

In our last study in Revelation 20, we considered the meaning of the verses that teach that Satan has been bound for 1000 years so that he might no longer deceive the nations and we saw that that means that Satan is restrained during most of the period between the first and second comings of Christ so that the gospel is able to spread around the world. While Satan is clearly still active in the world, the church has survived and spread around the world and continues to do so. So these verses are a great encouragement for the missionary calling of the church. By binding Satan, Jesus has created the conditions for the church to fulfill the great commission. While there is still a great deal of wickedness and unbelief in the world, there is also the church and it continues to spread and to grow around the world. That is possible because Jesus has bound Satan to keep him from deceiving the nations.

This morning we will continue working our way through this passage. Verses 4-6 describe what is going on in heaven during the same thousand year period which is described in verses 1-3. Verses 1-3 describe the binding of Satan and verses 3-6 describe what it is like in heaven during this period for believers who have died.

Believers who have died and gone to heaven are sitting on thrones and they are sharing with Christ in his judgments and in his reign. So this is one of the passages in the book of Revelation which gives us some insight into what believers who have died are doing in heaven. We will look at what that means a little later on, but first we will consider how these verses describe the ones who are judging and reigning with Christ. They are described in the second part of verse 4. "Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word 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." So this describes all believers who have died and gone to heaven having remained faithful to the Lord in this life. The text mentions "the souls of those who had been beheaded", but also those "who had not worshiped the beast or its image." So that includes every believer who has been faithful unto death, whether they have been martyred or not. Not every believer is killed for his faith, but every true believer does give his life for Christ and remains faithful in the spiritual warfare that is the Christian life. And they are all included here.

Now these verses use some unusual language to describe people who have died. Verses 4 & 5 say that "they came to life" and "the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended." These statements are referring to all the people who have died during the 1000 years which as we saw last time is the period between the first coming of Christ right until just before his second coming. Faithful believers came to life when they died. And the rest of the dead (unbelievers) did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.

This is an amazing statement about the significance of physical death for believers. Physical death for believers is an actual coming to life. The biblical language concerning death and life deals with more than physical death and physical life. The most important life in the Bible is spiritual life. Unbelievers are spiritually dead when they are physically alive and believers are alive when they are physically dead. So an unbeliever who dies

physically is doubly dead. He is dead spiritually and he is dead physically and he will remain in that condition until end of the age when he will be raised physically to face the judgment of God after which he will receive the judgment of eternal death.

A believer who dies physically, however, is raised to a greater experience of life than he has known on this earth. When a person is born again he receives eternal life at that moment. But when he dies his experience of that life is so enhanced that Revelation here describes the death of a believer as a coming to life. While their bodies rest in the grave, the souls of believers are experiencing a fullness of life that is far beyond what they have experienced on earth. That is what this verse is saying and this should very much influence the way we think about death and also about believing loved ones who have died with the Lord. This corresponds with what Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21 when he said, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” The verses that we are looking at this morning give us a little more detail about what it means that for a believer to die is gain.

Physical death for a believer is a coming to life. They enter into a far greater experience of life than they have every known on this earth. They have experienced the beginning of it when they first received the life of Christ in the Spirit, but they enter into it much more fully when leave their earthly bodies and their souls go to be with the Lord. This passage refers to this as the first resurrection. Usually the term resurrection refers to physical resurrection, but in this case John is using this term to refer to the coming to life that believers experience when they die.

So the death of believers is being held up for us in a very positive light. It is wonderfully paradoxical at least on the surface. For a believer, death is a coming to life. For believers, physical death is the moment of the first resurrection. From the perspective of this verse the death of a believer is a positive thing – an entrance into life.

That raises an interesting question concerning how believers should view this earthly life. If it is such a wonderful thing for a believer to die, should we not therefore do what we can to hasten the time of our death? Why not commit suicide? Why not refuse medical care? Why not be in a rush to leave this life and get to heaven as soon as possible?

Well there is somewhat of a tension here too. There is no question that when believers die they enter in to a state of blessedness that is far greater than anything they experience here. And yet, God created us to live this life on earth. Physical life is a precious gift of God. The sixth commandment requires that we do what we can to guard and preserve life including our own life. Proverbs 3:1-2 connect following wisdom with “length of days and years of life.” Jesus went around healing people. He did not kill believers off so that they might quickly enter the joys of heaven. And physical death is still the result of sin and the fall. So it is natural and right from a biblical preceptive to want to live long lives and to do what we can to get better when we are sick.

At the same time, death comes to all of us. Death remains sad because there is so much in this life which is legitimately precious. Losing loved ones is one of the greatest pains we experience in this life. But there is great comfort in this perspective that when believers die they come to life. Both of these things are true at the same time for believers in Jesus. This this life is precious and long life is a blessing. But at the same time when we die we will enter into a fullness of life beyond anything we have known here. Believers have a desire to live long lives. But they also have times of desiring to be with the Lord which is far better. How often and how strong their desire to be with the Lord is depends on the strength of their love for Christ and many other things.

But this perspective is a great comfort for believers in the light of the reality of death. No matter how healthy we are and no matter how long we live, death will come for all of us unless the Lord returns. We live in the shadow of death. What a comfort it is that the Bible speaks of what lies beyond death for believers in such positive terms! Death for believers is a coming to life. It is the first resurrection. No matter how good life is for us now, it will be better after we die.

There is one more thing that I need to say about this to put it all into biblical perspective. Even though the Bible presents the death of believers as a coming to life, this is not the ultimate hope that the Bible holds out to us. The ultimate hope is not that believers' souls will be alive in heaven. The ultimate hope is that they will experience the resurrection of the body and life with God in the new heaven and new earth. Life with God for the saints right now is good, but it is a temporary state of affairs. The fullness of salvation is not living as a soul in heaven, but living as a resurrected human being in the new heavens and the new earth. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and he created man to serve him on earth. At the end, that goal is going to be realized in a physical existence as part of a renewed creation. That is the salvation that God is working towards.

But in the meantime, the saints who die experience life more fully than they did when they were on earth. They are looking forward to the final resurrection and the new heavens and the new earth, but in the meantime they are not wishing that they were back on earth for they are experiencing a blessedness that is far greater than any earthly blessedness. And this passage gives us some idea of what they are up to.

They are seated on thrones. They have been given authority to judge. They are reigning with Christ for a thousand years. They are priests of God and of Christ and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

So somehow the saints in heaven share in Christ's work of judging the world even now before the final judgment. "The authority to judge was committed" to them, says verse 4. Richard Philips writes, "The manner in which the saints exercise judgment is not specified, but at a minimum they have the pleasure of approving and taking part with Christ in his judgment of sin."

It may be that one of the ways that the saints in heaven share in Christ's judgment of sin is through their prayers. Back in Revelation 6 we are given a vision of the saints in heaven and they are praying, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And in Revelation 8 there is a direct connection made between the prayers of the saints and the judgments of God being poured out upon the earth. That applies to our prayers now already, but it seems likely that at least part of the way that the saints in heaven exercise judgement is through their prayers for the coming of God's kingdom.

The saints are also reigning with Christ during the 1000 years – which is right now. Those who have died in the Lord are now in heaven reigning with Christ. The idea of human beings sharing in God's reign goes all the way back to the beginning when God made human beings in his image and gave them dominion over the earth. Dominion is another word for reigning. God's purpose right from the beginning was that his people would serve and glorify him by exercising authority on God's behalf. That will certainly be the case in the new heavens and the new earth where we will fulfill God's intention for humanity in the original creation, but in a greater and more glorious way. And from our text we see that that is also the case for the souls of believers who are not in heaven. We do not know what that looks like exactly, but on the analogy of how God works through his people to accomplish much of his plan on earth we can say that the saints in heaven are exercising authority and contributing in some way to the fulfillment of God's purposes of salvation and judgment.

It is interesting and significant that God does a lot of things through the agency of created beings. He uses human beings on earth. And he uses angels as well both in the spiritual realm and in the earthly realm. He does not need to use any other being, human or angel. God can accomplish whatever he wants to accomplish simply by speaking as he did when he created the world and as he does in upholding and governing the creation from moment to moment. And yet he has set things up in such a way that he often uses humans and angels in very significant ways to fulfill his purposes.

And we can understand the judging and the reigning of the saints in heaven at the present moment in that light. There is very little detail about what the glorified saints are doing in heaven. We know that they are worshipping. And we know that they are involved with Jesus in judging and reigning. We know that they are praying. And putting it all together we can conclude that they have an important role to play exercising authority under and with Christ as he rules over the nations and brings the coming of the kingdom to its consummation. Somehow they are involved.

One other thing that is mentioned about the glorified saints in heaven is that they are priests of God and of Christ. The priests in the OT served in the temple. They were as close to the presence of God as was possible in the OT period. The saints in heaven serve as priests in the presence of God. The significance of them being priests has to do with being in the presence of God and offering sacrifices of praise and service. Remember how Romans 12:1 says that believers now are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God. That is priestly

language. And so the saints in heaven are serving the Lord as priests in a much more glorious way because they are no longer sinful. They have access into the very presence of God and they serve him in whatever ways they can do that in heaven. Richard Philips writes that the reference to the saints in heaven as priests of God and of Christ “indicates that believers in heaven have immediate access to the presence of God and enjoy the unimaginable blessing of perfect spiritual worship before the face of divine glory.” (p. 583).

Revelation 7:15 describes this without using the word priest, but it is priestly activity that is mentioned. It says of the saints in heaven, “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.”

Now these verses are clearly intended to encourage faithful followers of Jesus and to warn those who are not faithful followers of Jesus. God here is holding before the saints a glorious future beyond this life. The book of Revelation has a lot to say about the persecution of the saints and the spiritual warfare that the saints are engaged in. The Christian life is wonderful because we are right with God and are beginning to live the blessed life of service to God, but the Bible is very clear that it is often hard, sometimes because of persecution and always because of the calling to die to self in the face of Satanic opposition. This passage is intended to be an encouragement for us in the struggles of the Christian life.

But there is a warning aspect in it as well. The souls who are judging and reigning with Christ in heaven are described as those who stood fast in persecution and against the pressures of living in a godless society. They are described as those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. As we have seen in earlier sermons, the beast and its image are symbols for the humanity in its opposition to God. The beast and its image for us is the godless society in which we are living with all its temptations to worship that which is not God. We saw too that the mark of the beast refers to the kind of worldliness that makes it possible to thrive economically in a godless society in which faithfulness to God often requires embracing economic hardship.

So the kind of people that end up judging and reigning with Christ when they die are those who have remained faithful to God in a world in which faithfulness to God means dying to self and accepting the cost of living the Christian life. In terms of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 this means things like “patient enduring”, “being faithful unto death”, not worshiping idols or practicing sexual immorality, “conquering and keeping [Christ’s] works until the end”, keeping Christ’s word and not denying his name. These are all different ways of speaking about being serious about living the Christian life, denying self to follow Christ, continuing to confess Christ before men even when that results in mockery or scorn or economic hardship or death.

So there is a call in these verses to examine ourselves and our lives. What is written here is a great encouragement for those who fit the description of faithful saints – dying for Christ and not worshipping the

beast. But that description is a warning for those confess Christ but who are not serious about the life of sacrifice, obedience, and service.

But at the same time we must remember that this does not mean perfection, it does not mean sinlessness. Jesus lived and died and rose again so that sinners might be saved. Every saved person is a sinner saved by grace. Jesus does not snuff out the burning wick or break the bruised reed. Both of these things are true at the same time. Those who are truly saved will be serious about living the Christian life. Those who are truly saved are weak, far from what they ought to be and they are trusting in Jesus for forgiveness and a right standing before God.

This passage also has a warning to unbelievers – to those who refuse to submit to God and accept his salvation in Christ. Verse 5 says that “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” There is a contrast here between those who die in the Lord and those who die as unbelievers – as enemies of God. When believers die they actually come to life as we have seen. When unbelievers die, they do not come to life until the thousand years are ended. Unbelievers who die in their sins do not participate in the blessedness that these verses describe for believers. The text says that they did not come to life until the 1000 years are ended.

It also teaches that the second death has power over them. It says that the second death has no power over believers who die in the Lord, but the clear implication is that it does have power over those who die in their sins. So when they die they do not come to life until the 1000 years are ended. And at that time they will experience the second death. The second death is defined for us in Revelation 10:14 which says “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”

So the second death is hell – eternal punishment in the lake of fire. The reality of hell is very, very sobering. But it is the clear teaching of the word of God and it is part of the background for the good news of the gospel. Hell is what we all deserve. Hell is what we are saved from if we are followers of Jesus. Unbelievers are warned of the reality of hell and exhorted to flee the wrath to come. Jesus is proclaimed as the one who suffered the wrath of God in our place so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

But the emphasis of these verses is on the positive. Hear again the words of verse 6, “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.”

This is here for the comfort and encouragement of the followers of Christ. These verses describe the current blessedness of those who have died in the Lord and it describes what lies before us after this life if we are following Jesus. There is not a lot of detail in the biblical description of the state of believers after they die, but there is enough to comfort us and encourage us as we live this life in the here and now. We will sit on thrones. We will be given authority to judge. We will experience the fullness of life to a much greater degree. We will

reign with Christ. We will be priests of God and of Christ. We will be blessed and holy sharing in the first resurrection.

So take heart people of God. Life is rich and precious, but it can also be difficult and we all suffer to some extent. And before us all is the end of this earthly life. But as believers the glory that awaits us puts our present life into the perspective of eternity. We live now knowing that the best is yet to come. Physical death is a reality that must be faced, but we face it knowing that Jesus has conquered death and after our physical death we will enter into life in a way far beyond what we have known on this earth. So let us live in the light of that hope. May it encourage us in the fight. May it help us to prioritize what will matter then. Let us follow Jesus “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Hebrews 12:2)