

What About Revelation 20? (Part IV)

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The Believer's Reign with Christ

We move on now to take up the second part of the vision in Revelation 20:4-6. This focuses on the reign of the saints with Christ during the millennium. In particular their participation in the first resurrection, so that they are not liable to the second death, is portrayed. Though it may be unsettling to admit, this is even more controversial and difficult to interpret than the first part. We will have to work our way through these verses very carefully.

I. THE IDENTITY OF THE SAINTS

After describing the binding of Satan, the vision of Revelation 20 changes its angle to focus upon a scene in which the saints, those who participate in the first resurrection, reign with Christ during the millennial period.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has

no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Two questions immediately come to mind which must be addressed before considering the meaning of the reference to the first resurrection. The first question is: what is the location or place of the scene that John sees in this vision? Is this a scene of the saints in heaven or the saints upon the earth? The second and related question is: who are these saints whom John sees? Are they the entire number of believers? Or only believers who have died and now reign with Christ in heaven? Or only martyred believers? Only after these preliminary questions are addressed will we turn to the more difficult matter of the meaning of the phrase, 'they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years'.

It is significant that the first thing the Apostle John sees in this vision are thrones. He says, 'I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them.' The likeliest location of these thrones is in heaven. Heaven is the place of the throne of God and the Lamb in the book of Revelation. But it is also the place where the saints who have died or who have been martyred have a share in the reign of Christ. In all of the references to 'throne' in the book of Revelation (some 47 instances), only three refer to some place other than heaven (see 2:13; 13:2; 16:10). For example, in Revelation 3:21 we read this promise of Christ: 'he who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne.' Thus, were the thrones of Revelation 20 located on the earth, taking the reign of these saints as a reigning not only over but also upon the earth, this would be inconsistent with the imagery of the book.

Furthermore, the fact that the Apostle John speaks of the 'souls' of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus adds to the likelihood that the scene is a heavenly one. This language is reminiscent of that used earlier in the book of Revelation to describe 'the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God and for the witness they had borne' (6:9). These souls were seen by the apostle under the altar, that is, before the throne of God in the heavenly sanctuary. Though the word 'souls' need not require that these saints are no longer dwelling in the body, the reference to their beheading implies that this is the case.¹ When it is noted further that these saints are contrasted in verse 5 with 'the rest of the dead', it becomes increasingly certain that John is seeing a vision of the saints in glory, those believers who have died and are translated into the presence of Christ in heaven.²

¹ Though this may seem too obvious to require emphasis, I mention it because sometimes the word 'souls' in the Bible, just as in our language, can refer to people who are dwelling in the body (for example, *Gen. 2:7, Luke 1:46*).

² The fact that later the vision speaks of some who are subject to the second death further confirms that these are believers who have died and who enjoy a blessing subsequent to death from which unbelievers are excluded.

Of course, it must be admitted that the location of these saints, whether in heaven or upon the earth, also depends upon the meaning of their participation in the first resurrection. If the first resurrection is a bodily resurrection, as premillennialists typically argue, then it would seem to follow that their reign is from and upon the earth. In the understanding of Premillennialism, the vision of Revelation 20 is a picture of the resurrected saints reigning upon the earth during the entire period of the millennium. Since we have yet to address the difficult question of the meaning of the first resurrection, our conclusion at this point can only be tentative and provisional. However, the natural reading of this vision certainly favours the position that these saints are reigning with Christ in heaven.

The second question — who are these saints? — is also disputed. Premillennialists commonly argue that John sees a vision of all the saints, believers who come with Christ to the earth after the tribulation period as well as believers who are alive at his coming, who reign with Christ upon the earth for a thousand years. Many postmillennialists and amillennialists regard these saints as the saints in glory, especially the martyred saints. However, some amillennialists say that these saints are only the martyred saints who enjoy a peculiar privilege during the millennium of reigning with Christ. Jay Adams, for example, in his study of the book of Revelation, *The Time is At Hand*, argues strongly that ‘during the 1000 years, the martyred saints are said to reign with Christ. The fourth verse speaks of a *limited* group; not *all* Christians. The Apocalypse is deeply concerned with the martyrs and their reward.’³

However, there are good reasons to take the saints in this vision to include all the saints in heaven, especially, but not only, the martyred saints. Those, like Adams, who would restrict these saints to the martyred saints do so by insisting that the conjunction ‘and’, be translated in the sense of ‘namely’. In this translation, we should read this text to say, ‘And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them, namely the souls of those who had been beheaded.’

Though this is a possible reading of the text, it could better be read using ‘and’ in the sense of ‘especially’. Upon this reading, the privileges enjoyed by the saints — judging, reigning with Christ, not being subject to the second death — would be shared by all the saints in heaven. But the martyred saints would be singled out from among them as special beneficiaries of these privileges. Far from being excluded from these privileges, the martyred saints’ enjoyment of them is particularly emphasized. Not only does this reading fit well the natural meaning of the word ‘and’ in this text, but it is also consistent with a theme that runs throughout the book of Revelation: that those who are faithful to the Lord and their testimony⁴ are more than conquerors through Christ (see 2:7, 10-11, 17, 26-28; 3:11-12, 21, etc.). At the same time, this reading does not require that these martyred saints enjoy privileges exclusive to them. They exercise judgment, reign with Christ as priests, enjoy immunity from the power of the second death — but these are

³ *The Time Is At Hand*, pp. 88-89.

privileges known to all those who belong to Christ (see *Eph. 2:6, Rev. 5:9, 10, Col. 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:9, 10, John 12*).

The scene, then, that opens before the Apostle John is that of the saints in heaven before the throne of God and the Lamb. Among these saints, John singles out for special emphasis those who were beheaded and martyred for their testimony and faithfulness.⁴ What he sees is that they all, including the martyred saints, are enjoying during the period of the millennium a most remarkable set of privileges: they are seated upon thrones, they are reigning with Christ, and they are serving as priests of God and of Christ.

II. THE FIRST RESURRECTION

At this juncture in the vision of Revelation 20:1-6 the most contentious issue arises: what is meant by the 'first resurrection' which is enjoyed by the saints whom John sees? In the description of these saints, we read that 'they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.'

On the premillennialist reading of Revelation 20, this is taken to be a reference to the bodily resurrection of all the saints at the time of the commencement of the millennium. The language used in this passage for the 'coming to life' of these saints, especially the use of the term 'resurrection', is taken to mean a physical resurrection of believers prior to the millennial reign of Christ on the earth. This resurrection is the exclusive privilege of believers and must be carefully distinguished from a second resurrection, the bodily resurrection of the unbelieving and impenitent, which will occur after the millennium in connection with the Great White Throne judgment described in verses 11-15. Believers who participate in the first resurrection are not liable to the second death. However, unbelievers who participate in the second resurrection remain liable to the second death. According to the premillennialist, nothing could more obviously confirm the idea of a literal millennial reign of Christ with his saints upon the earth after his coming at the end of the age. The postmillennialist and amillennialist position that this first resurrection is not a bodily resurrection but a spiritual reality with corresponding privileges and consequences is simply untenable.

Though this premillennialist argument sounds convincing at first hearing, a number of considerations lead to a different conclusion, namely, that the first resurrection is a reference to the life and blessing reserved for the saints, particularly those saints who have died and will be raised on the last day. In this understanding of the passage, the first resurrection is not a reference to the bodily resurrection of saints at the

⁴ The word for 'testimony' in the book of Revelation is the word *marturia*, from which is derived our word 'martyr'. The martyr is the one who is willing to die for the sake of the testimony concerning Jesus Christ.

commencement of the millennium, but to a spiritual participation in Christ which brings the blessings of living and reigning as priests with him, as well as immunity from the power of the second death. Among the considerations that support this understanding are the following.

First, were the first resurrection a reference to the bodily resurrection only of believing saints, an event that occurs at the commencement of the millennium, this resurrection would be separated in time by one thousand years from the resurrection and judgment of unbelievers at the end of the age. This separation in time between the resurrection of the just and the unjust, of believers and unbelievers, however, contradicts the teaching of Scripture elsewhere that these events will occur together as parts of one complex and consummating series of events at the end of the age. In John 5:28-29, Jesus Christ is reported to have said to the disciples, 'Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.' This passage speaks clearly of an hour in which all who are in their tombs will hear the voice of Christ, the Son of God, and come forth. At a point in time that coincides for all, the just and the unjust alike, a resurrection of life and a resurrection of judgment will occur. In addition to this passage, a number of other Scriptural passages suggest that the resurrection of believers and unbelievers will occur concurrently at the end of the age (see *Matt.* 16:27; 25:31-33, *Acts* 24:15, *2 Cor.* 5:10, *2 Thess.* 1:6-10, *Rev.* 20:11-15).

Second, though premillennialists correctly point out that the terms 'coming to life' and 'resurrection' are most commonly used in the New Testament for a bodily resurrection, this is not always the case. The verb which is translated in verses 4 and 5 as 'came to life' is used in several places for a life that is not a bodily resurrection.⁵ In Luke 20, for example, Jesus, speaking against the Sadducean denial of the doctrine of the resurrection, says that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him (verse 38). In several instances in the book of Revelation itself, this verb is used to describe God, who 'lives forever' (*Rev.* 4:9-10), who is the 'living God' (7:2), or who 'lives forever and ever' (10:6; 15:7). One especially interesting passage is found in Revelation 13. The vision here first describes the beast, one of whose heads was 'as if it had been slain' (verse 3). Then, in a subsequent description of this beast, we are told that the beast 'who had the wound of the sword . . . had come to life' (verse 14). This description indicates that the living or coming to life of the beast was not a bodily resurrection, but the healing of an (only) apparently fatal wound. Consequently, when the vision of Revelation 20 speaks of the saints who 'lived', this word need not refer to a bodily resurrection.

⁵ The translation 'they came to life' could equally well be 'they lived', the latter being less suggestive of the idea of a bodily resurrection than the former. In other words, the translation, 'they came to life', may lend greater credence to the idea that a bodily resurrection is being referred to than is really the case. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 1004-7.

Third and perhaps most importantly, the New Testament does speak of the believer's fellowship with Christ, which brings the benefits depicted in the vision of Revelation 20:1-6, as a resurrection which is not of a bodily kind. It is simply not true, as many premillennialists imply in their treatment of this vision, that the language and concept of resurrection in the New Testament must always mean a bodily resurrection. Indeed, the New Testament teaches a doctrine of the believer's being raised with Christ that is fundamental to salvation and itself the ground upon which the expectation of a future bodily resurrection depends. It is intriguing to note that though the vision of Revelation 20:1-6 seems by its reference to a first resurrection to imply that there is a second resurrection, it does not actually speak of a second resurrection. Only one resurrection is specifically mentioned, and it is particularly defined as the first resurrection because it brings the benefits of the believer's reign with Christ and immunity from the power of the second death. These are the only benefits mentioned in the text. Nothing is said of a bodily resurrection.

Though the privileges enjoyed by the saints whom John sees in this vision are glorious, it should be noted that all believers in union with Christ may be said to live and reign with him as priests of God. Elsewhere in the New Testament the believer's fellowship with Christ is described as a resurrection that brings victory over the dominion of sin and death. This is evident in the well-known words of John 11:25-26, where Christ promises those who believe in him that they will share in his resurrection power and life: 'I am the resurrection and the life: he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.' Likewise, the Apostle Paul speaks in several places of the believer's incorporation into Christ as a baptism into Christ that involves the believer directly in his death and resurrection. Through this baptism into Christ, the believer enjoys a fellowship with him that is nothing less than a resurrection.

For example, in Romans 6:3-4, we read: 'Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.' Similarly, in Colossians 3:1-3, the Apostle Paul speaks of the believer's resurrection in fellowship with Christ: 'If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' In another passage, the link between the believer's fellowship with Christ and his being raised with Christ so as to sit with him in the heavenly places is especially striking: 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus' (*Eph. 2:4-6*).

These passages are especially pertinent to the vision in Revelation 20 of the believer's participation in the first resurrection because they clearly teach that all believers, by virtue of their union with or baptism into Christ, have a share in his resurrection and all its attendant benefits. The believer's resurrection in fellowship with Christ brings with it

the reality of life from the dead, the assurance of never-ending life, and the blessedness of being given to sit with and reign with Christ in the heavenly places. Thus, none of the blessings or privileges enjoyed by the saints whom John sees in the vision of Revelation 20 are foreign to believers who are joined through faith to Christ.

This means that when John sees the saints in heaven reigning with Christ as priests of God, exercising heavenly prerogatives in fellowship with the exalted and enthroned Son of God, he sees these saints enjoying in a particular and pronounced way those blessings enjoyed by all believers who are united with Christ. These blessings follow from their participation in the first resurrection. Because of their participation in this first resurrection, they are not liable to the power and dominion of death, including the second death of eternal separation from the presence and favor of God.

This way of understanding the reference to the first resurrection in this vision is perfectly consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures. Not only does it remove the difficulty of separating by one thousand years of time the resurrection of the just from the unjust, but it also appeals to an important biblical teaching regarding the resurrection of believers in union with Christ. Even though this baptism into Christ and share in his resurrection is the common benefit belonging to all believers, in the vision of John in Revelation 20 this benefit is seen in its peculiar application to those who have been translated upon death into heavenly glory.⁶

III. 'THE REST OF THE DEAD'

⁶ It might be objected here that the vision of Revelation 20:1-6 suggests that these benefits and this first resurrection are the exclusive experience of those saints who have died or been martyred for the faith. It would not be correct, then, to identify this first resurrection with an experience common to all believers. In reply to this objection, I would note that the text requires only that these saints have a particular and special enjoyment of benefits that are, nonetheless, also the property of all believers in Christ. Far from death or martyrdom depriving them of these benefits, they are witnessed coming to life and enjoying these benefits in a most marvellous way in heaven. The position I am defending is similar to, though not identical with, that presented by Norman Shepherd in his article, 'The Resurrections of Revelation 20' (*Westminster Theological Journal*, 37/1 [Fall, 1974], pp. 34-43). Shepherd identifies the first resurrection with the believer's baptismal incorporation into Christ. Shepherd particularly calls attention to the fact that Revelation 20 does not speak directly of a second resurrection. It speaks only of a first resurrection, the benefits of which are associated elsewhere in the New Testament with the believer's baptism into Christ. With respect to the implied second resurrection, Shepherd suggests that it may refer to the resurrection or renewal of the entire cosmos, including believers in their bodily resurrection, at the last day. Though this suggestion does not enjoy direct support from the vision of Revelation 20, it does seem consistent with the teaching of other biblical passages Shepherd cites (for example, *Rom.* 8:18-23, *2 Pet.* 3:13, *Rev.* 21:1, *1 Cor.* 15:42, 50).

This reading of the vision finds further confirmation in the language at the close of the vision. Revelation 20:1-6 concludes with these words: 'The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.'

The 'rest of the dead' refers to the unjust and unbelieving. Because they have no part in the first resurrection, they remain subject to the power of the second death. They share none of the privileges enjoyed by the saints. The second death to which they are subject cannot be physical death, the separation of body and soul as the consequence of sin, because they have already suffered this death. It is a spiritual death, that death which results from separation from favour and fellowship with the living God. The first resurrection is distinguished as first because it brings victory, not over physical death (as in a bodily resurrection), but over spiritual death. The second death is second because it means liability to punishment, not in a physical separation of body and soul, but in a spiritual separation or excommunication from God's presence. The term 'second death' seems to confirm, therefore, that the first resurrection is not a physical resurrection.⁷ What distinguishes those who partake of the first resurrection is that they are not subject to spiritual death. They are those who live and whose life consists in unbroken communion with God and his Christ. The same cannot be said of the rest of the dead. They remain liable to death, even the second death under the judgment of God.

Thus, the rest of the dead are not mentioned in this vision in terms of their participation in a second resurrection. Nothing in the language of this vision suggests that the second resurrection will be akin to the first as a bodily resurrection. They are simply said to be excluded from the first resurrection of the dead and its benefits, and to remain liable to the power of the second death.

Conclusion

With these pieces of the puzzle of the vision of Revelation 20:1-6 in place, we are in a position to sum up our findings.

Revelation 20:1-6 presents one in a series of vision sequences in the book of Revelation. The vision of the binding of Satan and the reigning of believing saints with Christ for the period of one thousand years is a vision of history between the time of the first and second advents of Christ. This vision does not describe events that will occur

⁷ See Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*, p. 89: 'The "second death" is not physical. Why must the "first resurrection" be? Just as "second" is added to make it clear that physical death is not intended, so "first" is appended to show that a physical resurrection is not in view.'

after the return of Christ (with which the vision of Revelation 19 concludes), but events that cover the whole period of the history of redemption from the time of Christ's coming in the fullness of time until the time of his return in glory at the end of the age.

The vision of the binding of Satan portrays the world-wide gathering of the nations into the fellowship of Christ. During these last days of fulfilment, the nations are no longer liable to the deceptive devices of Satan but are being disciplined by the Spirit and Word of Christ. Revelation 20 offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the triumphant gathering of Christ's church from among the nations, a gathering which will not fail of its successful execution. Though Satan may not be absolutely constrained against any activity, he is not able to deceive the nations any longer. Even the 'little season' of Satanically inspired rebellion that will occur prior to the close of the age will issue quickly in frustration and defeat. Nothing can prevent Christ's gathering and building of his church.

Furthermore, echoing a theme which is sounded throughout the book of Revelation, the vision of Revelation 20 also teaches that, far from the death of the saints or the martyrdom of many indicating defeat for the cause of Christ and his kingdom, these saints have a full share in the glory and victory of Christ. Not least among those who share in Christ's victory are the departed saints, especially the martyred saints, who live and reign with Christ as priests of God during the entire millennium. This victory of theirs is not some earthly reign at a near or distant point in history, after the return of Christ and during a future millennial reign, but a present reality.

The vision of Revelation 20 provides the church, then, to which it was first written in the latter part of the first century AD (and the church since until Christ comes again) a great consolation and encouragement in the face of trial and persecution. Those who as believers see history with the eye of faith join the Apostle John on the isle of Patmos and they stand amazed and strengthened in this vision of the saints in glory seated upon thrones in the presence of God and the Lamb.

Only some such understanding of the vision of Revelation 20 can do justice to the particular language used in it, its context and place in the book of Revelation, and indeed, its place in the teaching of Scripture generally.

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