

THE HEAVENLY GLORY OF THE SAINTS

“Then I saw thrones and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its marks on their forehead or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with Him a thousand years”.

(Revelation 20: 4-6)

In the previous section I wrote about the binding of Satan as it was revealed to the apostle John in visionary form and recorded in the first three verses of Revelation 20. I concluded that this binding of Satan, lasting a thousand years (which denotes a full and complete period of time) takes place with the completion of Christ's earthly ministry and His ascension to heaven.

We also saw how this "millennium" is characterized as a time in which the progress of the Gospel will continue unto the ends of the earth. Satan loses his control of the world, so that he cannot deceive the nations any more. The mandate which Christ gave to His apostles, "To Me is given all authority in heaven and on earth. . . go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . ." (Matthew 28: 18, 19) is a difficult task but not an impossible mandate.

MANY MARTYRS

I suggested that this vision will have been of immense comfort for the believers in John's time who were being persecuted and killed for their faith in Jesus. John himself was exiled, and many others were put to death for refusing to offer incense to the Roman emperor.

It is evident from the entire book of Revelation that the "binding of Satan" does not mean that there will not be any casualties on the earth. A fierce battle is going on, and while Satan is bound and cannot stop the progress of the Gospel and prevent the gathering of the holy catholic church, he still persecutes the believers. In the latter days they have entered "the great tribulation" (Revelation 7: 14).

It is clear, then, that the millennium is not an age of undisturbed peace. Many will have to give their lives for the faith. Others will be sorely pressed not to succumb to the cult of the beast. The question arises, "What will happen to those who die in that period of time? Will they, in fact, not go under in Satan's campaign, despite the glorious rule of Christ?"

THE SCENE SHIFTS

The vision continues in this passage. But now the scene shifts from earth to heaven. John may see and proclaim what happens to those who during this time die in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are told that they reign with Christ in heaven and so consciously await the great day of the coming of the Lord.

It is not the first time in the book of Revelation that John has seen and recorded such visions of the heavenly glory of the saints. In chapter 6 he gives us the vision of the souls under the altar. Chapter 7 provides us with the vision of the great multitude before the throne of God. This is repeated in chapter 14, where the 144,000 are mentioned. From various angles the same comfort has been made known. And now, in chapter 20, it is made known again, and in even greater depth and riches, so that we will never doubt that Christ is risen and has ascended and that we may sit with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2: 6)

We now examine the vision concerning the heavenly glory of the saints during

the time when Satan is bound. We will see how their earthly faithfulness is vindicated and their heavenly bliss ensured.

THRONES AND SOULS

After the binding of Satan, we read in verse 4, “Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. . . .” It does not say here exactly where these thrones are located. Many scholars who believe in a literal millennium – Christ returning to earth to rule for exactly 1000 years – assume that these thrones are located on the earth, most likely in the city of Jerusalem from where, according to them, Christ will reign during that time. But it should be noted that whenever thrones are mentioned in the book of Revelation, these are always presented as being in heaven. Consistent exegesis, therefore, will take these thrones also as located in heaven.

The number of the thrones is not specified either. It remains indefinite. That is in keeping with the dynamic character of the last ages. What is made clear is the position of those who sit on the thrones. A “throne” symbolically indicates a place of honour, of rulership and judgment. So it says that those seated on the thrones are “those to whom to judgment was committed.”

Note well, it does not say *the* judgment, as if the final judgement is given to those on the thrones, for it is reserved for Christ, who will come to judge the living and the dead. It says only “judgment.” This means that those on the thrones have the right and authority to make certain judgments in keeping with God’s will, and so to partake in Christ’s heavenly rule and authority.

Those who sit on the thrones do not have this right of themselves, for it is committed to them, literally: *given* to them. Also in heaven, rule by God’s children is not a matter of merit but of grace. God’s sovereign grace extends from earth to heaven.

So far we still have not clearly identified who are seated on these thrones. But John continues the description. We read, “Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the Word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.” It is clear that those seated on the thrones are the same as “the souls” which John sees. For of these “souls” we read that they “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” This reigning with Christ is evident in their being seated on the thrones.

So it is clear who are seated on the thrones. They are the saints who have died. Their “souls” are taken up to Christ in heaven where they may rule with Him. It says in verse 4 that “they came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years,” but we can best translate “and they *lived* and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” They did not, as it were, die for a while and then come to life again, but they lived with Christ from the moment they left this life on earth. I’ll come back to that later.

TWO GROUPS OF SAINTS?

In the description of the saints in heaven, John makes a distinction which has led to some discussion. It appears that there are two “groups” – if I may use that word – of saints in heaven: those who have been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and the Word of God – the martyrs – and those who had not worshipped the beast and its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands – the other faithful. Some explainers take these words to denote one and the same group: only the martyrs. Others admit that two groups are mentioned here, but conclude that only the martyred saints (those beheaded) come to sit on thrones in heaven while the others do not receive this special honour.

What to think of this? In the book of Revelation special mention is indeed made of those who gave their lives in the service of the Lord. But not everyone is called to make that sacrifice. Everyone is called to be faithful to the Lord Jesus and to serve Him alone. Here in our text both groups – the martyrs and the other faithful who were perhaps not martyred – are mentioned in one breath. I therefore understand it in this way: they all live and they may all reign with Christ throughout the time of the millennium.

Rather than noticing any distinction, I see here the *unity* of the heavenly church. All those who have remained faithful, even unto death when required, may go to Christ and rule with Him in heaven. That is the simple and yet awesome significance of what John sees.

VINDICATION IN HEAVEN

So the souls of faithful believers are taken up to heaven and there they may share already in the glory and victory of Christ, reigning with Him for the duration of the thousand years, that is, until Christ returns in glory on the clouds of heaven. They take an active part in the millennium, praising God before His throne, calling upon Him, making righteous judgments, reflecting His glory.

All who die in the Lord are glorified and beatified. We may even use the word vindicated. For that is what is described here in this text. Just think of it, on earth these people were vilified and persecuted. They were stripped of their rights and lost their possessions. They were constantly being forced to the fringe of society, set under a massive boycott. They did not receive any consideration or compassion but were treated brutally and cruelly as the worst elements of human society.

But in heaven they are immediately vindicated for their faithfulness on earth, even unto death. Their earthly work and suffering were not in vain, but reap a great reward of grace.

FAITHFULNESS ON EARTH

Notice how this earthly faithfulness is described. They have, first, remained faithful to “the testimony of Jesus and the Word of God.” They did not deny Christ before men, but lived and spoke as Christians. They stood for the truth of the Word

of God. They were at all times confessing Christians who in word and deed showed their faith.

It also says: they had not worshipped the beast or its image. They did not partake in the idolatry of the last ages. They kept the antithesis between church and world. Therefore they “did not receive the mark of the beast on their foreheads or on their hands.” They were not a part of the grey mass of sinners and idolaters, but were known by another mark, Holy Baptism, which is the ensign of Christ and the sign of their being set aside from this world in fellowship with Him and His saints.

Because of their faithfulness while on earth, they are granted heavenly glory. You realize that this portrait of earthly faithfulness is given also for our instruction. Here on earth is where the decision falls. Here it is where we must show forth our Christian character and example, where we must be professing Christians who are not ashamed of Christ and His Word, and do not partake in the sinful culture and cultus (false worship) of this world. This is difficult in itself, and will become even more difficult as time progresses and the delusion of mankind increases.

Here lies the great test and task for every generation, for us as well. Will we keep the testimony of Jesus and the Word of God? Will we not go under in the delusion and deception which is growing steadily? This text is an appeal from God that we today discern the real issues, fight the good fight of faith, run the race to the end. We must endure! I think of what we find in Hymn 39, “If we endure – so Christ has said – we’ll also reign with Him our Head.”

When our earthly faithfulness has thus been shown, our heavenly bliss is ensured.

THE REST OF THE DEAD

It says in verse 5, “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.” These are difficult and much disputed words, but we’ll try to understand them in the light of the context.

It is clear that faithful believers will *live* with Christ in heaven throughout the millennium (verse 4). If we accept that as the proper understanding of verse 4, then the “rest of the dead” must mean those who have died in unbelief. The “souls” in heaven are indeed the souls of people who have also died. When they die, their bodies go into the grave, and their souls to Christ.

But it is not so with “the rest of the dead”. It says of them that “they did not come to life” until the thousand years were ended. It is again better to translate: they did not *live* until the thousand years were ended. That means: they died and were in the state of death until the return of Christ when the great resurrection of all people takes place. Until that time, they are kept in the realm of the dead, in Sheol. I think here of Psalm 49: 4:

Into Sheol like sheep they headlong run
Their shepherd, Death, stands by to urge them on

They all go down directly to the grave. . .
But God will pay my ransom and not leave me,
For He into His glory will receive me.

THE FIRST RESURRECTION

The words, “this is the first resurrection,” have given rise to various interpretations. Literal millennialists take them to mean: when the thousand year reign comes, only the believers will rise; the unbelievers will follow after the “millennium.” So the first resurrection would be that of the believers, and the second that of the unbelievers. But that is not consistent with biblical teaching, which makes clear that there is essentially only one resurrection, either to eternal glory or eternal agony.

Therefore the words “the first resurrection” must refer to the saints who go to heaven at their death. It is used, then, in a figurative sense. Some who follow this line of thinking disagree on the detail whether all the saints go to heaven or just the martyred ones. As indicated, I see here the same reality for all who die in the Lord. They all participate in the glory of heaven according to the measure of God’s grace. This is called “the first resurrection.” It is not the final resurrection, when their souls are united with their bodies, but the first one.

Is this not in keeping with Christ’s teaching, for example in John 11, in the history of Lazarus? When Jesus said to Martha, “Your brother shall rise again,” Martha took it to refer to the great resurrection. Christ did not deny that, but said something much more profound, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (11: 25, 26). Is this not an awesome reality of which Israel already sang in Psalm 17,

But I, when I awake, shall see
Thy face in righteousness and glory
O with Thy likeness then before me
How rich and full my joy shall be!

Dead, yet alive. Dead for the world; alive before Christ. Who lives and believes, shall never die. When we die, we indeed leave behind our earthly bodies, but it is a dying unto sin and an entrance into eternal life (Lord’s Day 16). It is not a dying in the final and devastating sense of the word, for we experience at our death “the first resurrection”! In that sense it can be said of the believers that they shall never die.

THE SECOND DEATH

Notice how we then read in our text a beatitude: “Blessed is he who shares in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power.” If there is a *first*

resurrection, there is apparently also a *second* death. With this “second death” is meant “the lake of fire” (see verse 14); it is a being consigned to hell as righteous punishment for sin.

What John writes is consistent. Those who partake in the first resurrection, who go to Christ when they die, shall not go under in the second death, that is, be cast into hell on the day of judgement, but they shall enter into everlasting blessedness. Of this eternal bliss John may assure the church.

If there is a *second* death, there is also a *first* death. The first is when we leave this earth. We have seen that for believers this is already called “the first resurrection.” Death for a child of God is not a sinking into darkness but an entrance into eternal life. The unbelievers are also resurrected, but only to be cast into the lake of fire. They go from death to death, from being dead temporarily to eternal death, an everlasting experiencing of God’s wrath.

But those who share in the first resurrection have nothing to fear from the second death. Instead they are called “blessed.” We read that “they shall be priests of God and of Christ,” already during the thousand years. Priests and kings. Is that not the designation of God’s people in the Scriptures? Think of what Peter wrote in his first letter, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of the darkness to His marvellous light. . .” (I Peter 2: 9).

A royal priesthood. You do not always see that here on earth. But it is surely evident in heaven, throughout the latter ages. And on Christ’s great day it will become evident in all its final glory, for then comes for the believers (to continue the phraseology of the text) the second resurrection, the great resurrection, when their souls are reunited with their bodies and they may live on the new earth together with God in perfect harmony! Only then is God’s work of restoration complete and is the restoration of life perfect.

HOW LONG, O LORD?

Until that day of Christ’s coming, the saints – in heaven and on earth – do not cease to call out: how long, O Lord? For the vision of the glory of the saints during the binding of Satan gives us a picture of an interim period, not of the final situation. As much as we appreciate the interim situation, we still long for the finale and the finish: the day of the great resurrection and the restoration of body and soul on the new earth.

This vision concerning the glory of the saints in heaven is given to the church so that we would be comforted in all trials and motivated to steadfastness in service. And as we progress in time, and Satan is loosed for a little while, we will have to fall back more and more on the truth of this vision. When everything in this world is taken away from us, this will be our surety and hope.

The Lord knows how difficult it is for us to persevere. It takes much struggle and prayer. In Revelation 2 the church at Smyrna is specifically warned about

coming tribulation. The Lord knows what His children must suffer for His sake. But He says there, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. . . . He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death” (2: 11).

Christ said it already when He was still on earth with His disciples: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell” (Matthew 10:28). Do not fear the world. Do not fear the first death. Fear only God, for He alone can save us from eternal damnation.

Let this be our surety and hope, also in times when we are faced not with persecution but certainly with much deception. Do not be fooled, the deception today is massive and widespread. Do not worship the beast or wear its mark. For then you face certain doom. But keep the testimony of Jesus and the Word of God. Fear Him who redeems you, body and soul, from everlasting damnation. And let it be here and now in this life your song:

Surely the righteous will adore Thee
And give their thanks to Thy great Name
The upright all will stand before Thee
And there Thy faithfulness proclaim” (Psalm 140: 10).