

**REVELATION 20:4–6.** (EHV)

Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years.

You may have heard of millennials, but that term is used in two different ways. On the one hand it can be used for those born between 1981 and 1996, give or take, and who therefore grew into adults at the turn of the new millennium. They are considered, for instance, the first generation to be truly comfortable with technology, since they grew up alongside the widespread adoption of the internet. By that definition I, for one, am a millennial.

But there is another definition. A millennial can also be someone who believes in the millennium. That is, they believe that there will be a millennium, a thousand-year period, of Christ ruling here on earth, and Christians ruling with him, before the final judgment. It is therefore, according to their view, a period when Christians can anticipate peace and prosperity here on earth. This idea is probably most associated with Baptists, and so you are most likely to encounter it in the Bible Belt in the southern and southeastern United States, but many Protestants throughout the world hold millennial ideas. I was just talking to someone in Winner yesterday who had heard about the millennium, and I'm sure others of you have encountered millennials—maybe more of you than I would guess.

There's one big problem with this idea of the millennium. At the heart of this teaching is a thousand-year period, as indicated by the name *the millennium*. But there is only one passage in all of Scripture that talks about a thousand-year period of ruling, and it's the passage in front of us, the Second Lesson I read earlier. And if we look carefully at these verses, not just in the context of Revelation, but also in the context of the rest of Scripture, we can see that they are *not* talking about a millennium as the religious millennials define it. These verses are rather talking about the two resurrections of the saints.

**1. The First Resurrection**

“Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge.” The apostle John saw this vision after seeing a vision of the devil defeated. John was given his vision to reassure himself and other persecuted and troubled Christians of their victorious reality. Of course, in order to be victorious, you need a defeated enemy. So that was the first thing John saw in this chapter—the devil defeated.

But in order to be victorious, you not only need a defeated party; you also need a victorious party. And that's what John sees next. He sees thrones with people sitting on them, or more precisely, the souls of people, and these people were given the authority to judge. After World War 2, a number of prosecutors representing the Allied powers, including the United States, conducted the Nuremberg trials and sat in judgment on representatives of Nazi Germany,

because the Allies were victorious and Nazi Germany was defeated. In a similar way, the victorious powers John sees here are given the authority to judge the defeated devil and those allied with him.

John now tells us more about these people who have been given the authority to judge, or at least about some of them: “And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God.” Remember that John was given his vision especially to comfort persecuted and troubled Christians. He now sees some of those persecuted Christians, particularly the souls of the people who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. This would have included the souls of John the Baptist, John’s own brother, James, the apostle Paul and others not named in Scripture.

“They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand.” Previously, in Chapter 13, John had seen a vision of two beasts, one representing the antichristian forces in government and another representing the Antichrist and the antichristian forces within the visible Christian church. Since from then on, the antichristian forces in government are simply called “the beast,” while the antichristian forces in the visible Christian church are called “the false prophet,” and since John talks about the mark of “the beast” here, it seems that this mark is related to the antichristian forces in government. In Chapter 13 he said that the beast would make all people receive a mark on their right hands and on their foreheads before they could buy or sell. In other words, people would have to side with them against the Church, they would have to acknowledge the government as the be-all and end-all of life, if they really wanted to prosper and be part of the “in” group.

The souls that John sees wouldn’t do that. They wouldn’t sacrifice their Christian trust and convictions for more money and power and prosperity and security, or even the prospect of such things. In fact, that’s why some of them were beheaded. This is especially good for us to remember as another election approaches. We need to make sure we don’t see government as the be-all and end-all of life, either by thinking that if the election goes the way we want it, it will usher in a golden age for us where everything is right, or by sinking into doom-and-gloom despair if the election doesn’t go the way we want it.

Back to the text. John now tells us that, in spite of what it looked like—that these Christians had died in lowliness, shame, and disgrace—they actually “lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

Let’s start by seeing that this verse is not describing a literal thousand-year period. The easiest way to prove that is for us to consider what type of book Revelation is. You see, if a book is a history book, like Genesis or Ruth or the four Gospels, then our default is to take its information literally, including any designations of time. If a book is actually a letter, like Romans, Colossians, or 1 Corinthians, there too our default will be to take its information literally, unless the context of the letter itself indicates otherwise. So, for instance, when Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians that he went to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, we have no reason to understand that as anything but an actual three-year period—perhaps rounded, but not symbolic. But the book of Revelation is a book about a vision the apostle John had, a vision about the future from his perspective and especially about the end of time. Visions in the Scriptures often contain fantastic and symbolic imagery and a symbolic use of numbers. Books

like this that predominantly consist of visions include large parts of Daniel, the book of Zechariah, and this book, Revelation.

We can even tell from the book of Revelation itself that numbers are used symbolically. We can tell that, first, from the repetition of the same numbers and their multiples over and over again—numbers like three, three and a half, four, seven, ten, and twelve. And we can tell that, second, from instances where something represented by one number is represented by a completely different number elsewhere. For instance, in chapter 14, there are 144,000 people in heaven—a multiple of twelve, incidentally—with the Lamb’s name and the Father’s name written on their foreheads. But earlier, in chapter 7, that same group of people, the human inhabitants of heaven, is called “a great multitude that no one could count.” So clearly the number twelve and its multiples are symbolic. And the same goes for many of the other numbers, like the thousand years mentioned here.

So then what is John seeing, when he sees these souls living and reigning with Christ for a thousand years? He tells us: “(The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection.” He says that what he is seeing is the first resurrection. This should and does make these verses incredibly easy to understand, because guess what? John and the other apostles clearly describe a first death and first resurrection in other books of the New Testament. The first death is the death into which we are all born, the state we inherit by nature. Paul tells us all that we are by nature dead in transgressions and sins, that we are by nature enemies of God and children of his wrath (Eph. 2:1–3).

So the first resurrection is when we are saved from this first death. We call it our conversion. Jesus says in John 5, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He is not going to come into judgment but has crossed over from death to life. Amen, Amen, I tell you: A time is coming and is here now when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who listen will live” (5:24–25). When we hear the Savior’s voice in his institution of baptism, when we hear the Savior’s voice in his proclaimed gospel message, and when we listen to and believe his voice, then we rise from death, spiritually speaking. We walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4). This is the first resurrection of the saints.

And since John says that the rest of the dead, the unbelievers, did not live until the thousand years came to an end, we know exactly what period the thousand years represents, because we know when the unbelievers will come to life—on the Last Day or Judgment Day. So the thousand years represents all the time from when the first person was put to death for their testimony about Jesus up until the end of time. This is the biblical millennium—not a literal period we’re looking forward to, but a symbolic period we are in right now.

Do you see what people are missing out on when they take this millennium as referring to an actual thousand-year period on earth? First of all, instead of placing their hope for a better life in heaven, where God wants their hopes to be directed, they’re placing it in this world, and their hopes will not be realized, because they are unfounded.

Second, they’re missing the comfort Jesus wants to give all believers right now. If you believe in Jesus, if no forces in the visible Christian church or in the world can convince you to deny him or to give up your faith in him as your only Savior, then regardless of how you look in the eyes of the world, regardless of how prosperously you live, regardless of how much you

suffer, regardless of how you die, right now your souls are living and reigning with Christ! John the Baptist, James, Paul, and all the others did not really face the miserable end they appeared to face. Their lives were not snuffed out. Far from it! Their souls live and reign with Christ, and so do yours! They sit enthroned as judges of the defeated devil and those allied with him, and so do you!

This is the first resurrection of the saints. If you are a converted, baptized Christian, you are participating in this resurrection.

## **2. The Second Resurrection**

But John says that's not the only resurrection of the saints. "Blessed and holy"—a saint—"is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years." If you believe in Christ, not only have you been delivered from the first death into which you were born, not only are you one of his priests who can approach God with freedom and confidence, not only does your soul currently reign with him, no matter how things may look, but you also don't have to worry about the second death. That is, you will also participate in the second resurrection.

If the first death is the state into which we are all born, then the second death is what we tend to think of when we think of death—our physical death followed by God's judgment on Judgment Day. If we have a share in the first resurrection through faith in Christ, then the second death has no power over us. Our physical death will not lead to eternal judgment in hell, but we will experience a second resurrection when our bodies rise from the grave on Judgment Day to be reunited with our souls and we go to be with the Lord in heaven forever. This second resurrection is what we are talking about when we confess, "I believe in...the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

You see, when John said that the rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end, it wasn't like he meant that their living then would be a good thing. No, Jesus tells us that all the dead will rise on Judgment Day, but that unbelievers will rise to be condemned (John 5:28–29). In other words, they will "live," that is, rise from the dead, simply so that they can go from one death to another—eternal death in hell, body and soul. Those who are holy, who are saints, through faith in Christ don't need to fear that outcome. The second death has no power over them. They will rise on Judgment Day to go and be with the Lord forever, together with all the saints and angels.

On this All Saints' Sunday, it's good to remember these two resurrections of the saints. Your believing loved ones who have preceded you, whether they are still living or have passed away, they, together with you who believe in Christ, live and reign with Christ.

And one day, the Last Day, they, together with you, will rise with their bodies and meet the Lord in the air. And we will be all together with the Lord forever. And instead of the *souls* of the deceased living and reigning with Christ *for a thousand years*, that is, until the end of the world, all the saints, soul *and body*, will live and reign with Christ *for all eternity*, time without end.

Whatever happens in this election, whatever happens, period, good or bad, be encouraged and encourage one another with these resurrections of the saints. Amen.