

Why Must Satan Be Released?

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The great hope of Christians—and the essence of the gospel message—is that Jesus Christ will return to establish His Kingdom on earth. He will be King of kings and Lord of lords, governing mankind in a way that has never happened before. In addition, He will depose Satan from his current rulership of this world, thus silencing the malignant, unseen influence that has snared the unwary from the time of Eve.

English theologian Richard Baxter wrote, “The devil is always the governor where God’s government is rejected,” an observation that speaks to why the world continues to produce such misery. Humanity has spurned God’s government from the very beginning, choosing to follow that cruelest of governors.

Conversely, we can glimpse in Baxter’s statement why the prophets speak of the Millennium in such extravagant terms. They foretell a time we can hardly imagine now, as we live and work in a spiritually bombed-out culture. We are surrounded by masses of human brokenness, urged on and tricked by the Deceiver, and as men further oppose God, the suffocating darkness deepens. But the Millennium will be glorious precisely because God will flip this order on its head. Satan will no longer rule, and God’s government will no longer be rejected.

Satan Bound

Revelation 20:1-3 describes Satan’s future binding, when he will not be permitted to deceive the nations for the duration of the Millennium:

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.

We have no frame of reference for what life will be like for humankind without the constant spiritual pressure, the unending broadcast of falsehood and rebellion against God. For the first time in human history, the Devil will not be whispering in man's ears to do it his way.

Some have speculated that the binding and sealing of Satan means that sin will not occur during the Millennium, but that is not the case. The pulls of the flesh exist wherever there is flesh, and those pulls always—eventually—break out in sin (see James 1:14-15). Even the apostle Paul observed that nothing good dwelled in his flesh, and that he had sin and evil indwelling simply by virtue of having flesh (Romans 7:18-23). He nowhere suggests that the solution to indwelling sin is to bind Satan. It is not until man becomes spirit that he puts on incorruptibility (I Corinthians 15:42-54).

Scriptures show that people will be sinning during the Millennium. Ezekiel's vision shows the priests making sin offerings during that time (see Ezekiel 40-46), and Zechariah 14:18-19 prophesies that some nations will sin by choosing not to attend the Feast of Tabernacles. Christ will rule with a rod of iron precisely because that is how carnal—sinful—people must be ruled (Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15).

Even though Satan's binding will not destroy carnality and sin, consider how much easier it will be for humans to make right decisions when he is not continually receiving the persuasions of the Serpent. What an incredible blessing that will be!

Reserved for Judgment

Verse 3 contains a curious statement: “. . . after these things [Satan] *must* be released for a little while” (emphasis ours throughout). Satan's release is a necessity in God's plan, as we will see. Revelation 20:7-10 describes Satan's release after the Millennium:

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.

Before considering Satan's release, we will examine some aspects of his binding. Notice Jude 6:

And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day . . .

While referring to the rebellious angels in general, this example shows that the chains that bind sinning angels are not their final judgment. A measure of judgment is involved, but note that Jude explains that the chains *reserve* them for the judgment of the great day. When Satan is bound, it certainly will be a punishing experience for him, but it will not be *the* punishment—it is not his final judgment. The Bible clearly states that Satan's judgment, written in advance, is to be burned (Ezekiel 28:18-19).

In Peter's parallel account, the apostle describes the false prophets who are manifestations of Satan's image: "By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber" (II Peter 2:3). He writes about the false teachers and the spirit influences—including Satan—behind them. God has already handed down the verdict; He has determined their punishment and set the date.

In addition to being chained, Satan is also cast into the pit. He is totally immobilized, and moreover, he is shut up with a seal that restrains him from

deceiving. He is completely powerless for a thousand years while he awaits the judgment of the great day.

“The Powers of the Heavens”

The prophet Isaiah also foretells a future binding of spirit beings:

In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days. The moon will be dismayed, the sun ashamed; for the LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders—with great glory. (Isaiah 24:21-23, *New International Version*)

Verse 23 mentions the moon and sun being dismayed and ashamed, providing a time reference. Revelation 21:23 describes the New Jerusalem descending from heaven sometime after the Millennium. When it does, those in New Jerusalem have no need of the sun or the moon. Those magnificent heavenly lights are figuratively disgraced and ashamed by the superior light of God. Isaiah 24:23, then, corresponds to the time after the Millennium.

But before that, the “powers in the heavens and the kings on the earth” will be shut up for a long time and *then* punished. The “powers in the heavens” refers to demonic principalities, including Satan (see Romans 8:38; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:16; 2:15; I Peter 3:22). The New Kings James Version calls them “the host of exalted ones.”

Isaiah then refers to “the kings on the earth.” However, those kings—mentioned in parallel with the “powers in the heavens”—do not have to be human. Scripture alludes to spiritual rulers throughout its pages: The king of Babylon (Isaiah 14:4), the king of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:12), and the princes of Persia (Daniel 10:13, 20) and Greece (Daniel 10:20) are a few examples. “Gog . . . the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal” may be another demon (Ezekiel 38:2, *English Standard Version*. See also Ezekiel 38:3; 39:1; Revelation 20:8).

These powers—these kings—will be shut up in prison, but their punishment does not come until “after many days” (Isaiah 24:22). (The word “days” is not restricted to 24-hour blocks of time; it can be used as a general marker of the passage of time.) *Their binding serves as a prelude to their punishment.*

Likewise, Satan’s binding is not his actual punishment. Its primary purpose is to protect the nations from deception, and then his punishment follows. The prophets describe him as being gazed upon by men during his imprisonment (Isaiah 14:16; Ezekiel 28:17). At this time, he is not on trial but on display because God has already reached His verdict.

Psalm 2:2-3 speaks about the kings of the earth and the rulers, saying, “Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.” The spirit rulers are chafing at their chains, causing the nations to rage. Yet when Christ returns, these powers and kings will be shut up in prison.

Released for Rebellion

This situation parallels Paul’s experience of binding in Acts 21-22, but there is also a marked contrast. The apostle was arrested at the Temple and subsequently bound for allegedly provoking a riot. He was later released from his bonds so that he could appear before the council for judgment. In fact, Paul was mostly in chains through chapter 28, not for punishment, but to keep him from getting into any more trouble.

Similarly, Satan will be arrested, as it were, because he provokes mankind to rebel, and God will intervene to silence him. The Devil, too, is bound, and he will be released in anticipation of God’s final judgment on him. In Matthew 12:37, Jesus delivers the universal principle that “by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Since Paul’s words were true, he was justified before God. But Satan begins deceiving humanity as soon as the seal is removed, and he condemns himself with his lying words.

We may wonder why God waits a thousand years after Satan’s binding before judging him or why God did not judge the sinning angels as soon as they sinned. God shows us a consistent pattern that He allows deplorable

circumstances to drag on as a testimony that His way is the only way that works, and all other ways bear only miserable fruit. God uses our experiences with sin to teach us what does not work. Likewise, rather than exact immediate justice, God will use Satan's post-Millennium rebellion as a powerful lesson.

However, we should also understand that even though God uses Satan's activities as part of humanity's education, He in no way depends on Satan. During the Millennium and after, God will bring many more sons and daughters to glory *without* Satan being around than *with* Satan being around. Satan is not integral to God's plan, but he does serve as an extraordinary warning against high-mindedness. His reservation for the judgment of the great day illustrates God's perfect sovereignty. His plan did not require the angels to rebel, but neither was His plan thwarted by it.

Satan is released so he can commit his final rebellion. We catch a glimpse of his first rebellion in Genesis 1:2, where the earth became without form and was void and in darkness. God did not create it like this, but it became that way. Rebellion against God is introduced at the beginning of the Book, which rebellion Revelation 20 resolves—in God's good time.

History Written in Advance

The prophesied release of Satan after the Millennium teaches us significant lessons. God says, "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done" (Isaiah 46:9-10). What Satan does after he is released is history written in advance. His deceptions and warmongering are the future, recorded thousands of years before they happen.

This fact is remarkable to consider. Mankind desires to know the future; we look to news analysis and weather forecasts to glimpse an idea of what lies ahead so we can respond appropriately. We use such indicators to prepare for the future or perhaps to work to change the course of events.

What is astounding is that the Adversary also knows the Scriptures, and he sees his future written in advance. This reality provides vivid testimony of Satan's nature—that he simply will not change, even knowing how

disastrous the end will be for him. The advance knowledge makes no difference. So, in addition to God giving Satan his freedom so he can commit his final rebellion, a second reason He must release him is to provide us with this final, powerful lesson about the Serpent's nature.

When God releases Satan, the Deceiver does what he has always done. Even after a thousand years of stasis, his nature remains unchanged. After a millennium of reflecting on his plight, calculating his ideal course of action, and contemplating his spiritual navel, as it were, he reaches the conclusion he started with: He knows better.

Maybe he will not be aware of the peace and prosperity as it blooms outside the pit, but when he is released, he will be able to see that goodness and abundance with his own eyes. Yet even with all the years of mankind under Christ, living the best that people can live, and all the good humanity will produce in cooperation with God, Satan will emerge, discount the evidence, and continue to act in the way that seems best to him, even though it destroys the lives of others.

Isaiah 14 reveals this attitude when it speaks of Helel ascending, exalting his throne, and trying to become the Most High. His image of self-perfection is written in stone. In his heart, he is convinced that he deserves more and better than God gave him.

In Satan's Image

We shake our heads at this most wretched of creatures, and rightfully so, for his existence is miserable. His removal will bring relief to the whole earth because even without making anybody sin, his presence always spawns turmoil. His fruits are always chaos, sin, misery, and destruction.

But before we become self-satisfied, consider substituting the phrase "carnal human nature" for Satan in Revelation 20:7-9. When our carnal nature is released, it immediately does what it has always done. Our carnality retains the spiritual image of Satan, and in type, it always produces the same things, even though we, too, have been told the end in advance!

Therefore, a third reason Satan must be released is to remind us that even as our Adversary never changes, human nature is always ready to choose spiritual blindness. In Revelation 20:7-9, the nations fall for the deceptions, just as Eve did because Satan easily manipulates the natural inclination of the human heart toward self-centeredness. It hears the siren song of getting more, of asserting itself over others, and it begins dancing to the tune.

Satan's spirit permeates this world, and it works in those who disobey, as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-3. Such was our condition before God regenerated us and endued us with His Spirit. However, the indwelling of God does not mean that our former selves have been banished. Thus, the epistles urge us to put off the works of the flesh, the hidden things of darkness, and the old man. Corruption will remain until the day of our resurrection or change when we finally put on incorruption. Until then, we wrestle with the law of sin and death at work in our members, struggling to keep our old man bound in chains.

But when we let down, we release our old man for a little while. Like Satan, he goes to war against God and man just as soon as his chains slacken. What remains of Satan's image in us is ever-ready to spring forth and risk all the spiritual abundance we have received.

Once let loose, our old man resists God. He bends the truth or even lies boldly for camouflage, self-preservation, or self-advantage. He radiates pride, antagonism, competition, selfish ambition, and unflinching confidence in his own rightness, even if it means God Himself would be wrong. He challenges God's sovereignty in his thoughts, perhaps in his words, and even in conduct.

Our old man has no problem using people for his own ends—even sacrificing them like Satan does the nations—because his ends always justify his means. Just as Satan gambles that he can skirt the consequences that always fall, our old man also bets that it will be different for us and the consequences the Bible foretells will not happen. God recorded the effects of sin for us millennia ago, yet when we are in the moment, we still convince

ourselves that His Word is not absolute—that all those bad things will never happen to us. Yet Revelation 20 tells us—just as it tells Satan—where those choices lead. We, too, know the result of sin, for it is written in advance.

A Test for the Nations

Consider this: Once the generation of those who live through the Day of the Lord dies, no human will have ever experienced Satan's broadcast. Think about having a 1,000-year history when nation will have never lifted up sword against nation, never learned how to make war. The nations will reap the abundance of Christ's rule, especially the blessing of peace.

Despite this, human nature in the nations will cast aside everything they have achieved because it believes it can have more, even though "having more" will mean opposing God's perfect will. Their human nature will wager that attacking is better than submitting.

As a test for the nations in the four corners of the earth, God releases Satan so those who are inclined to listen to him can be separated from those who listen to God, as chaff is separated from wheat. The Almighty finally judges the Adversary for his never-ending opposition, and He will judge the nations who follow the Deceiver for choosing to heed his poisonous message. Clearly, Satan is the instigator of the rebellion, but the root problem is human nature's unchanging proclivity to find common cause with his self-centeredness. If mankind possessed the character and heart of Jesus Christ, the Devil's fiery darts would have nothing to hit.

While Satan's influence and work amplify the perversity of human nature, carnality is a malignant force on its own. The real solution to sin is to replace human nature entirely with God's nature—one that is incorruptible, will not follow Satan's urgings, and will never become another adversary of God. This is what God is doing, and when the divine purpose has been fully worked out, nothing will ever again defile the Eternal's magnificent creation.