

Revelation

Part Fifty-One
Reigning With Christ
(Revelation 20:4-6)

With Study Questions

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And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then *I saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received *his* mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy *is* he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years (Revelation 20:4-6).

Introduction

As previously mentioned, this twentieth chapter of Revelation is, above all, a missionary chapter. Christ has given the Great Commission—that we are to make disciples of the nations (Matthew 28:18-20). To the twelve apostles—to the entire first century church—this would appear a daunting task. How could it be that this first century, middle eastern Man would be the Savior and Redeemer of the world? As far-fetched of an idea that this would seem to many today, it had to border on some level of fantasy to those who first heard it.

How could this possibly be accomplished?

It can be accomplished because the load bearing wall of deception has been compromised. That which was necessary—or *he* who was necessary—for the nations to continue to believe the lie has been bound. This is what the first three verses in this twentieth chapter of Revelation tell us. But this chapter should not be read as if the endeavor of loving and redeeming, of overcoming the lie, leaves those who are redeemed in a state of inactivity.

Remember, chapter nineteen portrays Christ on a white horse, battling through history “**clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His**

name is called The Word of God” (Revelation 19:13). And even though His garment is the only one **“dipped in blood”** there are others in fine linen on **“white horses” (Revelation 19:14).**

We are not, if you will, brought into this game of redemption as those who sit on the bench. Everyone on the team is in the game.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received *his* mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

Thrones

What are these thrones? Who is sitting on them? What are they doing?

What are these thrones? We should not view these thrones as literal pieces of furniture. A throne carries the notion of glory, authority and judgment (Matthew 25:31; Luke 1:32; Matthew 19:28). It is enough to give one pause! Let us recall that this is precisely what Jesus said He would give to those who overcome and keeps His works to the end. It was to the first century church in Thyatira that Jesus said,

But hold fast what you have till I come. ²⁶ And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations –²⁷ *‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’* – as I also have received from My Father (Revelation 2:25-27).

And to first century church of Laodicea, He promises,

To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (Revelation 3:21).

Who is sitting on them? This language of sitting on thrones is nothing new in Revelation. But just who is it that is sitting on these thrones? Keep in mind, that the above two promises are made to faithful Christians in the first century church.

One might be tempted to read the fourth verse of chapter twenty as if it is reserved exclusively for martyrs or some higher tiered Christian. But it is perfectly acceptable to read this description as simply including all who persevere in the faith. Those **“beheaded”** to be sure. But also, those **“who [hoitines can be translated ‘whoever’] had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads and hands.”** In other words, those who have remained faithful. All of them-the universal church.

Let us recall that the mark of the beast on the foreheads and hands was a parody of the mark of God (Deuteronomy 6:6-8; Ezekiel 9:3-6; Revelation 7:2-4). The forehead and hand refer to how we think and behave-faith and its attending works. It wasn't that they merely refused some mark. They had a different mark-marked by God as His.

Add to this how the Scriptures have already indicated where believers sit...

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6).

As we have mentioned numerous times, we don't want to come to one of most difficult books in the Bible and reinterpret that which has already been taught. We have already been taught that we are seated with Him in the heavenly places. This is simply, but boldly, reinforced in this chapter.

What are they/we doing? The bigger question may be, what are we called to do on these thrones? We are told that we reign with Christ. In all candor, this language makes me a bit uncomfortable. This language of reigning can appeal to some very dark instincts in humanity. The so-called Holy Roman Empire comes to mind.

One thinks of the interaction between Thomas Aquinas and Pope Innocent II when the pope was counting a large sum of money. The pope quipped (in reference to Peter and the lame man in Acts 3), “You see, Thomas, the church can no longer say, ‘Silver and gold have I none,’ to which Thomas responded, ‘True, holy father, neither can she now say, rise and walk.’”

Our natural discomfort (at least for some) of reigning with Christ has to do with a carnal/worldly definition of what it means to reign. There is a dark and oft used temptation to use positions of leadership, power and authority (husbands, politicians, fathers, elders) in a self-serving manner. But Jesus, as the head of the church, did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom (Matthew 20:28).

Some have said that reign is analogous to worship. Others have suggested, with some merit, that this reign appeals back to dominion mandate at creation. At creation mankind was commissioned by God to have dominion over the fish and birds and cattle and all things (Genesis 1:26-28). We were called to be faithful stewards of God’s creation; the ultimate environmentalists if you will. As in Psalm eight.

What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? ⁵ For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor. ⁶ You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all *things* under his feet, ⁷ All sheep and oxen – Even the beasts of the field, ⁸ The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea That pass through the paths of the seas. ⁹ O Lord, our Lord, How excellent *is* Your name in all the earth (Psalm 8:4-9)!

Of course, this reigning servanthood goes beyond the mere physical environment. Paul addresses the battle this kingdom of priests are to engage in.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, ⁵ casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the

knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

The entire creation went off kilter at the fall. We are called to participate in the restoration. And that restoration pertains to **“every thought.”**

Again, this should not be thought of as some new doctrine. It is all contained in the Great Commission. We are to make disciples. These disciples are to be baptized. Then they are to be taught to obey all Christ commanded.

But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years (Revelation 20:5, 6).

First Resurrection

The **“rest of the dead”** are those who have died in unbelief and are awaiting the final judgment at the end of the millennium, which marks the end of history.

John then beckons back to **“the first resurrection”** of which there is a great deal of speculation. This would be a premiere example of reading perhaps the most difficult chapter in the Bible and revamping the clear teaching of the previous sixty-five books.

Today’s most popular view has multiple resurrections. Dr. Bahnsen said he has read premillennialists who have up to seven. But at very least, the assertion that there are two or (mostly) three resurrections dominate the current evangelical culture. It is taught that there is a resurrection before the Tribulation (often called the rapture). Another resurrection at the end of the Tribulation (of Tribulation saints/martyrs). Then a third resurrection (of the unsaved) at the end of the millennium.

But the rest of Scripture does not allow for multiple resurrections. In the final resurrection and judgment, the sheep and the goats stand together (Matthew 25:31-46). Their judgment and resurrections are not separated by a thousand years. Jesus speaks of a resurrection happening in a single hour.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28, 29).

The same is taught in Daniel 12:2 and in Matthew 13:24-30 in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares and many other places. Both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed speak, not of the resurrections, but the resurrection of the dead. Inserting multiple physical resurrections into this chapter creates a system unseen in prior books in the Bible and should, at very least, be a last resort.

So, what is this **“first resurrection?”** Some say it is speaking of the resurrection of Christ. Christ is said to be the **“first-fruits”** in His resurrection, followed by those who are His at His coming (1 Corinthians 15:23). The upside of this is that it is theologically accurate and doesn't require overhaul of our basic, Biblical theology.

Another (and I believe more likely) view is that the first resurrection is speaking of a spiritual resurrection. In the same way the first death and second death are different types of death (one physical and the other spiritual), there are two types of resurrections.

John (the same author who wrote Revelation) speaks this way in his gospel. In John 5:24 John writes of a passing from death to life spiritually:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life (John 5:24).

This is followed almost immediately by a reference to a physical resurrection life.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those

who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28, 29).

Add to this how our regeneration (being born again) is often referred to in resurrection terms.

...even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),⁶ and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:5, 6).

...buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with *Him* through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead (Colossians 2:12).

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

And, as the very passage indicates, it is due to the first resurrection that the “**second death has no power**” over us. The reason the second death has no power over us is, at least primarily, not because of a physical resurrection, but because of a rebirth.

It would appear from this passage that this kingdom of priests (which is what the Bible says Christians are-1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6) are to exercise this Great Commission without fear of death. Even the beheaded are living and reigning with Christ. And if we belong to Christ, we may still die, but the second death has lost its sting. And this is the death which should concern people.

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

In summary, so far from this being a record of events that happen after the Second Coming, this passage is a glorious call to participate in

what God is currently doing in history. The liar and the lies he tells will no longer be dominant. But in order for the lies to be quelled, the truth must be told. To reign with Christ means to herald that truth. H. B. Swete writes of the direction this should take.

The picture presented to the mind is that of a state of society in which Christian opinion is dominant, and positions of influence and authority are held by believers and not, as in the age of St John, by pagans and persecutors.¹

When the Revelation was written, to herald that truth often meant death-“**accounted sheep for the slaughter**” (Romans 8:36).

But we are not to be governed by fear; even fear of death.

I was one year old when Jim Elliot went to Ecuador to evangelize. He was twenty-eight and almost immediately killed by a very violent Huaorani tribe. Shortly thereafter, his wife, Elisabeth Elliot courageously went to the same tribe. She was not killed. The ministry continued. Today an estimated twenty percent of the Huaorani are Christians. That is a small slice of the theme of the twentieth chapter of Revelation.

¹ Swete, H. B. (Ed.). (1906). [The apocalypse of St. John](#) (2d. ed., p. 258). New York: The Macmillan Company.

Questions for Study

1. What was necessary for the Great Commission to be fulfilled, according to Revelation 20:1-3 (page 2)?
2. What do thrones represent (page 3)?
3. Who is sitting on the thrones from verse 4 (page 4)?
4. What are those on the thrones doing? Explain (pages 4-6).
5. Discuss what is meant by the first resurrection. What is the promise associated with those who have a part in the first resurrection (pages 6-8)?
6. Can you give an application to the message taught in Revelation 20 (pages 8, 9)?