

Blessed Are Those Share in the First Resurrection

The first 10 verses of Revelation 20 are among the most debated, divisive and controversial passages in the entire Bible. Entire systematic theologies are based on how one interprets these verses. When you hear terms like the millennium, premillennial, amillennial, and post millennial that all comes from this passage. The controversy all centers on the nature and timing of the thousand years mentioned in the verses 2 and, or, as it is popularly known from the Latin, the millennium.

This is unfortunate, because this passage also contains one of the greatest blessings in all of Scripture, ***“Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power.”***

While we can discuss, debate, and even disagree over these issues, they should never be made a test of faith. I’ve heard teachers say that if you don’t subscribe to this view or that view, then you are not a Bible believing Christian. Such charges should not be leveled lightly, and I think in this instance such statements are inexcusable.

I can’t unravel all of these questions this morning. When I taught through Revelation 20 a couple years ago, it took three weeks to get through these 10 verses. We simply do not have the time, and if I tried, I think it would only lead to more questions than answers.

However, I cannot escape sharing some of my understanding and interpretation of this text, but I don’t want my personal views to overshadow the astounding blessing of this passage. So, even if you take a different position from me, or you think my position is unworkable, or you take the position of the panmillennialists who say it will all pan out in the end, we need to remember what we agree on.

What we agree upon in this text is more important than what we disagree about. What unites us is far more important than what divides us. Here are several fundamental basics that all the millennial views hold in common.

- All believe that history is moving to point determined by God.
- All believe that God is in control over history.
- All believe that Christ will return physically just as He promised.
- All believe that there will be a physical resurrection from the dead
- All believe that there will be a final judgment.
- All believe that all wrongs will be set right.

- All believe that the wicked will go to hell.
- All believe that the righteous will spend eternal life with God.

It is affirming these things that make you a Bible believing Christian. I don't think we have to agree on all the little interpretive details of Revelation 20. This is the only chapter in the Bible that talks about the millennial reign of Jesus. No other passage even mentions a 1,000 year reign. If such a specific understanding was essential to the faith, I think Jesus would have talked about it. I think Paul and/or Peter would have talked about it, but they didn't. So, I don't think we should make a single passage of Scripture from a highly symbolic book, which has proven to be so confusing and controversial, carry that sort of weight. I'm not going to judge the faith of my brother or sister in Christ based on how they understand these verses.

We want to focus this morning on verses 4, 5, and 6 this morning. This forms a complete visionary unit marked by the introductory phrase *then I saw*.

We Will Reign With Christ

The theme of these verses is the rule of Christ. It is captured in this term *reign*. It is portrayed in the image of *thrones*. This word *reign* refers to not just the power and authority of the ruler, but also to the honor and prestige that comes with being a ruler. Part of this amazing blessing is that we will share in this reign with Jesus.

The first thing John sees here are thrones. The Greek word for *throne* or *thrones* occurs 47 times in the book of Revelation. If we exclude this reference here, that leaves 46 instances. Of those 46 references, 43 refer to heavenly thrones, either the throne of the Father and the Lamb, or the thrones of the twenty-four elders. Only three of the throne references are on earth, and each refers to the throne of Satan or the beast (2:13; 13:2; 16:10).ⁱ

This is a compelling contrast. Heavenly thrones symbolize righteous, godly rule. Earthly thrones represent wicked, satanic rule. This alone leads me to see these thrones as heavenly thrones. I don't think this refers to an earthly reign. I think this is a spiritual reign with Christ in heaven. It is a stretch to see these thrones as representing righteous rule on earth before the final judgment has taken place, before Satan has been fully and finally defeated, before death has been defeated, and before the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth. There will be no righteous, earthly "thrones" until then.

Seated on the Thrones

Seated upon these thrones are ***those to whom the authority to judge was committed***. In American government the executive or ruling branch is supposedly separate from the judicial or judging branch of government. Such a separation of powers didn't exist in the ancient world. Sitting as a judge was one of the roles of the king. It was a part of his rule. Just who this might be sitting on these thrones is a question the text doesn't directly answer. However, there are other passages of Scripture that tell us who will be a part of the judgment.

Angels

The first group that will share in judgment are the angels. The prophet Daniel saw a vision of a heavenly court of angels sitting in judgment (Dan. 7:9-11). A couple passages in Revelation picture angels executing parts of the final judgment (Rev. 14:15-19; 19:17-18). Jesus taught that the angels would accompany and assist Jesus in judgment when He returns.

⁴¹ *The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,* ⁴² *and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* (Mt. 13:41-42; see also Mt. 16:27; 25:31; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26; 2 Thes. 1:7)

Saints

The second group we are told will be a part of the final judgment are the saints. Paul tells the Corinthian church, "Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? (1 Cor. 6:2)" Then in verse 3 he says we will judge angels. These are not the godly angels he means here, but fallen angels or demons. We will sit in judgment over the very spiritual forces that pulled the strings to oppress the church. So, I think here in Revelation 20, it is entirely biblical to see a combination of angels and saints sitting on these thrones sharing in the reign of Christ.

We know the saints are present, because John sees a group of risen souls. It is significant that John describes them as "souls." The word ***soul*** here refers to the spiritual life of a person. This is certainly not the word John would use for someone who had been physically resurrected. This just gives weight to the understanding that is taking place in heaven.

These risen souls are made up of two kinds of Christians. The first are those who had been martyred for their faith. The text says they had been ***beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God***. They stood up for the good news about Jesus. They stood up for the

truth of God's word. They did not sit down and shut up when the world told them to sit down and shut up, and they paid the ultimate price. They died for their faith. The word here literally means killed with an axe. That doesn't mean that those killed with a sword, or burned at the stake or shot in the head are excluded, but that was how Christians were being killed in John's day. It is a picture of someone who has died for their faith.

Some translations read here like this next part is describing the same group of people. While that is possible, there is an **and** here in the original Greek that some translations like the NIV leave out completely. The ESV gets it right when it says those ***beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the world of God and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands***. It is likely John is seeing another group of Christians in his vision. These believers haven't died for their faith, but they haven't succumbed to the temptations and pressures of the oppressive governments and false religions represented by the beast.

While persecution has been commonplace throughout much of church history, not every faithful Christian dies a martyr. Many live their lives faithfully until the day they die. They are faithful because they never "worshiped the beast." Christ doesn't tell this group, "Hey, I'd love to have you reign with me, but you didn't die the right way. You only died of cancer, or a heart attack or bad indigestion, so you don't get to reign with me." That makes no sense. These are the souls of those who died FOR the faith and IN the faith.

A Thousand Year Reign

The end of verse 4 says ***they came to life***, or literally ***they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years***. So, even though their bodies have died, their souls live and reign with Jesus. They don't have to wait until the end of time. They don't have to wait until the second coming. They are spiritually alive now, and are seated with Christ. What John is envisioning here are those who are spiritually alive and reigning in Christ in heaven, even though their bodies on earth have died.

It is my opinion, my interpretation that the thousand years is not a literal one thousand year period of time. That's not how numbers are used in apocalyptic literature. That's not how numbers are used in Revelation. Shane Wood, a professor at Ozark Christian College, who has a

doctorate in just the book of Revelation is fond of saying that numbers in Revelation should be weighed, not measured. Revelation doesn't use numbers like dates on a calendar. It uses them as word pictures.

A thousand years represents a long period of time. "One hour" in Rev. 17:12 represents a short time. 1,000 years is a long time. This is simply a way of saying that the saints will reign with Jesus in heaven for the full time God has allotted until Jesus returns. This isn't a future earthly kingdom of a thousand years, but it is the present reign of Christ in the soul of believers and those souls with Christ in heaven.

A Spiritual Kingdom

Such a spiritual resurrection and reign with Christ is a promise and a hope held out in Scripture. Jesus announced the arrival of His kingdom at the beginning of His ministry, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel* (Mk. 1:14-15)." Peter affirms this in his Pentecost sermon when he says that Christ now rules from David's throne (Ac. 2:29-36).

If you are in Christ, this kingdom is a present reality in your life. Upon becoming a Christian our lives switch kingdom allegiances. One flag is taken down and another is flown in its place. In Ephesians 2:1-6, Paul talks about how we were under the rule of the "*prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.*" However, God in His great mercy and love "*made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*" Speaking of salvation, Paul reminds the Colossians (1:13-14), "*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" We are reigning with Christ now.

Such a spiritual reign is exactly the kind of kingdom Jesus said his kingdom was. When Pilate interrogated Jesus asking Him, "*Are you king of the Jews?*" Jesus answered saying, "*My kingdom is not of this world* (Jn. 18:33-36)." Jesus told the Pharisees in Lk. 17:20-21, "*The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is,' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in a.*" In other words, it is not a physical, earthly kingdom. It is a spiritual kingdom that exists within you.

The heavenly nature of this kingdom is fully realized when we die in Christ and reign with Him in heaven. Jesus promised to the thief who would die with Him on the cross, *“Today you will be with me in Paradise (Lk. 23:43).”* Paul writes, *“we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8).”* Paul told the Philippian church, *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Php 1:21).”* He was torn between the two. Where is Christ right now? He is seated at the right hand of the Father ruling in heaven. Where are the dead in Christ right now? They are with Christ ruling in heaven.

The First Resurrection

John says ***this is the first resurrection***. This is just one of several firsts in Revelation. In the next chapter we see a “first heaven” and “first earth” along with the corresponding “new heaven” and “new earth (21:1).” He is not numbering a series of similar items; he is contrasting pairs of differing items. The first heaven is not like the second. The first earth is different from the new earth. The first resurrection is not like the second. The first death is not like the second death.

First things here in Revelation belong to the present order of things. We live in the age of the first heaven and first earth. The new heaven and the new earth belong to the age to come. The second death and the second resurrection belong to the age to come. The first death and the first resurrection belongs this age.

So, what is this first resurrection? This becomes clearer when we look at the second death. In Revelation 2, Jesus tells the church in Smyrna they will have to *“be faithful unto death (2:10).”* However, he promises to those that overcome, they *“will not be hurt by the second death (2:11).”* In other words, you will have to suffer the first death, but the second death won’t hurt you. What’s the second death? He answers that for us in chapter 20:14. *“the lake of fire is the second death.”* Look at chapter 21:8. It’s spelled out quite clearly there.

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

The second death is punishment in hell. It is spiritual death. The first death is physical death. We all die. But we can escape the second death of eternal judgment. The first resurrection is what gives us power over that second death.

Look at our blessing in verse 6. ***Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power.*** We already know the second death is spiritual death in the lake of fire; therefore the first resurrection is whatever allows people to escape hell. The first resurrection is none other than the becoming a Christian and being born again into new life in Christ.

The first resurrection is new life in Christ when you become a Christian. The second resurrection is physical resurrection when you receive your resurrection body when Jesus returns. The first death is physical death when your earthly body dies. The second death is spiritual death and eternal judgment in hell.

A Priestly Role

Now Jesus doesn't just give us this new life so we can escape the second death. Being is Christian is more than fire insurance! This spiritual life has a purpose now. He says we ***will be priests of God and Christ.*** We don't just have a kingly role in reigning with Christ. We have a priestly role. I think this further confirms we are right to place the millennium with this age. The role of a priest is to be an intermediary between God and the people.

We are His ambassadors to a lost people. 1 Peter 2:9 speaks of this as a present reality, *"you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* John already told the seven churches of Revelation that this kingdom was a present reality as God *"made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father (1:6)."* Our priestly role begins with our new life in Christ.

Our priestly role only increases when we enter into His presence in heaven upon our death. One of the honors of serving as a priest is that you served in the presence of God. Unlike the Old Testament where only the high priest was allowed into the Holy of Holies one day a year. In Christ's kingdom we all will be in His presence without interruption. In heaven there will be no separation or isolation from our Creator. We will live in perfect community with Him.

Let's not miss the incredible promise in this text, and the incredible hope it gives John's readers both in the 1st Century and in the 21st. We are truly blessed because our spiritual life in Christ means we cannot be touched by the second death. Your status on earth has nothing to

do with your status in Christ. No matter what may befall our physical bodies, be it a car accident, cancer, or the martyrs' sword, we know that our souls will live and reign with Christ until the day He returns. We have nothing to fear beyond the grave, or in the grave. We have this blessed assurance of serving in the presence of God.

ⁱ Foster, Lewis (1989) Revelation. Cincinnati, OH. Standard Publishing. p. 295