

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #150:

ARE WE IN “SATAN’S LITTLE TIME”?

By John Temples

Ponder these words from Revelation 20:1-3 and 7-10:

“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. *But after these things he must be released for a little while....* Now when the thousand years have expired, *Satan will be released from his prison* and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

Yes, we skipped verses 4-6; because they are not pertinent to the subject at hand and would require extensive explanation beyond the scope of this article. We are chiefly concerned about God’s forewarning of certain earthly Satanic activities just before the end of the world and the return of Christ.

Twice in this text, there is an ominous announcement. As the chapter opens, Satan is bound or restrained from certain earthly activities. But verse 3 says, “But after these things *he must be released for a little while.*” And verses 7 and 8 tell us, “Now when the thousand years have expired, *Satan will be released from his prison* and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth.”

This is telling us that for a short period just before the second coming of Christ, Satan will be given free rein to wreak havoc in the earth. We might call this “Satan’s second coming” or “Satan’s little time.” This is something every Christian should be aware of and concerned about, especially the generation (or generations) of Christians who will have to live through this period. The Lord could come at any time; so any generation, including ours, could be that generation. Every student of God’s word cannot afford to overlook or ignore this troubling prophecy.

THE TIMELINE OF SATAN’S ACTIVITY AS DOCUMENTED IN REVELATION 20

The prophecy we just read can be broken down chronologically as follows:

- The period of Satan’s activity before the binding
- The period of the binding of Satan, lasting a symbolic thousand years and representing restraints on his power
- The removal of restraints on Satan for a “little time” just before the return of Christ
- The final and total destruction of Satan’s power upon the return of Jesus

The question we will deal with is, Where are we along this timeline?

THE BINDING OF SATAN FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

As Revelation 20 begins, we read of an angel coming down and binding Satan with a chain. The only “chain” I know of that can bind or restrain Satan is the word of God. Jesus used that “chain” to defeat Satan in the wilderness temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). We have the same weapon at our disposal in the Bible.

But what is this “binding of Satan”? Your first thought might be that it is a reference to Satan’s being judged at the end of time. No, the binding of Revelation 20:2 is not the final, eternal punishment of Satan, for these reasons:

- He is bound only for a symbolic thousand years, not for eternity. At the end of the thousand years he is released.

- He is not cast into the lake of fire, from which there will be no return; rather, he is imprisoned in the “bottomless pit” or abyss. (Compare verse 10, where the devil IS cast into the lake of fire from which he will never escape.)
- This binding is not a complete restraint of all Satan’s activities, but only in reference to his “deceiving the nations.”

This binding, therefore, must occur at some point in earth’s history. When? To answer that question, we need to consider what conditions prevailed *before* his binding. The answer to that is found in Revelation 13. In that chapter, Satan is seen as having a “blank check” to deceive the nations and ravage the church. This suggests a period in world history we call “the Dark Ages”--from about AD 500 to 1800 (some scholars say AD 500 to 1500).

REVELATION 12 AND 13--A PANORAMIC PICTURE OF A LARGE PORTION OF CHURCH HISTORY

In Revelation 12, John sees an amazing vision: a pure woman clothed with the sun and bearing children. Many scholars believe (as do I) that this pure woman represents the true church. A woman bearing children would symbolize a growing church. She is a pure woman and radiates the glory of God. This exactly fits the state of the Lord’s church during the first three or four centuries.

This woman (the church) is forced to flee into the wilderness because of intense persecution by a dragon (Satan, verses 4 and 9). This is exactly what church history tells us happened: a period of prosperity and growth (roughly the first three centuries) was followed by a long period of persecution, centered in Rome. It got so bad that the true church all but disappeared as a visible entity, replaced by a counterfeit Roman church, complete with a counterfeit Christ--the pope--at its head.

How long did this “wilderness experience” for the church last? The pure woman is said to be in the wilderness for 1,260 days (Revelation 12:6). When is (or was) this?

THE 1,260-DAY IMPRISONMENT AND SUPPRESSION OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY

In Bible prophecy, a day often represents a year. Proof: In Ezekiel 4, God commands the prophet Ezekiel to do certain things for a number of days to symbolize God's punishments for Israel's iniquity. In verse 6, God tells Ezekiel, "*I have given you a day for a year.*" In other words, a day in Ezekiel's prophetic declarations stood for a year of actual earth time. Also, when the Israelites sinned in the wilderness, God condemned them to wander for 40 years, based on the 40 days the spies were in the Promised Land (Numbers 14:32-34). This day-year equivalence apparently occurs in Revelation also.

So, 1,260 days would mean 1,260 years, which just happens to be approximately the span of the Dark Ages.¹ Notice the things that are said to occur during the 1,260 day/year period:

- The true church would be persecuted and forced into hiding.
- Satan would suppress and dominate the true church through two beasts (earthly agents). For various reasons I detail in my Revelation commentary (Pictures From Patmos, an Amazon e-book), the two beasts likely represent Rome in two forms: political and ecclesiastical. Again, the facts of history bear this out. It is important to note this: *Satan's war on the church was waged largely through earthly governments, kings, or nations.*

Revelation 13 tells us that during the 1,260 day/year period, Satan would be allowed almost total domination over the church. Revelation 13:7 says, "And it was granted to him [the beast, the earthly agent of Satan] to make war with the saints and overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation."

Notice those last two words of verse 7: "and nation." These two words are the link to the text we are studying in chapter 20. Read Revelation 20:3 again: The angel "cast [Satan] into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive *the nations* no more until the thousand years were finished." In Revelation 12 and 13, Satan has almost unlimited power over *the nations*; in chapter 20, that power over *the nations* is taken away for a time.

¹ The 1,260 days are also referred to in Revelation as "42 months" (13:5) and "a time, times, and half a time" (12:14). Since a Jewish month was 30 days, 42 months would equal 1,260 days (years). "A time, times, and half a time" likely means a year, plus two years, plus half a year--again 42 months or 1,260 days.

Here is what all this is telling us:

- The church was going to enjoy a period of purity, prosperity, and growth.
- It would then be overcome by Satan and essentially replaced by a counterfeit church for 1,260 years.
- The 1,260 years would be characterized by Satanic power over nations. He would be free to use human governments to wage his war against true Christianity.
- During the 1,260 years, Satan's power over the church would be almost total (Revelation 13:7).

Again, this is exactly what church history says happened. The 1,260-year period, in my view, was the Dark Ages, approximately AD 500-1800.

Revelation 20 tells us that at the end of the 1,260 years, Satan's power would be drastically curtailed. Look at history again and notice what happened as the Dark Ages began to come to an end:

- AD 1450--the printing press was invented. The first book printed was the Bible. This was the beginning of the end of the "lockdown" of God's word, which Roman church authorities had kept from the common people for centuries.
- AD 1517--Martin Luther lit the spark of the Protestant Reformation, a further blow to the Roman church's iron grip on millions of people.
- AD 1793--the Reign of Terror and the French Revolution began. France was the "most Catholic" of all the Catholic nations of Europe. The rebellion by French citizens against the excesses of the Roman Catholic leaders was a sore embarrassment to the Roman church. During and after the French Revolution, the French military leader Napoleon inflicted major damage on the authoritarian Catholic leadership, even arresting the pope(!) at one point.²

² "In 1796, during the French Revolutionary Wars, French troops under Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Rome and captured Pope Pius VI, taking him as a prisoner to France, where he died in 1799."
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Pius_VII)

- AD 1800--Around this time, a “Great Awakening” began in Europe and America. People rediscovered the pattern for the church in the New Testament and organized congregations conforming to that pattern. Modern-day churches of Christ are the result of that Restoration Movement. The 1800s were characterized by an explosion of Biblical scholarship, Scripture translation, and archeological discoveries confirming the Bible.

Could all these one-after-the-other blows against the Roman church monopoly be what Revelation 20 calls “the binding of Satan”? In my view, yes. It makes sense to say that when the word of God is freely available, Satan is bound. If the word of God is restricted or kept from the people, Satan is not bound. During the Dark Ages, the Bible was locked away from the common people by the Catholic Church. After the events of 1500-1800, that “lockdown” was ended. In that sense, after about 1800 Satan was bound.

But remember, this binding, this restraining of Satan’s power, is only partial. Satan could still tempt us as individuals, but since the 1800s he has not been able to use human governments and nations to persecute or dominate the true church.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE THOUSAND YEARS?

Revelation 20:2 says that Satan would be bound for a thousand years. So you may be breathing a sigh of relief--if the thousand years began around 1800, it won’t end until 2800. But the thousand years is almost certainly not literal. Wayne Jackson says in his commentary on Revelation, “[T]he ‘thousand years’ is not a literal period of history. The numeral ‘thousand’ is used more than twenty times in the book of Revelation, and not once is it employed in a literal sense.”

All we can say is that Satan’s “blank check” to use human governments to persecute the church was likely revoked around AD 1800, and he will stay bound for some period of time known only to God.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE END OF THE THOUSAND YEARS?

After the “thousand years,” the restraints Satan has been under are removed. Go back and read Revelation 20:3 again: “...and he [the angel] cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. *But after these things he must be released for a little while.*”

What is Satan going to do after being released? Verse 8 tells us he's going to go right back to doing what he did for centuries: "deceiving the nations" (using human governments and the power of law and authoritarian force to persecute the church).

It is my view that we have been living in the period of Satan's binding--the symbolic "thousand years"--since about 1800. The Bible has been freely available during that time, Biblical scholarship has flourished, and Christianity has enjoyed a resurgence and the respect of people and governments. But recent events suggest that the period of restraint on the devil's activities may be ending (or may have already ended).

THE NATURE OF SATAN'S LITTLE TIME

What will characterize this (hopefully short) period just before the end? The major factor is that Satan will once again use human governments in an unrestrained fashion to persecute the church, something he had been prohibited from doing during the figurative thousand-year period (verse 3).

Human governments are comprehended in the symbol "Gog and Magog" in Revelation 20:8. In the Old Testament, "Gog" was a reference to leaders and lands north of Israel and in the area of southern Russia (see Ezekiel 38 and 39). Here in Revelation, these names probably do not refer to specific nations or leaders, but to pagan powers in general.

Here are some "warning signs" we might see during that "little time":

- Human governments and society in general becoming more and more hostile toward Christianity.
- Laws enacted putting restraints on Christian worship and the freedom to preach what the Bible says on moral issues.
- Laws characterizing Biblical teachings as "hate speech."
- The church coming under assault and pressure to become more secularized.

It's hard to look at what has happened in our nation and the world in general over the last 50 years or so and not think we are indeed living in "Satan's little time." Here are some specific things I have seen happen in my lifetime:

- Outlawing of prayers and Bible readings in public schools by the Supreme Court, 1962.

- Legalization of abortion, 1973.
- Removal of religious symbols (such as the Ten Commandments) from public places.
- Legalization of homosexual “marriage,” 2015.
- Government approval and protected status for so-called “transgenders.”
- The systematic striking down of laws recognizing Sunday as a day of worship.
- Consistent defeats in court for people who want creation taught in public schools as an alternative to the theory of evolution.
- Restrictions on passing out religious literature and on Bible studies in private homes.
- Repeated efforts to remove “In God We Trust” from our money and public spaces.
- Increasing de-platforming and silencing of Christians on public and social media. (There are places where you can be arrested and charged with “hate speech” for merely reciting Bible passages against homosexuality.)
- The federal government and several state governments are taking steps to enforce rules that would require faith-based children’s homes and adoption agencies to violate their religious beliefs by placing children in homes that do not align with their faith, such as non-Christian or same-sex couples, or cohabitating heterosexual couples that are unmarried. (Source: Alliance Defending Freedom, adflegal.org)

As you can imagine, the effects on the church during Satan’s little time will be severe. Christians who live through this period will be in for a rough time. In Matthew 24:37, Jesus tells us that the period before His coming will be like the days of Noah. The book of Genesis says of that time, “...the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of people’s hearts was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Revelation 20:8-9 foretells a worldwide assault on the church with the intent to exterminate it. Verse 9 says the church will be “surrounded.”

Jesus may have given a hint on the situation for Christians in Luke 18:8, when He said: “When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” Already, many people who profess Christianity are leaving the faith; churches of all stripes are closing their doors. A recent Gallup poll found that for the first time in 80 years, less than half of US adults belong to a church, synagogue or mosque, and the fastest growing “religion” in America is no religion.³

³ <https://nypost.com/2021/03/30/american-church-attendance-hits-historic-low-survey/>

So are we in Satan's little time? I believe so. But thankfully, at the last moment, when Satan's onslaught against the church is at its peak, God will intervene. Christ will come. The latter part of verse 9 says that just as Satan has the church surrounded, "fire [will come] down from God out of heaven and devour them." Verse 10 says that the devil and all his agents will be summarily cast into the lake of fire from which there will be no return.

If we are that generation--the generation that will experience the early stages of Satan's little time--let us pray fervently to God for strength and deliverance. --John Temples