

What picture will you end up in?

Text: Revelation 20:1-6 for 6/10/2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. ⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

If you want to find out who the photographer of a person's family is then just look at their family photos. If you look at someone's family pictures and you see pictures of their kids, or the mom, or mom and the kids, or the kids and mom it will soon be clear who the family photographer is. The family photographer rarely ends up in the pictures. So how many family pictures do you end up in?

The Apostle John has a similar question for us. Jesus had his disciple John record for us images of the end times, those last days leading up to Jesus' triumphant return on Judgment Day. As John sets these images before us, his writing leads us to the question ...

Theme: What picture will you end up in?

1. Will you end up pictured with Satan?
2. Or will you be pictured seated on a throne?

Throughout the book of Revelation John sees multiple visions of how Christ has defeated death and the devil, and what that all means for Jesus' believers. The vision we are looking at today is no different. In this vision John sees two pictures: a picture of hell, and a picture of heaven.

For us to understand these pictures we need to properly understand a term John uses as he describes what he sees. Five times John speaks about 'a thousand years.' This is not a literal one thousand years. In the Bible the term 'a thousand years' is used to describe characteristics of God: God's eternalness (Psalm 90:4) and his patience (2 Peter 3:8). Here in Revelation the thousand years is a slightly different picture. It is picturing the time of the New Testament church: the time from when Jesus ascended into heaven until the time when he makes his final return on Judgment Day. This will become clearer as we look at these two pictures.

In this first picture we see a picture of Satan's demise. John says, **"I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain"** (v. 1). This is no ordinary angel; this angel is Jesus. How do we know this? Earlier in the book of Revelation Jesus had told John that he holds **"the keys of death and Hades"** (1:18). The Abyss that John has mentioned is hell or Hades. It is a bottomless pit of eternal torment, and Jesus has the key to lock it shut.

In the next verses we see what Jesus does with the key. John tells us, **"He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from**

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deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time" (vs. 2, 3). John leaves no doubt in our minds as to who this 'dragon' is. This is the leader of all the evil angels. John gives us three references from scripture to describe this 'evil one.' John says he is 'that ancient serpent.' This is the same serpent who deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden and led Adam and Eve to sin. Then John calls him 'the devil' which literally means 'slanderer.' The devil works to give God, and those who believe in God, a bad name. Finally, John calls him 'Satan' which means 'adversary.' This is someone who accuses another person before a judge. This is what Satan does; he accuses people of their sins before God.

John tells us that Jesus binds Satan, throws him in the bottomless pit and locks him in so that the devil cannot deceive the nations anymore until the thousand years has ended. The devil can still deceive the people of this world, but he cannot deceive believers. God has given us his truth and as long as we trust what God says the devil cannot deceive us. He can try, but the truth of Christ defends us against his attacks.

What John is seeing in this picture is not a future event. This is a picture of something that has already taken place. Satan was bound back when Jesus gave up his life on the cross. When Jesus said, "It is finished," not only was all sin paid for, but the devil also lost his power. When you trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, there is nothing Satan can accuse you of before God. Satan has lost his power over you.

This doesn't mean the devil isn't powerful. Only Jesus, who is true God, is able to bind him and lock him up. And it doesn't mean the devil cannot hurt you. The devil is like a vicious dog that has been chained up with a "Beware of dog" sign posted in the yard. If you believe the sign and stay away from the dog, the dog can't hurt you. But if you ignore the sign and walk up to the dog, it will hurt you. The same is true of the devil. If you ignore what God says about sin and salvation and you walk into temptation thinking you can handle what the devil throws at you, not only will the devil deceive you, but he will tear you to shreds. This is not a picture you want to end up in.

But John has seen another picture. Next John sees thrones, and on them he sees **"the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years"** (v. 4). Notice that John sees "souls" not the bodies of these people. This tells us that Jesus has not yet returned on Judgment Day because we know on that day Jesus is going to reunite people's souls with their bodies. John also says that these souls **"came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years"** (v. 4b). How does a soul come to life? A soul comes to life when God creates in that soul saving faith in Christ. The souls that John sees live and rule with Christ for a "thousand years," that is, until Jesus returns on Judgment Day. This helps us see more clearly that the "thousand years" is the entire time until Judgment Day.

John also mentions what happened to these souls. He tells us they were beheaded. Why had these "souls" been "beheaded?" These people lost their lives for two reasons. One was the testimony they gave about Jesus, and the other is because they believed and trusted in the Word of God. These people put their faith in God's promises and in God's Son. They refused to worship the "beast" of worldly power, and fame, and knowledge, and prestige. They opposed the world and its self-worship. Instead they remained faithful to the promises of God and in doing so they received eternal honor and glory on the thrones of heaven.

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So, what picture will you end up in? Will you end up pictured with Satan, or will you be pictured seated on a throne? As we look at these pictures we might think to ourselves, 'Who in their right mind would want to end up in that first picture?' We certainly have no desire to be eternally condemned with Satan. To end up in that picture means to reject God and his saving grace.

It's easy enough to say that we would never reject God's loving forgiveness. It's easy enough, in our own minds, to put ourselves in that second picture. But are we willing to endure what the souls in that second picture endured? Are we willing to give our lives for Christ? Are we willing to face persecution, hardship, and even death to keep God's word pure and holy? Like those people in the second picture have we always gladly and willingly testified to who Jesus is and what he has done for us? Have we always stood up for the truth of God's word when the world speaks against it? Do we know God's word so well that Satan cannot deceive us when he twists that word around?

How easy it is for our lips to say 'yes,' but how hard it is to follow through on that commitment. It's hard for us to do what we say when it comes to God's word because of what we are all born with. When Adam and Eve chose to follow the words of the Deceiver they rebelled against their loving God. And in that rebellion, they handed down to every person the full and awful consequences of sin. Every person comes into this world hating God as much as Satan hates God. That sinful, rebellious self that we are born with will never testify for Jesus; it will never follow or keep the word of God. So what hope do we have of ever being pictured on one of those thrones?

If we are to sit on those thrones in the second picture, then we need that first resurrection that John speaks about. That first resurrection is the new life of faith that God gives to a dead soul. We need God to lift our dead souls out of that abyss of spiritual darkness. We need God to make us alive through faith in Christ. We need Jesus' forgiveness to free us from the guilt and shame of all of the things that we have done which would keep us out of that second picture.

Through his precious word your loving, heavenly Father has done just that: He has made you alive! Through the gospel he has freed you from everything that would bind you to that deceiving dragon. God has given you a new life in Christ. It's a life that clings to Jesus' forgiveness for salvation.

That new life of faith God gives us comes with many privileges. Perhaps the most overlooked privilege is that of serving God by testifying about his Son. While that testifying can take place anywhere and at any time, one of the main places that we do our testifying is right here in worship.

We testify about Jesus by admitting that we are sinners. We confess the things that we have done that make us worthy of the same damnation that the devil has received. By confessing our sins we are testifying to our need for a Savior. We then testify to Jesus' name, we are confessing our trust in the forgiveness he has won for our sins. When we proclaim our faith in Christ and his forgiveness we are testifying to Jesus' victory over sin, death, and Satan. When we know and trust the truth about Christ the devil can no longer deceive us.

Yet we can only make that confession with Jesus' help. When we confess our faith in Jesus, that confession will bring us persecution and hardship. Yet that confession, worked in us by Jesus himself, will also bring for us a place in that second picture.

So what picture will you end up in? Don't let Satan deceive you into being pictured with him in the end. Instead, continue to trust in the one who gave you saving faith. Jesus Christ is

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faithful and true. By his powerful word he will keep your faith strong so that you will one day be pictured seated on the thrones of heaven, and basking in the glory of the joyous eternal life that Jesus won for you. Amen.