

Ps 109:12,13
Hy 1A
Ps 89:1
Ps 83:1,2,6,7
Ps 96:8
Ps 98:4; Hy 57:3,4
Revelation 20
2 Peter 3:1-13
Lord's Day 19.52

Yarrow, May 9, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Christ who laboured for our benefit on the cross of Calvary ascended into heaven – but is not idle there. He intercedes for His own, the church confesses in Lord's Day 18, and rules over God's entire creation for the benefit of the church, the Catechism adds in Lord's Day 19.50,51. We find that comforting: He's busy pursuing our interests – what a thought!

But: we need to keep on struggling with the brokenness of this life. True: there's much for which we can be thankful, including life and health, love and families, church and peace, and the list goes on. But ours remains a broken existence, with so many tears and so much frustration. On top of that, the child of God is keenly aware of the sinfulness and the selfishness remaining in oneself. So many of us experience those moments when it all gets too much ..., so much so that we want the Lord to come back *now*. Then there are those good moments again..., and we'd be just as happy for Jesus to delay His return because despite the tears and struggles we're quite comfortable with the life we know.... And we're torn between longing for His return and longing for Him to delay....

But come He will, the Lord assures us in the Scripture, to cast His enemies and mine into eternal condemnation, and give to me and the rest of His chosen ones the privilege of heavenly joy and glory. The only thing is: when will He come? And how? And so what??

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE SAVIOUR COMES TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD.

1. How does He come?
2. When does He come?
3. So what?

1. How does Jesus come?

I suspect that it is clear to us all that the Lord's return will come with destructive force. To the Thessalonians Paul writes that the Lord Jesus will be "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels," and he adds, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people" (2 Thessalonians 1:7ff). Peter puts it like this: "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10). The passage we read from Rev 20 puts it like this in vs 9b: "Fire came down from heaven and devoured" the armies

Satan had collected from the ends of the earth. Then “the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur.”

Fire. In the Old Testament fire signified the presence of God Himself. Think of the fire in the burning bush Moses saw, and the fire on Mt Sinai. The Lord came to Sodom and Gomorrah, and demonstrated His presence with the fire that destroyed those cities. This is the picture concerning the Last Day; Jesus Christ, true God, will come to this sin-filled earth and the fires of His holiness will destroy this earth and all that's on it. The result will be that Satan and his demons will be cast eternally into hell, and with Satan and his demons will be every person who refused to acknowledge God and His Son Jesus Christ. Unceasingly they will weep and gnash their teeth at the agony they experience on account of the eternal wrath of holy God (Mt 25:30,41). Fearsome indeed to fall into the hands of the living God! This is Lord's Day 19: “He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation....” This is judgment.... And make no mistake: this judgment is fearsome! Even the godless know it's fearsome, and that's why “the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called on the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Rev 6:15ff). That Christ's coming is destructive for the ungodly is plain from Scripture, and exactly for that reason we do well to ensure that there not be among us any who is not washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. One wishes on nobody the terrible judgment that will fall on those who remain in their sins.

And what of the godly? Before He went to the cross Jesus had prayed, “Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory...” (John 17:24). And so it shall be, for on the cross Christ took on Himself the curse we sinners deserve. Though today life has tears and trials, and Satan exploits our weaknesses (to our continual frustration), the promise is that God will come to live with His people. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things” will pass away (Rev 21:4). We'll speak more of it with Lord's Day 22, but already Lord's Day 19 is clear, “He will take me and all His chosen one to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.” This is Paradise Restored, peace with God perfected. Christ on earth with all those who believe in Him: it's a glorious picture, something we look forward to eagerly! That glorious reality again presses the question on us: you are washed in Jesus' blood, is it not?? For there is no other way to enter the New Jerusalem than through faith in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross.

In relation to Jesus' coming, we have greater difficulty with the *timing* of that coming. For we hear that there needs to be more wars and earthquakes and other plagues before He can come – and since we live in peace, is it not obvious that Christ can't come back today?? And that thought that Christ can't come back today leads to lethargy and mediocre effort in His service. So I need to spend more time on this question this afternoon, and that's our second point:

2. When does He come?

I draw your attention first to Jesus' plain words to His disciples in Mt 24. “No one,” He said, “knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (vs 36). To drive home that the timing of His return is unknown, Jesus compares His return to the coming of a thief (vss 42f) – and no thief announces when he'll break in. Paul picks up that picture of a thief in his words to the Thessalonians, and says, “Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:1f). Peter mentions the same terminology in his second letter: “But the day of the Lord

will come like a thief" (2 Peter 3:10). The implication is clear: we simply don't know when Christ will come back. When we don't expect it, when we're busy with the bits and pieces of daily living and our thoughts are pre-occupied with the cares and joys of this life, then, suddenly, the trumpet will sound and Christ will be there (see Mt 24:37ff; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

But what do we do, then, with a passage of Scripture as Revelation 20? The Holy Spirit tells us here about Satan being bound for a thousand years and "after that, he must be set free for a short time" (vs 3). The passage even gives us details about Satan's newfound freedom; vs 7: "When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—God and Magog—to gather them for battle" (vs 7f)—and that sounds to us like Armageddon, that huge and obvious and terrible battle at the end of the ages Biblical fiction writers write about. Then we read in vs 9 about fire coming down from heaven to destroy Satan's army and the devil himself being thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, and we understand that that's the return of Christ. But how, we wonder, does this all fit together then? Does this not contradict Jesus' words about coming as a thief in the night?? Is it in fact so that things have to get much worse in the world before Christ can come back—we need more war, more hostility, more persecution of the church—and since we've enjoying freedom it's OK to be sloppy in the Lord's service?? *When's He coming?!*

Revelation 20 indeed tells us about Satan being bound for a thousand years (vs 2). It also tells us about the martyred faithful ones who "reigned with Christ a thousand years" (vs 4). On the basis of this passage some have taught a doctrine called "millennialism". The term 'millennialism' is built on the Latin word for 'thousand'. The thought is that there's a thousand year period when Satan will have no influence on the Earth and instead there will be a period of obvious Christian dominance in the world's culture, politics, science, etc. This will be a period of peace as the world has never known before, a golden era for those who serve the Lord. Immediately after this thousand year period Satan will be released for a short time (says this millennialism) to terrorize the earth and especially the Christians, and just when things get really bad and the pressure the greatest Christ will appear in glory to destroy the hosts of darkness. As we read Rev 20, we can understand where this Millennialism comes from.

I should add: there are two varieties of millennialism (or Dispensationalism, as it's sometimes called), known as pre-millennialism and post-millennialism respectively. 'Pre' translates the Latin word 'before', and catches the notion that Christ will come 'before' the thousand year period of Christian dominance (and then come a second time shortly after Satan's release), while 'post' translates the Latin word 'after', and so catches the notion that Christ will come 'after' the thousand year period of Christian dominance (and Satan's release). We need not get into the details of these two sub-categories of millennialism at this point. It is enough for us to know that this Millennialism is quite common among Christians of North America, and no doubt you've bumped into it in your conversations.

The question now is whether this is indeed what the Lord has revealed in Rev 20. And the answer is No, this is not the teaching of this passage of Scripture. Why I say that? A couple of reasons. In the first place, the harder passages of Scripture need to be interpreted in light of the easier and plainer passages. And there simply are no other passages of Scripture that obviously and plainly teach some form of a literal thousand year period of Christian dominance in the world (let alone Christ returning just before or just after this 1000 year Christian dominance. In the second place, the book of Revelation is full of symbolic language. In fact, Rev 20 itself is obviously full of symbolic language. Would you think that the chain the heavenly angel of vs 1 was carrying was a literal chain as you find it in today's forestry or mining industry? Would it agree with Scripture that Satan, fallen angel as he is,

could actually be bound by a heavy *chain*? The passage cannot be literal; in keeping with the book of Revelation, this chapter too describes facts in symbolic language. The 'one thousand' years is not a literal 999-years-plus-one, but is a period of time catching the notion of fullness.

But there's another thing here. What does Scripture actually say about the binding of Satan, and his release?

Notice the purpose of the binding as disclosed in vs 3. Satan is bound so as to hinder him from deceiving the nations any longer. What, we wonder, does that mean?

Think back to Paradise. In the perfect world of the Garden, the devil had free access to the human race, and was even able to deceive Eve and Adam. After the Lord sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden, these first parents undoubtedly told their children all about the Lord's creating work, their fall into sin, and His promises of redemption. But by the days of Noah, the entire human race had turned away from the Lord with the exception of Noah and his family. Talk about the devil deceiving the nations! After the flood Noah again undoubtedly passed on to his children and grandchildren the facts concerning creation and the fall and God's plan of redemption, the facts too about the flood and the rainbow and God's promises concerning springtime and harvest, cold and heat, etc. But at the Tower of Babel the entire human race rose up against God and acted as if life and safety depended on themselves. Talk about satanic deception! As the nations spread over the face of the earth, the bits and pieces of Truth they remembered from great-grandfather Noah became increasingly twisted into the mythologies of the tribes and God's service was warped into the service of oppressive gods; we call it heathendom, paganism. The devil was free to deceive the nations, and he made liberal use of that opportunity. In the time after Abraham, Israel alone knew the true service of the Lord; thanks to Satan's cunning the nations of the world lived in darkness.

All of that came to an end with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. In the course of His earthly ministry Jesus repeatedly cast out demons – and that's to say that Satan's power was being broken, his dominance reined in. To the Jews Jesus one day announced, "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out" (John 12:31). The "prince of this world" is a reference to Satan. The apostle John adds that with this word Jesus was showing the kind of death He was going to die (vs 33), and the point is that through His death Jesus Christ would defeat Satan. So Paul can write this to the Colossians: "having disarmed the powers and authorities" –and that's the forces of hell and darkness– "He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15).

And what do we read in Scripture directly after Jesus' triumph on the cross and His ascension into heaven? The ascended Christ poured out His Holy Spirit, and right away 3000 people from nations and languages far and near come to faith (Acts 2:41)! There's no parallel event in the Old Testament! Some short weeks later another 5000 people are added to the believers (4:4), and on it goes, growth upon growth in the church (cf 5:14; 6:1). What we have?? Through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross Satan was defeated, bound so that he could deceive the nations no longer! This is the Biblical picture reflected in Rev 20. The binding happened at Calvary, and the 1000 year period is the New Testament dispensation when the Lord Jesus Christ brings to faith every one on earth whom the Father has given to the Son (cf John 17:2). It is because Jesus Christ has bound Satan that Jesus could reassure Peter and the other disciples that the gates of hell would never prevail over the church of Jesus Christ (Mt 16:18).

The point: we live *today* in the millennium of Rev 20! The New Testament dispensation is the period of Christian dominance in the world inasmuch as the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to the ends of the earth and peoples anywhere turn from sin to serve the living God. There is no devilish scheme so

cunning, no devilish plan so strong to prevent the ascended Christ from working faith in any slave of the devil whom the Father has chosen to life eternal. In today's world, neither the Muslim faith nor the homosexual movement nor environmentalism or straight-out humanism or any other force Satan could come up with can hinder the progress of the gospel. This, we need to know, is greatly encouraging for the church of Jesus Christ.

What are we to say, then, of the message of Rev 20 concerning Satan's release after the 1000 year period? That's vs 3: "after [the thousands years were ended] he must be set free for a short time." And vs 7: "when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth...."

The temptation is to read these verses as speaking of a literal release at the tail end of the New Testament dispensation, with a resulting period of great oppression for the people of God. As I already said, the difficulty with that reading is that there is no other passage of Scripture that speaks of a period of satanic freedom just before Christ's return. We also need to note that the Bible does not indicate that there will be time of general persecution or great distress for a short period before the Last Day. Instead, the Bible is emphatic that the Lord comes like a thief in the night, totally unannounced.

The picture we receive from the rest of Scripture is that Satan, though defeated and bound, still has limited power and opportunity upon the earth. So Peter warns his readers to be self-controlled and alert because "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Paul tells the Ephesians to "be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power" and to "put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (6:10f). Jesus teaches us to ask God to "deliver us from the Evil One" (Mt 6:13). In fact, it's exactly because Satan has been defeated that he is filled with fury and goes out to make war upon the people of God (cf Rev 12:12ff). That's why we experience today the "sorrow and persecution" mentioned in our Lord's Day.

What then of the "release" of Satan at the end of the New Testament dispensation? Notice that the passage does not speak of great oppression for the church. It speaks instead of Satan rounding up the nations—vs 9—and marching them across the length and breadth of the earth to attack the church of God. But it gets no farther than an *attempt*, for when Satan thinks to have his ducks lined up to destroy the church totally Christ Jesus returns on the clouds of heaven to destroy His enemy totally and finally (vs 9f). Yet even this devilish attempt to surround the people of God and destroy His church would not be obvious to mankind and not even to the church either, for the day of the Son of Man's return will be like a thief in the night....

When, then, will Christ return? How late is it on God's clock?? We simply don't know. It is enough to know that Christ will return at the right time. Meanwhile, we have no reason to think that Satan may one day triumph or God's church be crushed. Satan himself is defeated, bound, and shall never escape; even his release will be because Jesus Christ permits (cf Rev 20:3b) and it must serve His purposes (cf Is 10:5ff; Philippians 1:12ff). So we stay confident and optimistic of the future. And we expect our Saviour to return *at any moment*.

Yes, *any moment*. Hence our third point:

3. So what?

The vision of Rev 20 came to the apostle John when he was imprisoned on Patmos Island on account of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a word: he was being persecuted, and so was the church of his day. That John would then receive this vision of Satan's binding was so very encouraging, for himself as

well as for the persecuted church. Satan, Jesus revealed in that vision, simply could not prevail; though the devil hates the Saviour and His redeemed, the gospel necessarily must triumph on earth. Even the freedom Satan has is given by God..., and it's only a matter of time when the devil will be thoroughly swept off the Earth.

John and the church of his day, of course, needed to *take courage* from this good news. That sense of encouragement is precisely the flavour coming through Lord's Day 19. Notice that Q 52 asks "what *comfort*" it is to you that "Christ will come to judge the living and the dead." And the church's answer to the question of comfort is: "In all my sorrow and persecution I lift up my head and eagerly await from heaven the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me." The *same* Person who went to the cross to pay for my sins and reconcile me to God: *that's* the One who will return. Since He gave me His *everything* on Calvary, He most certainly won't give me less on that Last Day! On the contrary, He'll rid the earth of the Tempter-of-the-beginning, and so there shall be no tears or frustration anymore. Here is comfort and encouragement indeed!

But there is more than comfort and encouragement. Listen to Peter as he lays before his readers the practical consequences flowing from the good news of Jesus' return. He comes to destroy every enemy of God, and in the process everything that's on this earth will be burned up (Peter says in 2 Peter 3:10). Then he continues, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" He answers his question like this, "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (vss 11ff). I trust we catch his point: since my skates and my baseball glove will be destroyed in that Big Burning, I cannot today live as if hockey and baseball are everything. Since my tools and my computer will be burnt up, and my house and my car also, I cannot live as if my work or my house are ultimately important. The one thing that will not pass away is the Lord God, for He's eternal, and since He's made me His in Jesus Christ I'll survive the Judgment because of Him.

But that leaves us with the reason why we exist in the first place, and that is for the greater glory of God. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Hallowed by Your Name" (Mt 6:9). And that's equally why Paul was empathic: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Exactly because I believe that Christ comes to judge the living and the dead, and that at His coming this earth will pass away with all that's on it, it follows that I cannot, I may not, give myself to things that do not glorify My God. Christ comes, any moment. Is using my free time to play soccer or hockey going to speed His coming or prepare the world for the Judgment? Or might the awareness of His coming –any day– mean that I need to spend more time with my children or my neighbours or some brother or sister in the congregation? It's all about the Lord's glory, and that's the more so as the Day of Christ's return comes ever closer. My hockey and my Bible study, the way I work and the way I spend my evening, needs to be very deliberately geared to the greater glory of Him who comes any moment.

He comes, and we don't know when. So we're left with this question: are you ready?? And: have you done and are you doing all in your power to ensure that your children are ready? And your spouse? And your friends?

He comes, and the world does not need more rumours of wars and more earthquakes and more volcanoes before He can come. He comes, like a thief, and it could very well be today.

It's something to look forward to..., and something to think about.