

Different interpretations of the first few verses of Revelation 20 are at the center of significantly different interpretations of the biblical teaching about what will happen in the world in the history leading to the end of time. These different interpretations are very much influenced by how literally one interprets the symbolism in this passage and in the book of Revelation. The main division is between those who believe that the book of Revelation and other parts of Scripture that deal with the end times must be interpreted as literally as possible, and those who believe that this type of literature in the Bible is intended to be interpreted symbolically. The Reformed tradition has always interpreted Revelation symbolically, but a large portion of the rest of the evangelical church interprets it as literally as possible.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time with this, but I thought that I should give a quick summary of the main views for interest's sake and perhaps to help you place some of the language that you might hear from Christians of other traditions. The different interpretations of Revelation 20:1-3 have to do with how the thousand years in this passage is understood. The passage teaches that Satan is bound for a thousand years so that he might not deceive the nations any longer. The question is, when does that happen, and what is the result on earth of Satan being bound for that time.

Many evangelicals believe that this refers to literal thousand years on earth – that it happens after Christ's second coming and that Christ is physically on earth during that period ruling and that it is a period of great blessing and prosperity because Satan is bound. This view gets complicated because it teaches that after the 1000 years Satan is unbound, the great tribulation happens and then after all that the final judgment. Among those who teach this view there is considerable variation in the details and you need charts to be able to see how it all fits together. These people are called pre-millennialists because they teach that Christ returns bodily before the 1000 years of Revelation 20 – It is believed that Christ will return before (pre) the millennium or 1000 years of Revelation 20.

Then there are post-millennialists. Many of the puritans were post-millennialists. So was RC Sproul and some, but not all, of the leaders associated with Ligonier ministries. These are generally reformed people, but I don't think that there are too many of them anymore. Post-millennialists believe that the 1000 years of Revelation 20 are not a literal 1000 years, but a long period of time before the end of the world in which most of the world will be saved and after that time, Christ will return. So in the post-millennial position Christ returns after (post) the 1000 years of Revelation 20. Post-mills tend to think that during this period many of the OT prophecies concerning Israel will be fulfilled and that the Jews as a nation will turn to Christ.

The majority of Reformed thinkers and a large number of evangelical scholars are a-millennials although few people like that term. That is the approach that I have been taking in my teaching from the book of Revelation and about the end times in general. This approach recognizes the symbolic nature of much of the biblical teaching concerning the end times and interprets it accordingly. It is clear to most biblical scholars that the dramatic symbolism of the book of Revelation was never intended to be taken literally. If you take something

that was intended to be taken symbolically and interpret it literally you end up with some very strange conclusions. Anyway our tradition tends to be a-mill in its interpretation of the biblical teaching concerning the end times. And the term a-millennial simply means "no literal millennium." That is not the best term, but it is the one that is mostly used and so I will use it.

The a-millennial interpretation of this section of Revelation 20 is that the 1000 years during which Satan is bound is a symbolic number which stands for almost entire period between the first and the second coming of Christ. There is a short period after the end of the millennium and the return of Christ when Satan is unbound. So what is described in Revelation 20:1-3a began when Jesus was on earth and died and rose again and will end shortly before the end of the world when Satan is released for a little while.

So hear again these first three verses of Revelation 20. ¹"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. ²And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³and 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. After that he must be released for a little while."

These verses describe Satan being bound by an angel coming down from heaven. Satan is thrown into the bottomless pit. He is shut in it and it is sealed. He is bound this way for a thousand years and the result of his being bound is that he might not deceive the nations any longer. According to the a-millennial interpretation that describes the present time and it has been the reality since the time of Christ and it will be the reality until just before the return of Christ when Satan will be released for a little while. So the point for us is that Satan has been bound as this passage describes since Christ won the victory over him during his early mission and he has been bound ever since and will remain bound until right before the second coming of Christ when he will be released for a little time.

Now the immediate question that this raises is that it does not look like Satan is bound right now. He seems to be quite active. He being quite successful in turning the world against God and encouraging wickedness. In many parts of the world including the west, he seems to be winning. Satan is certainly active in our world today and on the face of it, it is hard to imagine that he is bound seeing how much wickedness there is in this world. You would think that if Satan was bound, the world would be a much better place than it is.

Now one very important biblical perspective, as we think through this matter, is that spiritual reality is often the opposite of what it appears to be and the most fundamental example of that is the cross itself. The cross seemed to be a defeat, but it was the victory of all victories in the warfare between God and Satan. And the cross is paradigmatic in the sense that the pattern of seeming defeat truly being a victory is very common in God's way of accomplishing his purposes and bringing his kingdom.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 is very important for this point. In that passage Paul says that “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Later on in this passage Paul writes, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” His point is that God works this way on purpose. God delights in bringing great victories through what look like defeats as he did on the cross.

If we apply that idea to Revelation 20:1-3, we can expect that Satan being bound may not look like we expect it to. The reality is that Satan is bound and it does not look like Satan is bound. But in the light of the cross we want to take into account God’s habit of bringing his kingdom through what at first looks like defeat. In God’s way of doing things, the truth is often the opposite of what it appears to be on the surface. The reality is that the church has always proclaimed victory in situations that did not look very victorious. And that principle is found throughout the book of Revelation as well. In the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, each time promises are made to those who conquer, but the conquering is not success by any earthly standard, but being faithful even if that means persecution and even if that means dying for one’s faith. In the book of Revelation those who die for faith in Jesus have been victorious in a way that is analogous to the victory that Jesus won when he died on the cross.

The point is that in the Bible what looks like winning is often losing and what looks like losing is often winning. And so when we think of the fact that Revelation 20:1-3 says that Satan is bound at the present time we need to remember this principle that in God’s way of bringing his kingdom winning often looks like losing. And what that means for us is that we must look at our circumstances from the perspective of faith in God’s word rather than from the perspective of how things appear to be on the surface.

So how is Satan bound at the present time? – so that he might not deceive the nations any longer. The starting place for answering that question are a number of verses in the NT that describe how when Jesus was on earth he was winning victories over Satan – victories which curtailed Satan’s activities. Jesus’ casting out of demons was Jesus waging war on Satan’s activities. By casting demons out of people who had been possessed, Jesus was exercising his power and authority over the demonic realm and that was the beginning of a much larger victory that Jesus was working towards. In Matthew 12:22-29, Jesus is being accused by the Pharisees of casting out demons by satanic power and his answer is given in verses 28-29, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man.”

Here Jesus uses the language of binding in connection with his ministry of exorcism. Jesus was in the process of binding Satan through his ministry on earth. The initial step of doing that was casting out demons who had possessed people, but that was but a foreshadowing of Jesus’ entire mission.

The next important passage for this theme is Luke 10 where Jesus sends out seventy two of his followers to preach the gospel of the kingdom. When they return, they tell Jesus “Lord, even the demons are subject to us

in your name!” And Jesus says, “I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven.” This refers to some loss of power and influence on Satan’s part. In explaining this the ESV study Bible writes, “Jesus indicates that Satan’s authority and power over people has been decisively broken.” Whatever this means exactly, it is clear that there is a connection between the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom and Satan losing power and authority over people.

The next important verse for the idea of Satan being bound through Jesus’ ministry on earth is John 12:31-32, which quotes Jesus shortly before his crucifixion. Jesus says, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” So the ruler of this world, who is Satan, is cast out in some sense by the death of Jesus and the result of that is that Jesus will draw all people to himself. So what we have again is this connection between Jesus’ mission, Satan’s somehow being curtailed in his power and influence and Jesus drawing people to himself.

And then in the light of these verses that speak in various ways of Satan losing power and influence as a result of Jesus activities on earth and the spread of the gospel consider the great commission where Jesus asserts, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19-20). These verses do not mention Satan specifically, but in the light of the way that the gospels show that the preaching of the gospel goes hand in hand with Satan losing power, the great commission fits with that picture. Jesus, because of his work on earth including his death and resurrection, is given all authority over heaven and earth and on the basis of that the church is sent into all the world with the gospel.

The coming of the kingdom of God is about God re-establishing his authority over his creation. The one who has usurped his authority of course, is Satan. Jesus even refers to him in John 12 as the ruler of this world, but Jesus is in the process of re-establishing God’s authority over his world which means taking away Satan’s authority. And the preaching of the gospel throughout the world is a direct result of what Jesus has accomplished by his ministry on earth including especially his death and resurrection.

Now relate all this to Revelation 20:1-3 where Satan is bound for a thousand years and the result of that binding is that he might not deceive the nations any longer. This fits perfectly with what we have been seeing about Jesus’ defeat of Satan in the gospels and the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. The binding of Satan in Revelation 20 is not that he not able to do anything – that will come – but it has to do with him not being able to deceive the nations any longer.

Before Jesus came to earth, Satan was able to deceive the nations in a way that he is no longer able to do. The gospel was restricted to Israel and even in Israel the number of those who were saved by it was very small. That has changed dramatically since Jesus has ascended into heaven and poured out his Spirit upon the church. The gospel has gone out through all the world. The church has grown in numbers through the

centuries. There have of course, been many setbacks and sometimes that true church has been very small in certain places, but it has gradually spread throughout the earth and it continues to do so.

Satan is still able to do a lot. He is bound, but he is not yet put out of commission. He is still active. He still has a great deal of influence. But he has not been able to stop the church from surviving through time and gradually spreading around the world. There are a lot of professing Christians in the world. Not all of them are truly saved people, but many of them are. And the gospel is still going out. People are being saved. Every person who is saved is one more who has been “delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred ... to the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son.” And this is all happening because of what we read in our text. Satan is bound during this period symbolized by 1000 years. That binding is not that he is totally kept from doing any harm. He is being kept from deceiving the nations and the direct result of that is that the gospel is being proclaimed all around the world, people are being saved, the church of Jesus Christ continues to exist and grow.

Before Jesus bound Satan by winning the victory over him in his earthly mission, Satan had a power to deceive the nations that he no longer has. Before Jesus came to earth, even in Israel, there was only a small remnant of true believers. And outside of Israel, Satan had almost complete control. Not in the ultimate sense for God never stopped being the only true God who reigns over all, but Satan did have a lot of power over the human race by God’s permission. And so he was able to deceive the nations so that all but a tiny sliver of humanity was under this cruel authority. He still has a lot of power now, but he does not have the same power that he once had.

So this is an important text for missions. This is a text of encouragement for the work of the church in preaching the gospel to the world – in seeking to fulfill the command of Christ to make disciples of all the nations. We are living in a period of time in world history that God in Christ has set aside for the nations to be reached with the gospel. By binding Satan so that he might no longer deceive the nations, Jesus has created the spiritual conditions for the gospel to go forth and for many people from all the nations to be brought to salvation. Satan still has power as is obvious enough, but what is remarkable from this passage is that he is specifically restrained from keeping the gospel from being spread throughout the world and from delivering people from his kingdom.

Clearly that does not mean that he is kept from putting up any opposition. He still opposes the gospel. But he is being restrained by the comprehensive authority of Jesus from keeping the gospel from advancing throughout the world according to the will and plan of God. We are not to expect this to look like Satan is powerless and the gospel will sweep effortlessly around the world. The book of Revelation shows us clearly how the church will suffer and how their enemies will often appear to have the upper hand. And yet through it all, temptations, persecution, martyrdom, the gospel advances sometimes dramatically, sometimes a conversion here and there. Jesus is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The

kingdom of God said Jesus in Luke 13:21, “is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”

That is what is going on at the present time. There has been a fundamental change in what Satan is able to do after the victory that Jesus has won by his life, death, and resurrection. Before the time of Christ he was not bound, he was not restrained from deceiving the nations and so other than the light of God in the nation of Israel the whole world was in satanic darkness. But that has changed with the victory of Jesus so that Satan is now bound so that he is no longer able to deceive the nations as he once did. And through all that time the gospel has been at work in the world like yeast in a lump of dough and more and more it is spreading through the whole dough.

The existence and growth of the church through the centuries happened because of this binding of Satan that Revelation 20 is describing. The existence and growth of the church in our time is happening because Christ has bound Satan a thousand years so that he might no longer deceive the nations.

From one perspective it does not look very glorious when you think of the weakness of the church in the west and all of the issues in the church all around the world. And yet remember the way that God loves to hide victory in apparent defeat and how God chooses the foolish in the world to shame the wise and the weak in the world to shame the strong. Think of how the cross looked like a defeat and ended up being the greatest victory of all.

So let’s be encouraged to participate with enthusiasm in this great calling of the church to make disciples in this situation that Christ has provided for the Church to make disciples of the nations. He has bound Satan so that he might not deceive the nations any longer so that by the power of the gospel people may be delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into his kingdom. Think of Jesus’ words in Matthew 9:37-38, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.”

May this picture of Satan being bound so that he might not deceive the nations any longer encourage us to be excited to do whatever God is calling us to do to be part of what the church is going to fulfill the great commission. There is the witness of our everyday lives in our neighborhoods and work places. There is the support of the work of our presbytery in missions and church planting. There is the location of our new church building which we are being called to use as a base for bringing the gospel to that community. There are the organizations that we support and other organizations by which believers work together to make disciples of the nations. And there is the ministry of prayer – personal prayer, but also corporate prayer – our prayer meetings which is a vital part of the church’s fulfillment of the great commission.

These three verses that have been the focus of so much controversy, are a profound encouragement for us in the mission of making disciples of the nations. Satan has been bound so that he might not deceive the nations

any longer so that the church may go into the world and make disciples of those nations. May that picture of Satan being bound be impressed into our memories so that we may always think of it as that step in Jesus' victory to make possible the mission of the church to make disciples of the nations.