be renewed again and again during his life on earth (cf. Luke 4:13; Matt. 16:23, and parallels; 26:38, and parallels; 27:40-43, and parallels). From the beginning of his public activity Jesus' power over Satan had already asserted itself. This is not only proved by the casting out of devils in itself, but also by *the manner in which those possessed*

by the devil behave in his presence (cf. Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; Mark 5:7; Matt. 8:29; Luke 8:28, 31). When Jesus approaches they raise a cry, obviously in fear. They show that they have a supernatural knowledge of his person and of the significance of his coming (cf. Mark 1:34; 3:11). They call him 'the Holy One of God,' 'the Son of God,' 'Son of the most high God.' By this they recognize his messianic dignity (cf. Luke 4:41). They consider his coming as their own destruction (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34); their torment (Matt. 8:29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28). They feel powerless and try only to lengthen their existence on earth (Matt. 8:29; Mark 5:10), and implore him not to send them into 'the deep,' that is to say, the place of their eternal woe (Luke 8:31, cf. Rev. 20:3ff.). All this shows that in Jesus' person and coming the kingdom has become a present reality. For the exercise of God's power over the devil and his rule has the coming of the kingdom for its foundation.

"And finally we must refer in this context to Luke 10:18-19. Jesus has sent out the seventy (or seventy-two) who come back to him and joyfully tell him of the success of their mission. And then Jesus says: 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.' Thus he accepts the joy of those he had sent out and shows them the background of their power over the devils. The general meaning of this is clear: Satan himself has fallen with great force from his position of power. This is what Jesus had seen with his own eyes. Satan's supporters cannot maintain themselves. . . . The thing that counts in this connection is that what is said here is essentially the same thing as in Matthew 12:28 and Luke 11:20, i.e., the great moment of the breaking down of Satan's rule has come and at the same time that of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. The redemption is no longer future but has become *present*. In this struggle it is Jesus himself who has broken Satan's power and who continues to do so. Such appears from what follows when he discusses the power of the disciples which they have received from him to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, so that, in the future also, nothing will be impossible to them. By this *enemy* Satan is again meant. *Serpents* and *scorpions* are mentioned here as his instruments (Ps. 91:13) by which he treacherously tries to ruin man. But any power Satan has at his disposal to bring death and destruction (cf., e.g., Heb. 2:14) has been

subjected to the disciples. All this implies and confirms that the great moment of salvation, the fulfillment of the promise, the kingdom of heaven, has come."

The whole message of the New Testament (cf. Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14) stresses that Satan was definitively defeated in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. It is absolutely crucial to remember that in speaking of Christ's "Ascension" – His Coming to the Throne of the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:13-14) – we are speaking not only of His single act of ascending into the Cloud, but also of the direct and immediate consequences of that act: the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church in A.D. 30 (Luke 24:49-51; John 16:7; Acts 2:17-18, 33), and the outpouring of wrath upon Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 (Dan. 9:24-27; Acts 2:19-20). Pentecost and Holocaust were the Ascension applied. The final act in the drama of the *definitive* (as distinguished from the *progressive* and *consummative*) binding of Satan was played out in the destruction of the Old Covenant system. This is why St. Paul, writing a few years before the event, could assure the Church that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20).

Satan is bound *progressively* as Christ's Kingdom grows throughout history, extending its influence to transform every aspect of life (Matt. 5:13-16; 13:31-33), and in the daily experience of Christians as we successfully resist the devil (James 4:7) and proclaim the Word of God (Rev. 12:11). Satan will be bound consummatively at the Last Day, when death itself is destroyed in the Resurrection (John 6:39-40; 1 Cor. 15:22-26, 51-54).

For all these reasons, it is generally suggested by both postmillennial and amillennial authors that the binding of Satan, **so that he should not deceive the nations any longer**, refers to his inability to prevent the message of the Gospel from achieving success. And, as far as it goes, this interpretation certainly has Biblical warrant: Before the coming of Christ, Satan controlled the nations; but now his death-grip has been shattered by the Gospel, as the good news of the Kingdom has spread throughout the world. The Lord Jesus sent the Apostle Paul to the Gentile nations "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion

of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me" (Acts 26:18). Christ came "to rule over the Gentiles" (Rom. 15:12).

A good account of the pervasiveness of demonic activity and control throughout the ancient heathen world is contained in the first ten books of St. Augustine's *City of God*, but the fact is obvious even in the writings of the pagans themselves. Virtually every page of Herodotus' *History* or Virgil's *Aeneid* bears eloquent and explicit testimony of the tyranny the "gods" exercised over every aspect of pagan life and thought. Yet it all came to a halt with the Resurrection of Christ: The gods suddenly stopped talking, as the pagan writer Plutarch observed in his work *On Why Oracles Came to Fail*, and as St. Athanasius constantly remarks in his classic treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*.

That Satan has been bound does not mean that all his activity has ceased. The New Testament tells us specifically that the demons have been disarmed and bound (Col. 2:15; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6) – yet they are still active. It is just that their activity is restricted. And, as the Gospel progresses throughout the world, their activity will become even more limited. Satan is unable to prevent the victory of Christ's Kingdom. We will overcome (1 John 4:4). "Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen" (Acts 28:28).

The great fathers and teachers of the Church have always recognized that Christ definitively defeated Satan in His First Coming. As St. Irenaeus said, "The Word of God, the Maker of all things, conquering him by means of human nature, and showing him to be an apostate, has put him under the power of man. For He says, 'Behold, I confer upon you the power of treading upon serpents and scorpions, and upon all the power of the enemy' [Luke 10:19], in order that, as he obtained power over man by apostasy, so again his apostasy might be deprived of power by means of man turning back again to God." St. Augustine agreed: "The devil was conquered by his own trophy of victory. The devil jumped for joy, when he seduced the first man and cast him down to death. By seducing the first man, he slew him; by slaying the last man, he lost the

first from his snare. The victory of our Lord Jesus Christ came when he rose, and ascended into heaven; then was fulfilled what you have heard when the Apocalypse was being read, 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah has won the day' [Rev. 5:5]. . . . The devil jumped for joy when Christ died; and by the very death of Christ the devil was overcome: he took, as it were, the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced at the death, thinking himself death's commander. But that which caused his joy dangled the bait before him. The Lord's cross was the devil's mousetrap: the bait which caught him was the death of the Lord."

But the precise thrust of Revelation 20 seems to be dealing with something much more specific than a general binding and defeat of Satan. St. John tells us that the Dragon is **bound** with reference to his ability to **deceive the nations** — in particular, as we learn from verse 8, the Dragon's power "to deceive the nations . . . to gather them together for the war." The stated goal of the Dragon's deception is to entice the nations to join forces against Christ for the final, all-out war at the end of history. Satan's desire from the beginning has often been to provoke a premature eschatological cataclysm, to bring on the end of the world and the Final Judgment *now*. He wants to rush God into judgment in order to destroy Him, or at least to short-circuit His program and destroy the wheat with the chaff (cf. Matt. 13:24-30). In a sense, he can be considered as his own *agent provocateur*, leading his troops headlong into an end-time rebellion that will call down God's judgment and prevent the full maturation of God's Kingdom.

Writing of Jesus' parable of the leaven – "The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened" (Matt. 13:33) – Gary North observes: "The kingdom of God is like leaven. Christianity is the yeast, and it has a leavening effect on pagan, satanic cultures around it. It permeates the whole of culture, causing it to rise. The bread which is produced by this leaven is the *preferred bread*. In ancient times – indeed, right up until the advent of late-nineteenth century industrialism and modern agricultural methods – leavened bread was considered the staff of life, the symbol of God's sustaining hand. 'Give us this day our daily bread,' Christians have prayed for centuries, and they have eaten leavened bread at their tables. So

did the ancient Hebrews. The kingdom of God is the force that produces the fine quality bread which all men seek. The symbolism should be obvious: *Christianity makes life a joy for godly men. It provides men with the very best.*

"Leaven takes time to produce its product. It takes time for the leaven-laden dough to rise. *Leaven is a symbol of historical continuity, just as unleavened bread was Israel's symbol of historical discontinuity.* Men can wait for the yeast to do its work. God gives man time for the working of His spiritual leaven. Men may not understand exactly how the leaven works – how the spiritual power of God's kingdom spreads throughout their culture and makes it rise — but they can see and taste its effects. If we really push the analogy (pound it, even), we can point to the fact that dough is pounded down several times by the baker before the final baking, almost as God, through the agents of Satan in the world, pounds His kingdom in history. Nevertheless, the yeast does its marvelous work, *just so long as the fires of the oven are not lit prematurely.* If the full heat of the oven is applied to the dough before the yeast has done its work, both the yeast and the dough perish in the flames. God waits to apply the final heat (2 Pet. 3:9-10). First, His yeast – His church – must do its work, in time and on earth. The kingdom of God (which includes the institutional church, but is broader than the institutional church) must rise, having 'uncorrupted' the satanic dough of the kingdom of Satan with the gospel of life, including the life-giving reconstruction of all the institutions of culture.

"What a marvelous description of God's kingdom! Christians work inside the cultural material available in any given culture, seeking to refine it, permeate it, and make it into something fine. They know they will be successful, just as yeast is eventually successful in the dough, if it is given sufficient time to do its work. This is what God implicitly promises us in the analogy of the leaven: *enough time to accomplish our individual and collective assignments.* He tells us that His kingdom will produce the desirable bread of life. It will take time. It may take several poundings, as God, through the hostility of the world, kneads the yeast-filled dough of men's cultures. But the end result is guaranteed. God does not intend to burn His bread to a useless crisp by prematurely

placing it in the oven. He is a better baker than that."

As Tertullian stated in his masterful defense of the Christian faith: "We are a body united by a common religious profession, by a godly discipline, by a bond of hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation that as an organized force we may assail God with our prayers. Such violence is acceptable to God. We pray also for emperors, for their ministers and those in authority, for man's temporal welfare, *for the peace of the world, for the delay of the end of all things.*"

The specific point of the binding of the Dragon, therefore, is to prevent him from inciting the eschatological "war to end all wars," the final battle – until God is ready. When God's Kingdom-City is fully matured, then He will once more release Satan and allow him to deceive the nations for the final conflagration. But the fire will fall according to God's schedule, not the Dragon's. At every point, God is controlling events for His own glory.

Satan is to remain bound, St. John tells us, for **a thousand years** – a large, rounded-off number. We have seen that, as the number *seven* connotes a fullness of *quality* in Biblical imagery, the number *ten* contains the idea of a fullness of *quantity*; in other words, it stands for manyness. A thousand multiplies and

intensifies this (10 x 10 x 10), in order to express great vastness (cf. 5:11; 7:4-8; 9:16; 11:3, 13; 12:6; 14:1,3, 20). Thus, God claims to own "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). This of course does not mean that the cattle on the 1,001st hill belongs to someone else. God owns all the cattle on all the hills. But He says "a thousand" to indicate that there are many hills, and much cattle (cf. Deut. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 68:17; 84:10; 90:4). Similarly, the **thousand years** of Revelation 20 represent a vast, undefined period of time (although its limited, provisional nature as a pre-consummation era is underlined by the fact that the phrase is mentioned only *six* times in this chapter). It has already lasted almost 2,000 years, and will probably go on for many more. Milton Terry observes: "The *thousand years* is to be understood as a symbolical number, denoting a long period. It is a round number, but stands for an indefinite period, an eon whose duration it would be a folly to attempt to compute. Its beginning dates from the great catastrophe of this book, the fall of the mystic Babylon. It is the eon which opens with the going forth of the great Conqueror of 19:11-16, and continues until he shall have put all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). It is the same period as that required for the stone of Daniel's prophecy (Dan. 2:35) to fill the earth, and the mustard seed of Jesus' prophecy

to consummate its world-wide growth (Matt. 13:31-32). How long the King of kings will continue His battle against evil and defer the last decisive blow, when Satan shall be 'loosed for a little time,' no man can even approximately judge. It may require a million years."

The binding of the Dragon prevents him from deceiving the nations any longer, until the thousand years are **completed; after these things he must be released for a short time**, in which he again goes forth to deceive the nations. The story of the Dragon will be picked up again in verse 7, and so here we need notice only St. John's use of the word **must** (literally, **it is necessary**; cf. 1:1; 4:1; 10:11; 11:5; 13:10; 17:10; 22:6). At every point, Satan's activity takes place under the strict government of the Providence of God. As Swete observes, "it is in vain to speculate on the grounds of this necessity" (upon which he immediately goes on to speculate!); it is enough that God has decreed its necessity. The Dragon is not his own master. He has been seized and bound and shut up in the Abyss, and someday he will be released for a brief time – but all this takes place according to God's good and holy purposes. All the Dragon's hatred and rage against Christ's Kingdom are utterly impotent and ineffectual; he is powerless to do anything until he is deliberately **released** by the One who holds the key to the Abyss.

How else could He plunder?

In "Four Views on the Book of Revelation", Kenneth Gentry explains the meaning of "the binding of Satan" as follows:

Christ's promotion of the kingdom of God involved his exercising power over Satan's kingdom (cf v.26): He snatched men and women from Satan's control. In that we are still in the Millennium, Christ continues his plundering of Satan's house today by the preaching of the gospel, which rescues people from darkness and brings them into his kingdom (Col. 1:13; cf. Acts 26:17-18). Christ bound Satan for a well-defined purpose: "to keep him from deceiving the nations *any more*" (Rev. 20:3, italics added). In Old Testament times only Israel knew the true God (Ps. 147:19-20; Amos 3:2; Luke 4:6; Acts 14:16; 17:30). But Christ's incarnation changed this as the gospel began flowing to all nations (e.g., Isa. 2:2-3; 11:10; Matt.28:19; Luke 2:32; 24:47; Acts 1:8; 13:47).

Floyd E. Hamilton (The Basis of Millennial Faith) makes some helpful observations on the subject of Satan's being bound:

"I suppose that no one would insist that Satan is to be bound with a literal chain of iron or some other metal, for Satan is a spirit and material chains could not hold him captive for a moment. Satan's being bound does not mean that he is powerless to tempt people, and we know that he does. It is merely limitation of Satan's power in one particular respect especially, that of ability to deceive the nations. During the interadventual period the gospel is to be proclaimed to all nations, and Satan is powerless to prevent it. The way of salvation has been opened to all nations and there is nothing that Satan can do to block that way" (pp. 131-32).

"In Hebrews 2:14, the writer tells us, that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. Christ brought the devil to nought, that is, He limited the devil's power in such a way that all his efforts amounted to nothing, and his power was definitely frustrated. All these things show that in the New Testament Christ claimed that in a very real sense he had bound Satan, and limited his power. In Revelation 20, one particular aspect of that binding is before us, namely, the limiting of Satan's power to deceive the nations as he did before the coming of Christ. From that time forward during the whole of the interadventual dispensation Satan is defeated in fact. He can still go about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, but in this particular respect he is a caged lion" (ibid., pp. 132-33).