

## UNDERSTANDING REVELATION 20: 1 – 10

In the early chapters of the Bible we are introduced to a snake. A reptile to be wary of, he figures in the Revelation too. So dangerous! And yet.... and yet....

'...I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years' (20:1, 2). The devil behind bars? Sealed in a pit, bound and limited? While the faithful departed – including the Martyrs – sit on thrones and reign for a thousand years? These opening sentences of chapter 20 are enough to put new heart in the most timid of believers.

But when is this millennium? Does it follow hard on the heels of the events portrayed in the previous chapter? I don't think so. *We are seeing a new vision unfolding.* We've wound back to the beginning of the video again. In a way we are seeing a repeat play-back of chapter 12, where we learnt of Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and of the overthrow of our adversary. It's the cross of Golgotha again, seen from a heavenly perspective. There Satan was defeated and at that point the thousand-year period of victory began for the people of God. You see, I'm a parallelist! I don't see Revelation 20 following *chronologically* after chapter 19. Some Bible students do see it this way. They are called, broadly speaking:

### **The pre-millennialists**

You may as well get used to the term. In this interpretation the return of Christ is thought of as coming *before* ('pre') the millennium – in chapter 19, to be precise. Then follows chapter 20, with its account of the chaining of Satan and the setting up of Christ's kingdom here on earth (vv. 1-6). Then after a thousand years Satan is let loose for a last fling, only to be defeated with his allies (vv. 7-10). There follows the raising of the remaining dead and the day of judgement, together with the overthrow of the unrepentant (vv. 11-15). And, finally, the new heaven and the new earth (ch. 21).

One respects those who may differ in their interpretation, of course. But it does seem to me that this interpretation is too artificial to be true to Scripture as a whole. Too much is pinned upon these first few sentences of chapter 20; once we get away from them, there seems little in the New Testament to point us to such an interpretation. There is another school of thought:

### **The post-millennialists**

Again we can only respect one another in our endeavour to understand the teaching of the remarkable passage of Revelation 20. The post-millennialists expect Christ's return to occur after ('post') the millennium. Their understanding is that the thousand-year reign – that still lies largely ahead - will be a golden era, far more triumphant than anything experienced by Christians at the present time. The chaining and shutting-up of Satan will be, they maintain unequivocally definite, clear-cut and obvious.

The popularity of this view is limited today, and its main weakness is pin-pointed by the general New Testament teaching that the period immediately before Christ's return will be fraught with crises and persecutions (e.g. 2 Thess. 2:3-12).

And then there is a third group:

The a- millennialists

I suppose that I'm an a-millennialist myself but I dislike the title because it implies that its adherents who don't believe in a millennium at all, for the Greek prefix 'a' means *without*! But of course we do hold to a millennium, even if not to a *literal* period of thousand years. I take the millennium to symbolize the period between Christ's first and second comings, seen in its rounded-off completeness and entirety. Over that first Easter week-end, the powers of death and evil met their match and Satan was bound. The light of the good news began to spread. Disciples of Christ everywhere were led to expect victory. The millennium was under way!

Yes, perhaps you are quick to point out an apparent weakness in this interpretation. Does Satan *look* all that bound, as we survey the events of the past centuries? Can we in all honesty call this period a *millennium*?

I believe we can. Look back a little and think. Think also of the teaching that we find elsewhere in the New Testament.

Here are three examples:

'....Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel....'

(2 Tim. 1:10)

'...he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death' (Heb. 2:14-15)

'And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross' (Col. 2:15)

Notice the force of these terms – *destroyed .... disarmed... a public spectacle*. That's what the death of Christ did to the opposition! So if there is a problem about the language of Revelation 20:1-3 in its descriptions of the binding of the dragon, let's at least recognise that the problem extends to the rest of the New Testament!

But think carefully, and I believe you will find that the problem recedes as we look back to the world before the time of Christ. What was it like? Frankly, the human race had no way of dealing with guilt, death and evil. In our superstition and dread of the unknown, our dreams were haunted by the world of spirits. Perhaps there were gods, but they were capricious ... and remote. The best brains that we had could only guess about the meaning of life and the purpose of the universe. And then Christ came!

The difference his coming has made is staggering. We read in Revelation 20:3 that from then on it was not possible for Satan to keep the nations in deceit. How true! As the good

news of sins forgiven and eternal life was proclaimed, the darkness began to give place to the light. The message that Christ was Lord spread to every continent. Death had been defused! It was impossible to keep the lid over our ignorance any longer.

As we have seen earlier, the opposition does not give up lightly. The devil's days are short, and he is an angry foe (12:12). In spite of his immense power, a bridge-head of light and truth has been established in virtually every country. With the gospel spreading outwards, there is no reason for any nation to remain deceived by error. Christianity is a world faith, and nothing is going to halt the progress of the frail-looking Church of Christ, despite the persecutions and adversities fanned into being by the devil's rage. For the devil is a bound foe.

He has not disappeared, but he is beaten! He is like the black mamba at the London Zoo. If you open up the glass barrier and get too near him, he will be on to you like an express train. So we keep our distance warily, but recognizing that the devil has no power over the Christian – except to tempt and to bluster. He can thrash furiously, and woe betide anyone who gets within proximity. He can still cause immense damage. But throughout the millennium the Church is going to continue; no one is going to rub it out.

*We are in the millennium now.* The martyrs and other faithful departed, who have gone ahead of us, are reigning with Christ in heaven meanwhile (20:4-6). They share in 'the first resurrection', awaiting the time of Christ's return, when body and soul are united. It is only at the very end of the millennium that the powers of evil are released for a brief period of unprecedented liberty (v.3,7). This fits in with what we have learnt earlier:

A long period of advance for God's people.

A short period of ascendancy for Satan.

The judgement and overthrow of all evil.

We read about the annihilation of Satan in verses 7-10. Here is the re-run of Armageddon. From different perspectives we have already encountered this vision twice, in chapters 16 and 18. Gog and Magog? The names come from Ezekiel 38 and 39, Gog having been notorious as the prince of Syria (Magog) at a time of intense adversity for the Jewish people. These names heighten the impression of the evil that will surround God's camp as Armageddon draws near; the Church is about to be liquidated!

No. Goodness and purity will always have the upper hand. The power of evil can never stand against the fire of God. We need the vision of Revelation to assure us that this is true. There is only one result of Armageddon – the total excise of evil!

We can hardly believe it, but it is coming. Just as Satan does not feature at the start of the Bible, neither does he have any place in the final chapters. He is out of the picture from now on. For the time being we may feel his opposition and his hatred, but fear of the ancient serpent need not disturb our sleep.