



Part 41 – Living Confidently in the Kingdom of Christ

Revelation 20:4-6

Christ is the reigning King over all creation. His great millennial kingdom has been established on earth during the entire church age, the period of time between his first advent and his glorious return. During Jesus' earthly ministry, though weak from the viewpoint of the average onlooker, he nevertheless repeatedly declared that in him the kingdom of God had now arrived.

As we saw previously, since Christ's completed work, Satan has been bound from deceiving the nations (vs. 3). We are not told that Satan was bound so that he could no longer tempt Christians to sin or do all sorts of mischief in the world. Rather we are told he cannot keep the light of the gospel from the previously pagan nations. He cannot, except for "a little while," when the end comes, mobilize an international rebellion against God's people (vs. 8). Christ has strictly bound Satan's activities so that he can never act outside the sovereign purposes of God.

The signs of Christ's present reign were stamped all over his earthly ministry. From his uniquely authoritative teaching to his miracles and his casting out of demons, he was declaring that the kingdom had now arrived. His earthly reign was also confirmed by the light of the gospel breaking upon the Gentile nations which, previous to his advent, had been held in darkness by an unbounded Satan. In verses 4-6, John is given a vision concerning the thousand years, this time with a view of those Christians who have died and whose souls are now in heaven (especially those who have been martyred for Christ's sake).

1. Where is this happening?

Vs. 4 – "Then I saw thrones..." – John now sees the events described previously from the perspective of heaven. More specifically, he is allowed to see once again in the throne room of heaven, having previously described the same sight in chapters four and five. Surrounding the throne of God, we are told that there are 24 thrones upon which are seated the 24 elders. The word translated "throne" (*thronos*) appears 47 times in Revelation. Of those, 40 uses are references to the throne or thrones in heaven.

As we will see more fully in verses 7-15, this scene draws directly from the prophet Daniel's vision (chapter 7) of the heavenly throne and the final judgment. These are not thrones on earth but in heaven. "Verses 4-6 show us what happens in the heavenly realms during the long, complete period before Jesus returns. Those who have suffered for Jesus on earth go to be with him to reign in heaven (2 Timothy 2:11-12)."¹

2. Who is John seeing?

Vs. 4 – "...Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God..."

There is good reason to take the view that all Christians are being represented here. The Christian martyrs were not all executed by beheading. In fact, it is likely that most were not killed in this way since beheading was a form of execution typically reserved for those who were Roman citizens. Christian martyrs were killed by crucifixion, stoning, by wild animals in Roman arenas, etc. So this is a parallel with all the martyred souls depicted at the breaking of the fifth seal (6:9).² "As 'slain' in 6:9 refers not only to physical martyrdom but to persecution of all sorts, so 'beheaded' here could be a figurative way of expressing the same thing... That all forms of suffering are generally referred to by John is substantiated by 1:9 and 12:11 where 'because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' and 'because of the word of their testimony' respectively occur and where all forms of suffering are referred to (see also 2:10 for degrees of persecution up to and including death)."³

Because the term "beheaded" here is used symbolically for all the sorts of suffering that God's people endure for the sake of Christ, it is widely held that John has in view all those believers who faithfully endure to the end. "Because this group is later described as 'the camp of God's people, the city he loves' (20:9), it

¹ Brent Lauder, *Apocalypse Then, Now, and Soon* (Storied Publishing, 2023) p. 309

² Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 328

³ G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) p. 437

seems that all believers, including the martyrs, are in view.”⁴ Notice how John further defines them. These are those “who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.” This seems to be a clear indication that he is referring to the whole company of God’s redeemed people to which he gives the promise to be seated with him in glory (Revelation 3:21). Therefore, who John is seeing are the souls of all believers who have died and await the resurrection of their bodies. “All faithful followers of the Lamb who have died are included, for these rulers are also described as those who did not worship the beast...This fidelity, not the circumstances or method of their death, distinguishes them as qualified to share the Lamb’s rule.”⁵

3. What is the state of those who have died in Christ?

Vs. 4 – “...They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” – This verse begins and ends with images of kingship. “The saints’ vindication as a result of the judgment of Satan consists in the resurrection of life and priestly/kingly role which they have been granted (vs. 6). This is the primary point of verse 4. Verses 5-6 explain the meaning of this resurrection life in relation to priesthood and kingship.”⁶

Verses 4-6 is one of those difficult passages that we must interpret by means of the many other more clear passages that speak of the same events. The pre-millennial view is that this coming-to-life is the physical resurrection of believers at the beginning of the thousand years. This interpretation, however, requires that the thrones (vs. 4) be placed on earth for an earthly reign. However, this does not match with the evidence from the text and those other passages which refer to the same reality:

- Verse 4 places this scene firmly in the heavenly realm (see also Daniel 7).
- The adjective “first” used in verses 5 and 6 describes a time belonging to the present fallen order. The resurrection of the bodies of those who have died in faith will occur following the second coming of Christ (John 5:28-29; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44; 50-54). Therefore, this “coming to life” is not the bodily resurrection promised at Christ’s return (Philippians 3:21).⁷
- This is further confirmed in 1 Corinthians 15:25-26: “...The last enemy to be demolished is death.” Paul later quotes Isaiah 25:8 (“Death is swallowed up in victory”) as being fulfilled at Christ’s second coming. So, what John is describing here cannot be the death-destroying resurrection of those believers who have died. That only happens following the thousand years at the last trumpet when Christ returns.
- The coming to life that John sees here must refer to the life experienced by the souls of Christians in heaven who experience the joy and privileges of those who worship in Christ’s presence. It is the very promise the Lord makes in his messages to the seven churches that those who endure to the end will live and reign with Christ.

Vv. 5-6 – The effects of Satan being bound are further unpacked as “the first resurrection” and the blessings that go with it of being “priests of God and of Christ,” shielded from the “second death,” and now reigning with Christ.

- Some suggest that the remaining dead who did not come to life until after the thousand years were completed “are the lost, who have no share in the thousand-year reign of the saints and no protection against the punishment in the lake of fire.”⁸ Others, however, believe that verse 5 refers to the “experience of believers who die and enter into the life of the intermediate state.”⁹
- In the view of Pre-millennialism, the “first resurrection” refers to the physical resurrection of believers at the beginning of Christ’s earthly millennial reign, separated by a thousand years from the resurrection of unbelievers unto judgment. Again, this would require that the thrones John sees in verse 4 are on earth which I do not believe can be supported from the text. It seems better to take this “first resurrection” as pertaining to the souls of believers who die and go to heaven to reign with Christ. So, the resurrection John refers to here is not the raising up of the bodies of the saints who have died but a way of describing

⁴ J. Scott Duvall, *A Theology of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015) p. 250

⁵ Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 290

⁶ G.K. Beale, p. 438

⁷ Johnson, p. 292

⁸ G.K. Beale, p. 438

⁹ Sam Storms, *Our God Reigns* (Edinburgh: Christian Focus, 2024) p. 477

their eternal life which began at the moment of their death. Are believers not brought to life at the moment of their death? Of course they are! This is, as it were, the first resurrection.

- In seeking clarity in these matters, we must keep in mind John's original readers. Rome demanded a kind of allegiance to the emperor that Christians could not give. When John wrote Revelation, some of the churches in Asia Minor were already experiencing heavy persecution for this (2:10, 13). How weak the church must have felt under such overwhelming opposition. To these embattled Christians, John's vision promises a raising to eternal life which happens at the moment of their death.
- Historically, theologians have distinguished between "the church militant" and "the church triumphant," (or "the church at rest"). The church militant describes the church in the world crashing the gates of hell while the church triumphant refers to all the saints who have gone on to heaven. This is who John sees in the vision of verses 4-6. Though their souls are fully alive in the presence of God, they wait for the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15:50ff).
- Such a vision would have been an enormous source of encouragement for the suffering churches John was writing to, just as it is for those around the world in every generation who stand for Christ in the midst of trials and persecution.

Vs. 6 – "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection!" – Again, there has been much debate over the meaning of "the first resurrection." The rest of the relevant Scriptures specify only one bodily resurrection of those who die (often referred to as "the general resurrection" described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15). Also, this is the only reference in the Bible to a "first resurrection." So, again, it seems best to see this as a reference to the eternal life which begins the moment a believer dies.

"...Over such the second death has no power..." – Death has no power over those who have died and whose souls are now in heaven precisely because they have already passed through death safely and are now waiting joyfully for the resurrection of their bodies which will happen upon Christ's second coming.

Summing up, I believe we best understand Revelation 20:1-6 as telling us that, during the time between Christ's two advents (the church age), Satan is bound from organizing a coordinated international assault against the church. During this time, all believers who die will join the Lord in heaven where they will reign with him and live joyfully in his presence (this is often referred to as "the intermediate state"). Shortly before Christ's second coming Satan will be unbound. During this time, which will only be "a little while" (vs. 3), Satan will deceive the nations once again into a doomed effort to destroy the church once and for all (an effort symbolically given the name of the great battlefield "Armageddon"). At that point Christ will return triumphantly with his risen saints to cast Satan into the lake of fire. Judged too will be all those who spurned God's grace, preferring instead the deceptions of the beast to the mercy of Christ. This is the second death.

God's people need not panic or live in fear. We live in a world where Christ reigns. His kingdom is not uncontested yet. The dragon continues to fight. Since the finished work of Christ, Satan has been bound (vs. 2). That is, he is no longer able to keep the nations in blindness, nor can the gates of hell withstand the church's assault. "The resurrection of Christ is the great spiritual watershed for the nations. Satan no longer has free rein to deceive the nations, and this is good news for the Gentiles (Acts 13:47; Rev. 7:9-10). But it is also good news to the church for not until the 'short time' at the end, determined by God in his sovereign plan of the ages, can there be a world power or coalition with the potential to erase the people of God from the earth."¹⁰

In the end, life eternal is the inheritance of the saints. No matter what the world may do to God's people, the end is always eternity in God's blessed presence. And so, we may live confidently in this world despite the trials and persecutions because our present and future are hidden in the victory of the Lamb.

¹⁰ Storms, p. 288