

THE 1,000 YEARS OF REVELATION 20 (2)

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II. The Reign of the Saints (4-6)

In our exposition of the millennium of Revelation 20:1-10, we now come to verses 4-6 which speak of the reign of the saints.¹ First, these saints are disembodied souls, that is, they are believers who are physically dead, but who are alive in their souls. Verse 4 begins, “And I *saw*” (just to remind us that this is still a vision) “thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus.” The passage says “souls,” but someone could object that sometimes this means simply “people.” True. The Bible tells us, for instance, that seventy souls came to Egypt (Gen. 46:26-27), and this does not mean seventy disembodied spirits; it means seventy people (in body and soul). But here we are told in Revelation 20:4 that these are souls who have been beheaded, and so they have died physically. They are disembodied souls.

The second point is that these saints are in heaven and not on earth. Where else would those saints be who have died physically and live in their souls? If you look at Revelation 6:9-11, you will see the souls of the saints presented as being under the altar in heaven. We are told in Revelation 20:4 that these souls, who have been beheaded, sit on thrones, and thrones are always heavenly in the book of Revelation. Take a concordance and check it out. Moreover, we read of these souls that they are reigning with Christ, and He (in His body) is in heaven.

Third, these disembodied souls in heaven are not only those who have been literally beheaded; they are all the believers in heaven. In the book of Revelation, all the saints are presented as martyrs. We are martyrs since we are hated by the world because we belong to Jesus Christ. The world hates Him and therefore it hates us. We are martyrs, too, because all saints are persecuted by this world. By definition, you cannot be a saint in this fallen world without being persecuted. Persecution comes in different forms and in varying degrees, but all saints are hated and are persecuted. Romans 8:36 declares, “As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all

¹The speech from which this two-part article is derived can be listened to on-line (www.cprc.co.uk/m3u/1000years.m3u).

the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” Paul does not mean just himself; he means all Christians, all those who are elect and called. “For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” is a quotation from Psalm 44:22. It is always this way (both in Old and New Testament days) with God’s beloved people. All Christians fit the characteristics of Revelation 20:4. All persevere in holiness in a godless world. Though the degree of our persecution varies, in principle, all Christians are slain because hatred, as the Bible teaches (cf. Matt. 5:22; I John 3:15), is principally murder and the world hates God’s children.

As describing the disembodied souls of saints in heaven, Revelation 20:4-6 speaks of the intermediate state of the righteous. “Intermediate” means the period in the middle. It is the period in between what we currently experience on earth and the eternal state. When we die, we enter the intermediate state in our souls with Christ in heaven. After that is the eternal state that begins with the bodily resurrection. Thus Revelation 20:4-6 speaks of the intermediate state (between our present life and the eternal state). It teaches us where we are going to be when we die and what it is going to be like. The life of the people of God after death is a life of reigning as kings. We read of “thrones” (4), which means we are kings, and as kings on thrones we exercise dominion and rule over heaven and earth in union with Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. That life is also one in which we offer sacrifices of praise to God as priests, for verse 6 calls us “priests of God and of Christ.” This is a most exalted priesthood enjoyed by the saints, a greater priesthood even than that exercised by Aaron or Jehoiada in the Old Testament. It will also be a life of adjudicating as judges. In the future, we, who are judged unworthy by the world, will judge the world. This rich life as kings and priests and judges is a life with Jesus Christ and in His presence. Thus verse 6 says, “*Blessed and holy* is he that hath part in the first resurrection.” This is the state of all the dead who die in Christ, including many people whom we have known. This is where they are today, and this is the life that we personally shall enjoy with Jesus Christ at our death, unless He returns first.

Revelation 20:5 states, “This is the first resurrection.” This first resurrection is not the bodily resurrection because John tells us that he saw the souls of them that were beheaded. It is not regeneration either, for although regeneration is spoken of in the Bible as a resurrection, these souls are in heaven and not on earth. The first resurrection is the intermediate state of those who die in Jesus Christ, it is their being raised to heavenly glory. Thus verse 4 describes the state of the righteous dead

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in heaven, and the first part of verse 5 excludes unbelievers from this blessedness: “the rest of the dead lived not” (there is no Greek equivalent for the word “again” in the AV) “until the thousand years were finished”—they do not have a part in that glorious life in heaven. Then it says, “This is the first resurrection.” Verse 6 continues, “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection.”

If the first resurrection is the resurrection of the soul of the believer into heaven at death, what is the second resurrection? The second resurrection is the resurrection of the body of the believer at the return of Jesus Christ. Thus the first resurrection concerns the soul of the believer; the second resurrection concerns his body. The first resurrection occurs at death; the second resurrection occurs at the return of Jesus Christ. So what is resurrected at the first resurrection? The soul. What is resurrected at the second resurrection? The body. When does it take place? The first resurrection occurs at death; the second resurrection at the second coming of Christ. Our first resurrection at death *and* our second resurrection at Christ’s return *together* effect the perfect transformation of the believer, both soul and body when we shall perfectly bear the image of Jesus Christ.

After looking at the first and, by implication, the second resurrection with respect to believers, we need to consider “the second death” (6, 14) and, by implication, the first death. What does Revelation 20 teach about this second death? Verse 6 says that the second death is not for the believer: “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: *on such the second death hath no power.*” So believers do not experience the second death. Verse 14 states concerning the second death, “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” The second death, then, is eternal punishment in the flames of the lake of fire. So while the first and second resurrections in Revelation 20 are for the believer, the (first and) second deaths are for the unbeliever. And if the second death of the unbeliever is the lake of fire, which is torment in body and soul, the first death is their intermediate state, hell, which is torment in soul.

I am going to run through it again in order to parallel the two. What happens to the believer? At death, he experiences the first resurrection: he lives with Christ in heaven in his soul. At Christ’s return, he receives the second resurrection: he lives with Christ in the new heavens and new earth in body and soul. This view of the resurrection, the first resurrection being that of the soul at death and the second resurrection being that of the body at Christ’s return, accords with the *Heidelberg*

Catechism (Q. & A. 57).² What happens to the unbeliever? What is his first death? That is when he dies in his body and he, in his soul, enters the intermediate state for the wicked. Like the rich man in Luke 16, he lifts up his eyes in hell being in torments. The second death occurs when, at Christ's return (and the general resurrection and the final judgment), his body and soul are cast into the lake of fire to endure eternal punishment.

Thus Revelation 20:4-6 tells us about what is happening with the church both in heaven and, by implication, on earth during the thousand years. On earth, between the first and second comings of Christ, Christians are tempted to commit idolatry: to worship the beast and his image, and to receive his mark (4). The Christian church is always tempted by the world and the false church to commit idolatry, and so I John 5:21 commands, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." This temptation to idolatry will intensify with the deeper apostasy as our Lord's return draws nearer (cf. II Thess. 2:3-4, 7, 9-12). This means, second, that faithful Christians are persecuted when they refuse to commit idolatry and worship the beast in whatever form he is manifested through the New Testament age. Then at death, Christians live and reign and judge with Christ in heaven in their souls (the first resurrection), where the blessed dead currently are, awaiting the second resurrection, which is the resurrection of the body at the personal return of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven.

What can we say about the unbelievers during the New Testament or millennial age? They live in sin and the hatred of God and they tempt and persecute the church (Rev. 20:4). Each of the ungodly at his first (physical) death is cast into hell in his soul; then at the second death he is cast into the lake of fire where he is tormented in both body and soul.

III. Satan's Little Season, Gog and Magog and the Final Battle (7-10)

At the end of the millennium or New Testament era, "Satan shall be loosed out of his prison" (7), that is, as verse 8 specifies, he "shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together

²Q. What comfort doth the 'resurrection of the body' afford thee?

A. That not only my soul after this life shall be immediately taken up to Christ its head [i.e., the first resurrection]; but also, that this my body, being raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and made like unto the glorious body of Christ [i.e., the second resurrection]."

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to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.” This period is called “a little season” (3). From this we get the phrase “Satan’s little season.” And why “little season?” Because it is a brief period. It is a brief period, especially when compared to the thousand years. Satan is bound for a thousand years. Then he is allowed a little season, in which he carries out his dastardly plan (for a while), and so fulfils God’s eternal purpose. What does Satan do in this little season? He gathers Gog and Magog to battle (8).

The first and only reference to Gog and Magog in the Old Testament is in Ezekiel 38 and 39. Gog is presented as a chief prince and Magog is a people or country. The idea of Ezekiel 38 and 39 is that Gog and Magog constitute a particularly evil, fierce and numerous enemy. They are a vast army that swarms and destroys. They come up to attack the people of God, and then the Almighty comes and destroys them suddenly.

Revelation 20 picks up this reference to Gog and Magog in Ezekiel, and presents Gog and Magog as the final, great enemy that attacks God’s church. Gog and Magog are not Russia or China. In fact, they are not any particular individual nation at all. They are described in verse 8 under three names. First, they are called “the nations:” “Satan shall go out to deceive the nations.” Second, more specifically, the nations “which are in the four quarters of the earth.” Third, they are called “Gog and Magog,” a fearsome enemy mentioned in Ezekiel 38-39. If you put these details together, Gog and Magog, that terrible enemy described in the Old Testament, are the nations in the four quarters of the earth, all the ungodly of the world.

More particularly, God and Magog are the wicked world, as it is united under Satan who, being released and loosed, gathers all the ungodly together to persecute and destroy the saints (Rev. 20:9). Satan has his man over them; he is called “the man of sin” in II Thessalonians 2 or “antichrist” in I John 2:18 or “the beast” in the book of Revelation. Revelation also explains the role of the false prophet as one who seduces the nations with his lying propaganda so that they enlist in the service of the beast. Through Antichrist, aided by the false prophet, Satan gathers Gog and Magog to the final battle.

Revelation 20:9 says that Gog and Magog, the ungodly nations of the four quarters of the earth, “went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city.” We need to specify who this “camp,” this

“beloved city” (Jerusalem), is. This camp and this beloved city are *not* national Israel and the earthly Jerusalem. This camp of the saints, this beloved city, is the New Testament church of Jesus Christ. I say this because the New Testament teaches explicitly and repeatedly that we are the true Jews. We, Gentile and Jewish believers in Christ, are “the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3). He is not a Jew who is one outwardly whose circumcision is in the flesh; he is Jew who is one inwardly, who is circumcised in the heart and by the Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29). What does the word “Jew” mean? It means “praise” (29). Who are the people who praise God? First, the Messiah and, second, all those who are in Him. They are the only humans who truly praise God. Galatians 4:26 states that “Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.” That is the Jerusalem in which we are supremely interested, the one that is above and not the one that is in the Middle East. Hebrews 12:22 speaks to this same subject as well. It says to New Testament believers (over against the earthly, unbelieving nation of the Jews), “ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”

Identifying the “beloved city” in Revelation 20:9 as the church, practically defines the nature of the battle. It is a vision: there is a massive army, coming from all the quarters of the earth, surrounding this city. The reality portrayed by the vision is that all the ungodly will systematically and unitedly persecute the true church wherever she is found throughout the world. This persecution takes various forms, as the book of Revelation describes. Believers will be unable to buy or sell (13:16-17). This has happened in various places at certain times, and it will intensify as the end approaches. Then there is the mark of the beast: you will have to identify openly with the antichristian system and Antichrist himself, and you will have to worship the beast and his image, or you will die (20:4). All the world wonders after the beast with all its false miracles and power and popularity, apart from the faithful saints (13:1-18). Then, just when everything looks bleakest for the church of Christ on earth, fire comes down from God in heaven and devours Antichrist and all his forces (20:9).

This is the second coming of Jesus Christ for judgment, described in much the same way as it is presented in II Thessalonians 2:8, when Antichrist shall be destroyed with the brightness of Christ’s coming. The Lord shall consume the man of sin with the spirit of His mouth and shall destroy him with the brightness of His coming. In Revelation 19:19, this same battle is spoken of: “I saw the beast, and the

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kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war” (literally “*the war*” or “*the battle*”) “against him that sat upon the horse, and against his army.”³ Revelation 16:14 speaks of this same battle: “They are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to *the battle* of that great day of God Almighty.” It is called the battle of “Armageddon” in verse 16: “And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon.” Then all the ungodly are destroyed, and the beast and the false prophet and Satan are captured and cast into the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10).

So to what sort of a world does Christ return? He does not come back to a converted or Christianised world. He returns, to take up the imagery of Revelation 20, for a remnant church, for the nations on the four quarters of the earth are gathered together against one, besieged city. This is a picture of a minority, certainly not of a majority. Christ returns to punish an ungodly world dominated by Antichrist, who reigns over the whole earth, and to deliver His beloved people.

This does not destroy my hope because my hope is not that all the nations of the earth will one day be Christianised. My hope is that “blessed hope,” namely, “the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13), when all the elect have been saved. Then all the wickedness of Satan, man and the fallen angels will be judged; every wrong will be righted; all the elect church will be gathered, perfected and vindicated; and we shall be prepared with new, glorified, resurrection bodies for the bliss of the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwells righteousness for ever. Sorrow, tears, pain and death will be no more; God’s name will be worshipped in all the world; Christ’s name shall be in our foreheads and we shall see His face! “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection” ... and in the second resurrection!

³Two sermons on “The Last Battle” (Rev. 19:11-21) are available on-line (www.cprfextra.co.uk/lastbattle1.m3u; www.cprfextra.co.uk/lastbattle2.m3u).