

## THEY WILL REIGN WITH CHRIST

Revelation 20:1-15

Key Verse: 20:6

“Blessed and holy are those who share 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.”

Revelation has introduced us to Babylon, a beast, and a false prophet who are instruments of Satan’s power to do evil in the world. Chapters 17-20 tell how these evil powers are judged and destroyed one by one. Babylon’s fall is described in chapters 17-18. The beast and the false prophet are thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur in chapter 19. Now, in chapter 20, God executes final judgment on Satan--the source of evil. Satan’s elimination is followed by the establishment of God’s perfect kingdom. There his people will reign with Christ as priests of God.

We live in a world full of injustice, lies, discord, corruption, and death. The struggle to live every day leads to frustration, anger, and depression. This past week, in what began as a civil rights protest, we have witnessed chaotic violence all over our nation. This follows a two-month lockdown which has given rise to a 20% rise in domestic violence worldwide.<sup>1</sup> These things happen where Satan reigns. Where Christ reigns, it is totally different. Imagine a world dominated by love, understanding, joy, peace, truth, justice, and righteousness. A world where everyone works together for God’s glory and the blessing of his world. It seems like a fairy tale. Yet this happens where Jesus reigns. At present, we catch glimpses of his reign in our families, and community, but they are temporary due to sin, death, and Satan’s hindrance. Yet when Jesus comes again our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like Jesus’ glorious body and Satan will be eliminated forever. Then we will experience the full blessings and privileges of Christ’s reign. In fact, we will

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-chaos/202005/why-the-increase-in-domestic-violence-during-covid-19>

reign with Christ. We will study in two parts: the blessings of sharing in the first resurrection (1-6), and judgment of Satan and the dead (7-15).

First, blessings of sharing in the first resurrection (1-6). Verses 1-3 describe how Satan was bound and imprisoned. John saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain (1). The Abyss is a place where evil spirits are bound. It is different from the lake of fire, which will be their final destiny. Satan has many names, including “dragon,” “ancient serpent,” “the devil.”<sup>2</sup> He disguises his true identity in order to deceive people. But he cannot hide himself from God. The angel, with authority from God, bound Satan with a great chain and threw him into the Abyss (2-3a). In the past, Satan roamed freely, deceiving people, leading them astray, accusing and tormenting them (Job 1:7; Rev 12:10b). No more! Now Satan is in lockdown; the Abyss has been sealed over him. This was done to keep him from deceiving the nations until a thousand years had passed. After that he must be set free for a short time (3b).

In verses 4-5 John saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. John also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They did not compromise with idol worship or give in to fear. They kept their faith in Jesus at the cost of their lives. Now they are alive, and they reign with Christ for a thousand years. This is the first resurrection. It began with the resurrection of Christ. Believers are united with Christ in his resurrection by faith. From our perspective, it is spiritual resurrection of the soul. It begins with the new birth. At bodily death, our souls go to the Lord in heaven. Our bodies will be raised when Jesus comes again. The period of the first resurrection lasts from new birth to receiving a resurrection body. Only believers will share in the first resurrection. The rest of the dead, unbelievers, are not included (5). Rather, they will take part in a resurrection of the wicked to be judged, which is referred to in verses 11-15 (Ac 24:15).

In this passage, a key phrase is “thousand years.” This phrase appears six times (2,3,4,5,6,7). It marks a period of Satan’s imprisonment and Christ’s

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<sup>2</sup> See the manuscript, *Triumph by the Blood of the Lamb*, on 12:1-13:18 for a fuller description.

reign together with his people. It is also known by the Latin name “millennium,” which means “thousand years.” Since it is only mentioned here in the Bible, we should understand it in the context of Revelation. It is most controversial. There are three major approaches.<sup>3</sup>

***The Premillennial View.*** There are two kinds: historical and dispensational. *Historical premillennialists* believe that the one thousand years begins after the second coming of Christ. Satan is bound and Christ ushers in a period of earthly peace and prosperity--some think it is a literal thousand years, but others think it is symbolic of a long time. Believers receive resurrection bodies at the beginning of the Millennium. The final judgment for all others takes place at the end of it. Then will come the new heavens and the new earth. *Dispensational Premillennialists* believe that Jesus will return to take up believers into heaven by means of rapture, immediately before a seven year worldwide tribulation. Then Jesus will come again to reign for a thousand years over a literal Jewish kingdom. This is the least desirable view.

***The Postmillennial View.*** They believe that Christ comes after the thousand years and that the church will expand greatly before Jesus returns. Some postmillennialists take the thousand years literally. Others believe that “the Millennium” began with the resurrection of Christ.

***The Amillennial View.*** They understand the millennium to symbolize the present reign of Christ and not to be a literal thousand-year reign. Satan has already been bound by Christ’s triumph at the cross and through his resurrection (Jn 12:31; Col 2:15). The first resurrection starts with the new birth. A general resurrection and final judgment will take place at Christ’s coming, followed by the creation of new heavens and a new earth.<sup>4</sup>

While each view has merit and can be defended by Scripture, there are clear reasons to favor the amillennial view. Premillennialists interpret chronologically that the events in chapter 20 will happen after those in 19:11-21. However, in terms of the structure of Revelation, it makes more sense to see chapter 20 as the seventh and last cycle of judgments. Revelation is

<sup>3</sup> Poythress, Vern S., *The Returning King* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), pp.177-179.

<sup>4</sup> Gregg, Steve, *Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2013) p. 515.

written in a series of repeating spirals, not chronologically. The seven seals, trumpets and bowls are not in chronological order; they describe the wrath of God which becomes increasingly more intense and precise. And each series of seven concludes with Jesus' second coming and his reign (7:17; 11:15; 14:14-20; 19:11-16). Along the same lines, the final battle in 20:7-10 seems to be the same as the final battle in 16:14,16; 17:14; 19:11-21. And again, the judgment of Satan in 20:10 parallels the judgments of Babylon (17-18) and of the beast and the false prophet (19:11-21). Most importantly, all of Christ's enemies are destroyed in 19:11-21. If 20:1-6 describes events later than 19:11-21, who is left for Satan to deceive in 20:3?

Whichever view we take, we should not be dogmatic about it. It is not one of the essentials of Christian faith. We should humbly acknowledge that there is a mystery about future things and stay focused on the main point: Satan will be finally defeated, and in the meantime, God takes care of his people and will bless them to reign together with him. This assurance gives us comfort, hope, a sense of victory, and strength to bear all kinds of trials.

Let us read verse 6. "Blessed and holy are those who share 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." This is one of seven blessings in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14). "Blessed" means "highest happiness." The word "holy" is added because sin has been removed completely. They are pure and blameless. The blessings are given to "those who share in the first resurrection." Again, this refers to anyone who puts their faith in Christ while on earth. They are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. For them, death is entry into God's presence in heaven; they are victors over the dragon and the beast.<sup>5</sup>

What blessings are given to them? First of all, they are exempt from the second death. The "second death" implies a first death. The first death began with Adam's sin. Ephesians 2:1 says, "We were dead in our transgressions and sins...." The first death is spiritual death--separation from God. Physical death is a symptom of the first death. The second death is eternal condemnation in

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<sup>5</sup> ESV Study Bible, (Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2008), p. 2492.

the fiery lake of burning sulfur (21:8). The second death has no power over those who believe in Jesus. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (Jn 5:24).

Some of us worry about facing God's judgment in the future. We imagine standing before God as he exposes all of our sins and wrongs and puts us to shame. We may diligently try to confess and repent of all our sins before facing that judgment. Yet we should believe that when we come to God in humble repentance, he forgives all our sins, past, present, and future, and will remember them no more (Heb 8:12). Furthermore, our union with Christ in heaven will be like a glorious wedding ceremony. To prepare us as his bride, he has clothed us in his righteousness. Christ makes us his holy, glorious, radiant bride without stain, wrinkle, or any other blemish (19:7-8; Eph 5:25-27). This is God's unfathomable grace, beyond our imaginations now. But it will surely happen because of God's great love and mercy. This is why we "eagerly await him" and "long for his appearing" (Php 3:20; 2Ti 4:8). This great blessing surely comes to those who share in the first resurrection.

Another great blessing is that we will reign as priests of God and of Christ (1:6; 5:10). The role of the priest is to serve our God and to reign on earth. From the moment we believe in Christ, we begin to reign with him (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1). Christ's reign, which has already begun, will be fully realized at his return. Here we need to understand the meaning of "reign." When you hear the word "reign," what comes to mind? It may be ruling over others from a high position. This is a great misunderstanding. In truth, it means to restore our original position as rulers and stewards in God's world. When God created human beings in his own image, he blessed them to rule over all he had made (Gen 1:27-28). It meant to take care of God's creation with love. However, after Adam sinned, the meaning of "rule over" or "reign" was distorted. To "reign" came to mean exploiting others and the world for selfish gain. This is the root of strife and brokenness in the world. Human beings have lost their dignity and purpose. In fact, this is because of Satan's reign due to our sins.

However, Jesus came to reverse the pandemic reign of Satan and restore what was lost. Hebrews 2:5-9 explains that Christ did this through his

incarnation and death. Though he is the Son of God, he renounced heavenly glory and honor and became a human being, like one of us. He confined himself in time and space and lived among us. He identified himself as a friend of sinners and tax collectors. He took care of all kinds of sinners. Though he was their great master and teacher, he humbled himself to wash his disciples' dirty feet. His servant leadership moved people's hearts to willingly welcome his reign (5:12). This is the real meaning of "reign." Furthermore, Jesus became the atoning sacrifice for our sins and made us God's children and his co-heirs. When Jesus reigns over all creation, we also reign with him (2Ti 2:12). This is more than a restoration of our original reign. It is a promotion because we will no longer be vulnerable to Satan, the power of sin or death. Also, there is no term limit. We will reign with Christ forever. Under this reign, his creation will thrive in beautiful harmony.

We can understand "reign with Christ" more deeply through the wedding metaphor in chapter 19. This wedding is the perfect and eternal union of the bride and the Lamb. This Lamb defeated all God's enemies and reigns over all creation as King of kings and Lord of lords. As his bride, we share his reign. To receive this blessing, we also share in his sufferings while on earth. Paul calls us "co-heirs with Christ" if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Ro 8:17b).

Second, judgment of Satan and the dead (7-15). When the symbolic thousand years are over, at some future time of God's choosing, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth--Gog and Magog--and to gather them for battle (7-8a). Gog and Magog are a metaphor for the enemies of God. When Satan was bound through Christ's death and resurrection, his power to deceive was restricted for a long time. But just before Jesus comes again, for a short time, Satan will be unconstrained and able to deceive the nations. Jesus referred to this when he foretold that false messiahs would come and deceive many, and even the elect if that were possible (Mt 24:24). Paul explained more in detail in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-12. Verses 9-10 say, "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refuse to love the

truth and so be saved.” God’s purpose in releasing Satan is to purify his church and to expose his enemies. Satan will gather God’s enemies together and march across the breadth of the earth and surround the camp of God’s people, in the city he loves (8b-9a). But God will rain down fire from heaven in a decisive judgment and devour them (9b). Then the devil, who deceived them, will be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever (10). They will blame, curse, and attack each other, again and again, through all eternity. And there is no hope to get out of it. This is hell.

Another judgment takes place in verses 11-15. John saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it (11a). The great white throne represents the purity and holiness of God, the Sovereign Judge (4:2-3; Dan 7:9). This is a judicial court, and standing before the throne are unbelievers, both great and small, in resurrected bodies--not glorious bodies but zombie bodies. Jesus foretold the resurrection of all people, both the righteous and the wicked. John 5:28-29 says, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out--those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.” There is no longer a place for sinners to reside or to hide, since heaven and earth have fled (11b). All stand before the judgment seat of Christ. They will be judged based on what they have done as recorded in books which are opened (12; Ro 2:6). The books are precise records of everything they have thought, said, and done during their entire lifetimes. Everything is exposed and no one can cover up the truth, lie, or make excuses. The sea, death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them (13). The last enemies: death and Hades, were thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death (14; 1Co 15:26). All those whose names are not written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire to be punished forever (15).

In this passage we can find a great contrast between Christ’s reign and Satan’s dominion. Who reigns over us is not a small matter--it is a matter of life and death, happiness and misery. Satan’s reign makes people violent, merciless, and wicked. We can see the signs of Satan’s reign all around us. Last Monday (May 25, 2020), a white Minneapolis police officer arrested an African American man, George Floyd, who allegedly committed a small crime. The

officer handcuffed Mr. Floyd, put him on the ground and knelt on his neck with all his weight until Mr. Floyd expired. It was a callous murder which showed utter contempt for a precious human life. It was another occurrence of the systemic racial injustice in our country. It made people furious and serious rioting has followed. At the root, it is caused by Satan's work through the sin of racism. How can we fight against this? We can pray for God to bind Satan's power. And we can preach the gospel that exposes sin and leads to Christ clearly and boldly.

Consider a beautiful true story of the power of the gospel. As a boy, Bart Millard was the victim of violent abuse by his father, who was terribly frustrated over his own broken dreams. As a result, his father reacted with rage toward Bart's dream of a music career. Once Bart was beaten so badly that he thought he would die. After Bart left home in deep brokenness, his father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. His father began to seek God's forgiveness and prayed for Bart to return. After hearing a pastor's message, he asked Christ into his heart to reign. His transformation was amazing. Bart could not but forgive him and they reconciled. Bart said, "If the gospel can change him, it can change anybody." His father was so changed that Bart said, "He was a monster. Now he is my best friend, a man I want to be like." Just before he died, his father gave Bart his life savings and told him to use it to pursue his music career. Soon after, Bart was inspired to write the great Christian song, "I can only imagine." It was dedicated to his father and has sold 2.5 million copies to date. There are so many beautiful stories like this. Christ's reign produces love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Let us pray that Christ may reign now over each of us, our families, our communities, our nation, and the world.