

Revelation 20:1-6

Dear Friends in Christ,

Many people, especially if they have read the “Left Behind” series of books and others like them, miss out on the tremendous comfort that God wants us to have from these verses of Revelation. Those who believe in a rapture and a thousand year physical reign of Christ on earth look at these verses as referring to something that is way off in the future and that doesn’t affect their daily lives. But just the opposite is true. This vision isn’t talking about the far distant future, it is talking about things that have already happened and are continuing to happen right now.

The first thing that John sees in this vision is an angel coming down from heaven. This angel has the key to the abyss and a big chain.

Revelation often provides details in one part of the book that help us understand the meaning of another part of the book. That’s the case here. In the very first chapter of Revelation, Jesus is described as the one who holds the keys to death and Hell. This angel coming down from heaven to earth is Jesus. That makes perfect sense because Jesus said that the reason that he came to earth was to destroy the devil’s work.

The vision pictures this angel as binding and sealing up Satan to keep him from deceiving the nations. A regular angel, even Michael the Archangel, does not have the power to bind Satan. Only Jesus has the power to do that. He said that he was able to cast out demons because he was able to tie up the strong man and carry off his possessions.

Jesus has destroyed the devil’s work. He has robbed him of his power. He has crushed Satan’s head. He has set those Satan had imprisoned free. He did this by his perfect life in our place, and his innocent suffering and death in our place. Once he had paid for the sins of the world so that we could be set free from guilt and Satan’s accusations, he rose from the dead and descended into Hell where he proclaimed his victory.

Some wonder why Jesus would be pictured as an angel, but if you remember what the word angel means, it makes sense. An angel is a messenger. Jesus also came down to earth to proclaim the truth, to show us how loving and gracious God is. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that in the past God spoke to us through the prophets, **but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son.**

Satan is defeated. He is bound by a great chain. But, like a dog on a chain, he can still be very dangerous. We still need to be on guard against his temptations and tricks. He loves to make himself look like an adorable little puppy so that we come close to him, but as soon as we get inside the range of his chain he shows his teeth and tries to sink them into us. One of his oldest tricks is to make what is bad, what is sinful, what is forbidden, look good. Just ask Adam and Eve, or anyone who has been drunk or abused drugs. What looks good, or sounds like fun at first can quickly turn around and bite you.

Satan is bound, restricted by God so that he is not able to deceive the nations. Up until the time of Jesus, Satan had been successful in deceiving the nations. Many of the people of the world worshiped idols, sometimes they worshiped the sun, moon and stars, and sometimes even worshipped their political leaders as gods. But, after Jesus ascension he empowered the Apostles and other believers to preach the gospel to the nations. Starting in Jerusalem they went out through Judea and Samaria, then to Antioch in Syria, and then to Turkey, Macedonia, Greece and Italy. Wherever they went, the good news about Jesus rescued people from the control of Satan as many were brought to faith in Jesus as their Savior.

It's very sad to think about what has happened in Turkey, Macedonia, Greece, Italy, Europe; what is happening right here in America. People are turning their backs on God and his word, just as Israel did. They are returning to the worship of false gods and idols. Some worship science, or technology, or the earth, or the stars, or even themselves. As a result, Satan is not as restricted as he once was. Persecution of Christians is growing all around the world, even here in the USA. It's beginning to look like we are living in that **little while** when Satan is set free.

John saw that these things were happening over a period represented by a thousand years. The numbers in Revelation are like parables. They represent, or picture something for us. One thousand represents a long period of time with a definite beginning and ending. The thousand years represents the time between Jesus' first coming and his binding of Satan, and Jesus' second coming in glory. In other words, we are living in the thousand years right now, and we seem to be very close to the time when Satan is loosed for a short time just before Jesus comes again in glory.

What did John see was happening during the thousand years in which he lived, and we are still living? He saw the souls of martyrs. He saw souls, not bodies. He saw the souls of those who had been beheaded—maybe he saw John the Baptist, Paul, and his own brother James. In other words, this vision John was seeing was a comforting funeral sermon from God.

God was showing John that his friends and co-workers who had been executed because they refused to stop preaching about Jesus and the resurrection, or because they refused to bow down and worship the statue of the emperor; he was showing John that these people weren't dead and gone. Their bodies were dead and buried, but their souls were living and reigning with Jesus!

What a comfort this vision must have been for John. What a comfort it is still for us today to know that our loved ones who have died believing in Jesus aren't dead, but they are living and reigning with Jesus. They are around the throne of God with John the Baptist, and Stephen, and Paul, and James, and John, and everyone else who has died believing in Jesus as their Savior. This is why Jesus told us that we don't have to fear those who kill the body. This is an illustration of what Jesus told Martha at the tomb of her brother Lazarus. **Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**

John is told that this living and reigning with Jesus is the first resurrection. **Happy and holy are those who share in the first resurrection; the second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will rule with him during the thousand years.**

Jesus helps us understand what is meant by the first resurrection when he says: **I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.** Paul talks about the first resurrection when he says that we were **dead in sins but have now been made alive through faith in Jesus.** Jesus repeatedly tells us that **everyone who believes in him has, present tense, eternal life.** The first resurrection is what occurs when the Holy Spirit works through the word and sacraments to bring us who were dead in sin to saving faith in Jesus.

Those who believe in Jesus, who are part of the first resurrection, are called happy and holy. Through faith in Jesus we are covered with Jesus' righteousness. When God looks at us, he doesn't see our disgusting sins; he sees Jesus' holiness in our place. In Jesus our sins are washed away. Therefore God calls us holy. Saints.

We are also called priests. Priests serve God and offer sacrifices to God. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus, we want to serve him. **In view of God's mercy, we offer our bodies to**

God each day as living sacrifices. We want to declare the praises of the one who has called us from death to life, from darkness into his wonderful light.

Best of all, John is told that **the second death has no power** over those who believe in Jesus, who are a part of the first resurrection. The picture of the second death is explained at the end of the chapter. The second death is the lake of fire, the final place of punishment into which Satan, the two beasts who served on his behalf, the false prophet and all whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown. It's the place of eternal punishment where the rich man couldn't even get a drop of water to cool his tongue. But, it's a place that has no power over those who trust in Jesus. By God's grace, we have been brought to trust in Jesus as our savior. Our names have been written in his book of life.

Don't lose the wonderful comfort God wants you to have through this vision of John by thinking that it refers to a time that is a long way off and probably doesn't apply to you. What John saw was a depiction of things that have happened and are continuing to happen. Jesus came down from heaven and destroyed the Devil's work. The thousand years is the whole time set by God between Jesus' first and second coming. Whether or not we are living in the short time before the end when Satan is loosed, we are assured that all believers who die aren't really dead. Their souls have gone to live and reign with Jesus. The second death, eternal punishment in Hell, has no power over those who believe in Jesus.

What wonderful comfort this vision gave John as he thought about his friends, relatives and co-workers who had been executed. What comfort this vision gives to us as we think about those who have died trusting in Jesus. They are right now, living and reigning with Jesus.