

Revelation 20:1-3 “The Dragon Is No Houdini”
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Harry Houdini was the famous escape artist of the twentieth century, widely known as “The Handcuff King.” He toured the U.S. and Europe, freeing himself from jails, handcuffs, chains, ropes and straitjackets, often while hanging from a rope in plain sight of street audiences. Such was his ability to escape.

In our text today, there is someone who is chained and locked-away for whom there is no escape. When we examine the text, we learn that *because Satan is restrained and cannot stop the spread of the gospel to the nations then you should commit yourself to the cause of Christ.*

Context

It is AD 95-96, the Apostle John is banished from Ephesus and exiled to the prison island of Patmos. Alcatraz of the ancient world. There he finds himself in solitary confinement, removed from the other political prisoners because of his revolutionary message about a dead Nazarene who claimed to be king of the world, according to John, now risen from the dead. John is isolated from the churches he loves. Has no Christian community. The lonely and bitter experience assails and attacks his faith. He doesn't know what lies before him. Nor does he know what will become of the churches of the Roman province of Asia. Some are dead. Others have compromised to the pluralistic age. A few addicted to the materialism of a consumeristic culture. Others plagued with heresy, some infected with sexual immorality. The most commendable is the smallest and seemingly weakest. Added to this existential crisis are the relentless persecutions of the Roman Empire. Can one see the most vital question for the first century believer? What will become of Christianity? How will the Church survive? The answer is provided in this glorious *Revelation*. The *Revelation* given to the Apostle John. Awe-inspiring visions which unveil hope to the original recipients of the letter living in the Roman province of Asia.

The Millennium

Chapter 20 begins a new vision. The *Millennium* as commonly called. Millennium is the Latin word for 1,000 which is mentioned 6 times in the first seven verses. The binding of Satan for 1,000 years (vv. 1-3), then the Thousand-year reign of Christ (vv. 4-6). The Millennium presents the most controversial passage of the *Apocalypse*. This term itself, *millennium*, is what labels the different schools of interpretation of the *Revelation*. Pre-millennial, post-millennial, a-millennial; in reference to the return of Christ.

How should we must approach the text? The most popular method today is to tack the millennium, chapter 20, onto the end of the events in chapter 19 and read in chronological order. As sequential narrative. Which makes perfect sense for a Westerner unaccustomed to reading apocalyptic literature. Especially if one picks up the *Revelation* and begin reading it in chapter 20. Alas, however, this school raises some serious theological concerns. In chapter 19 we have the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ who appears on a White Horse. The White Rider is the Messiah of the Old Testament, the ultimate Warrior-King who emerges from the mist of the

future to defeat the armies of the God-hating global government. The devastation is totally comprehensive. After the war, the human carnage is left to the birds of the air on which they feast at the great supper of God. There are no survivors, the defiant human race obliterated in the judgment of God. Then the Beast and the False Prophet thrown into the lake of fire. It is the end of the world. History finished. So reading chapters 19 and 20 as sequential narrative presents some critical theological questions. Here is the reign of Christ for 1,000 years. Yet again, the nations assemble for *the* war. Where do the nations come from to wage war against Christ if He has already smitten them with a rod of iron so that they were shattered to pieces like pottery and totally destroyed? Who are these people that rebel against Christ? Furthermore, what is the need for yet another last battle after the last battle to end the world? What would be the purpose? Most vexing, if this is Christ's glorious reign here on earth, after His second coming, how could evil co-exist with Him? How could there be any evil after Christ's second coming? How could evil exist in Christ's consummated kingdom? What would that indicate about Christ power? The blessedness and bliss of His kingdom? What would it indicate about the transforming power of Christ's glorified presence? After a thousand years of delighting in Christ, the human race suddenly wants to free itself from the addicting pleasure of Christ's presence? Rebel against the only source of true delight? The complications are endless.

Might I suggest, as per Augustine, that we read the *Revelation* as a series of recapitulating visions, parallel visions. Spanning the timeframe from the first coming of Christ to His Second. Each vision is like a different angle of the camera filming the same football game. From the press box to the end zone. The game winning play is obscured. Did he have possession of the ball? Was his foot in bounds? So we watch the replay, but we don't imagine ourselves watching an entirely different game. But the same game from a different angle. The replay zooms-in on a different feature. So it is with the *Apocalypse*. A series of progressively parallel visions, each of which provide a different perspective of the eternal plan of God. Here in chapter 20, we don't continue in sequential order, but start over with a recapitulation of what has already happened. Chapter 19 ends with the final battle, the camera focusing on the destruction of the Beast and False Prophet. Chapter 20 shows a replay of same war to end the world, zooming-in on the destruction of the Dragon. In the subplot of the book, the last villain remaining. The others are already destroyed. Babylon, the Beast and False Prophet. Now the Dragon. Chapter 20 begins a new vision that takes us to the end of the world, spanning the timeframe which begins at the first coming of Christ.

The Captured Key from Christ's Descent into Hell

How do we know? It is what the text shows. Verse 1, *Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.* John sees, coming down from heaven, an angel with the key to the *bottomless pit*. Notice the superscription directing our attention to the footnote. "Greek the *abyss*." We have seen this pit Abyss before in chapter 9. An angel, with the key to the Abyss, unlocks and opens it which releases the great horde of locusts that fly out in order to torment unbelievers, demons. The Abyss is the abode of demons. Remember the response of the demons when Jesus is casting them out of the possessed man, Legion. *And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss* (Lk. 8:31). The Abyss is the lowest region of the underworld in which the fallen angels are imprisoned. Peter explains, *God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell [Tartarus] and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept unto the judgment* (2 Pet. 2:4). The

Abyss is a warm home called hell. The Greek word for *hell* that Peter uses is *Tartarus*. In Greek mythology, Tartarus is the lowest chamber of the underworld in which the Titans are imprisoned. Peter takes a term from Greek mythology and baptizes it so that it takes on a new meaning. Then he uses it in order to teach about the prison of the fallen angels, demonic realm, the Abyss. The Abyss is the lowest compartment of the underworld. How do we know? The term *Abyss* itself means bottomless. So, by definition, there is nothing under it. Rather it is located under Hades, the realm of the dead, in which we find the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Under Hades is the Abyss, the lowest region of the underworld. Accessed by a key. The angel is *holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit*. Who gives him the key to the gates of hell? The devil? Apollyon, the ruler of the Abyss (9:11)? No. Christ is the only one who owns the key that locks and unlocks the demonic realm. From where does Christ get it? *He descended into hell*. A literal, spatial descent into the underworld. Where the Son of Man conquers it and triumphs over it and takes the key to the Abyss. *That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven, on earth, and **under the earth*** (Phil. 2:10). Christ descends that He might triumph over the hosts of hell. In Greek mythology, Hercules descends to the underworld and in a wrestling match beats Death. But that is a one-time wrestling match. Hercules never conquers Death. Indeed, Hercules himself dies and returns to Hades and suffers its eternal misery. He fails to capture the key. But in Christ's descent He conquers Death and captures the key. What we learn in the first vision, the Son of Man. *Fear not...I died and behold I am live forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades* (1:18). As Victor, Christ triumphantly keeps the keys of the underworld. He controls the gates as He pleases. He unlocks the gates that none can lock, and He locks the gates that none can unlock because He is the keeper of the key.

In addition to the key to the Abyss, Christ gives the angel a chain. Verse 1, ... *holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain*. A chain used to shackle a prisoner. Like a leg chain, handcuffs. Moreover, it is a *great* chain, the unbreakable cast-iron-links clang and rattle like the sound of car crashes. Making a Houdini-type escape impossible.

The Binding and Expulsion of Satan in Christ's Earthly Ministry

What is the point of the key and chain? The angel is going to shackle someone and lock him away in the Abyss. Who? Verse 2, *And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years*. The angel arrests the arch-enemy of the Church. To avoid any confusion with respect to his identity, every name by which he is known in the *Revelation* is listed here. The *dragon*, as introduced in chapter 12. Standing in front of the Ms. Universe who is with child, awaiting to abort her pregnancy. That ancient *serpent* at the beginning of the world who lied and deceived the first man and woman thereby bringing all to ruin. The same *devil*, the accuser of the brethren. Namely Satan cuffed and stuffed.

The question for us is, when did this binding occur? The Greek verb is δέω. The first place we read of it in the New Testament is Matt. 12 in the Parable of the Strong Man. Jesus is casting out demons. The Pharisees accuse Him of being in league with Satan, casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Jesus turns the tables. He counterquestions. *"If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?...Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first **binds** the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house"* (Mt 12:27-29). A very simple parable. Two points of comparison. The Strong Man and the Plunderer. The Strong Man is Satan whose house is being plundered. Satan keeps stored within his house his property, that is, the souls of men whose bodies have been possessed

by demons. The Plunderer carries off the strong man's property by casting out demons and rescuing the souls of possessed people. Clearly, Christ is the Plunderer. How is Jesus able to ransack the house of the strong man? By first binding the strong man. That Jesus is casting out demons clearly proves that Satan is already bound. This is what allows Christ to plunder his house and exorcise demons. Jesus binds Satan by defeating the Evil one at His temptation in the wilderness. Which binding is secured by Christ's descent where He captures the key to the Abyss. According to Christ, He binds Satan before He casts out demons. The reason for which He is able to plunder the Devil's house. So the binding of Satan begins in the earthly ministry of Christ.

If it's not clear that this vision begins with Christ's first coming then the timing is indicated again. Verse 3, and *threw him into the pit...* The Greek word for threw is a form of **βάλλω** which means "to throw, cast." When do we read of the Devil being cast out? The author of the *Revelation*, John, records it for us in the gospel according to *John*.³¹ "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out."³² "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." (Jn. 12:31-32 NAS). As Jesus hangs on the cross, the ruler of this world is cast out, *ek-ballo*-ed. Satan is thrown out by Jesus crucifixion. This vision begins in the early ministry of Christ.

Satan Bound for a Thousand Years

For how long? 1,000 years. Is this a literal 365 thousand days? What thus far in the *Revelation* have we interpreted with a hyper literalism? A woman who stands on the moon? As John tells us over and over, I saw another *sign*. The *Revelation* is a book of signs to be interpreted, symbolically. Therefore, we must be consistent and interpret this text in the same way as that of the entire book. Symbolically. Furthermore, the text itself will not let us interpret it with a rigid literalism. How does one literally bind Satan with a metal chain? He is a spiritual creature. How does one imprison him behind a gate locked with a physical key? So I humbly suggest that the 1,000 years, like everything else, is not to be taken literally, but symbolically.

As we have already seen, the number 1,000 is a symbolic number that signifies completion, perfection. How many sealed servants of God are there? 144,000. From each of the twelve tribes, twelve thousand multiplied by a thousand. The New Jerusalem, its measurements show it to be a perfect cube. Width, length, and height are all equal. Each 12 stadia times 1,000. Over and over throughout the Scripture, the number one thousand symbolizes completeness, fullness. *The Lord owns the cattle on a **thousand** hills. One day with the Lord is like a **thousand** years. Showing lovingkindness to a **thousand** generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.* A thousand, a thousand, a thousand. A symbolic number that signifies completion, perfection. So the millennium symbolizes an perfect period of time, spanning the age from Satan's binding and expulsion to that of Satan's destruction. The exact timeframe from the first coming of Christ until His glorious second coming. The Millennium is the entire Church age, the age in which we now live.

So what does it mean, that Satan is bound, thrown into the Abyss during the millennium? Are we suggesting that Satan is not a threat, that He is not dangerous? No. He is alive and well and exercising tremendous influence on this planet. He will destroy you given the opportunity. As Jesus tells Peter, *Simon, Simon, Satan has asked permission to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you Simon...* Therefore we are to resist the Devil. Avoid the traps that he sets before you. Watch out for that woman. On Facebook, beware of the old flame that is a new friend. Tell

the truth about the money. Because Satan, the ancient foe, is a ferocious Dragon who seeks to destroy those who hold to the testimony of Jesus (12:17). That Satan is bound and thrown into the Abyss is not saying that he is inactive. So what does it mean?

The meaning of his binding is revealed in the purpose of his binding. What is the reason for which he is thrown into the Abyss for a thousand years? *Verse 3, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended.* The purpose of Satan's binding is to keep him from deceiving the nations. What does that mean? What does Satan do when released? *Verse 7, And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle.* Satan deceives the nations in order to gather them for battle. What battle? The last battle to annihilate the Church. The last battle to completely eradicate Christianity once and for all. Satan's sinister scheme since before the birth of the Male-Child, wiping the Church from the face of the earth forever. Therefore, the purpose of binding Satan, the reason for which he is bound and locked away, is so that he can no longer deceive the nations in order to destroy the church. The purpose of the binding of the Dragon is so that he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel to the nations. "The devil can do much indeed, during this present period of one thousand years. But there is one thing which, during this period, he cannot do. With respect to this one thing he is definitely and securely bound. He cannot destroy the Church as a mighty missionary organization heralding the gospel to all the nations" (Hendricksen, 190). "The binding of Satan...means that throughout the gospel age in which we now live the influence of Satan, though certainly not annihilated, is so curtailed that he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel to the nations of the world" (Hoekema, 229). Satan is bound so that he cannot thwart the mission of the Church, *Go and make disciples of all nations.*

This is easily seen when we consider the millennium in the context of world history. Just consider the spread of the gospel since the apostolic era. Rewind to the time of Christ, what nations of the world are deceived by Satan? In other words, what nations of the world lie in spiritual darkness, living in defiance of the God Who Is There? Every one of them except Israel. The nation which is chosen by God, and given His Word that reveals the need of reconciliation with God, atonement for sin. To Israel is given the laws governing the temple and sacrificial system. To Israel is sent the prophets predicting the coming Messiah to redeem the world. But the nations outside of Israel are all, without exception, deceived by Satan and under His rule. What does one see in the streets of the cities of the seven churches? Pagan temples, sorcery, demon-possession. What does one see in Ireland at this time? Ancestors of some folk here, sacrificing their own children. In Germany, toasting to Thor as they drink from the skulls of their enemies. In Africa, witchcraft, voodoo and deep darkness. In India, children starve while cows considered as sacred safely roam the streets. In China, superstition about a snail being one's reincarnated grandfather. In Pacific islands, human sacrifice. South America, cannibalism.

But then Christ comes and in His earthly ministry binds the Strong Man and casts out Satan so that he can no longer deceive the nations. Therefore Christ boldly commissions His followers, *Go and make disciples of all nations.* How can He so commission them so confidently? To take the gospel to the ends of the earth? Because Satan can no longer deceive the nations and prevent the gospel from spreading around the world. It travels from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, Syria, Ethiopia in Africa, as well as Greece and even Italy to the very household of Caesar. Because Jesus promises, "*I shall build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" Because He is the Keeper of the Key. The truth of which is depicted here in

this apocalyptic portrait of Satan being bound, cast into the Abyss, locked behind keyed gates and imprisoned for a thousand years.

The Application to Us Today

Do you see what this means to persecuted Christians? Today in North Korea is a Christian awaiting execution for his faith in Christ. Suppose diplomatic pressure has some effect. The State Department flies you there to meet with him. What would you tell him knowing that he awaits execution? What would you say to encourage him to remain steadfast and not recant his faith? "God wants you to have a wonderful marriage. God wants your career to be successful." Might he be more emboldened to keep the faith were you to tell him that Satan has been bound and locked away? That though he may die his suffering is not in vain. Because the Church is not a lost cause precisely for we are living in the Millennium. This period of time in which the gospel shall triumph over the nations. Since Satan can no longer deceive the nations because he is locked away in the Abyss and therefore the salvation of the nations is ensured.

This is why our fathers in the faith sacrificed to form the PCA. Planted new churches like ours, start RUF campus ministries, sent missionaries. Because the Gospel shall prevail. Yet how do we live today? To what do we so passionately commit our lives and our time? To the American dream? To the pursuit of that which in the end is vapor. God has not promised you a lake house, a new truck. He has not even promised you tomorrow. But we are promised that the Church shall prevail. Perhaps in this New year we should seek how to more earnestly and more passionately commit ourselves to the cause of Christ. Precisely, because Satan has been bound and locked in the Abyss for 1,000 years. Amen.