

Jesus Gives Us the Victory!

(Revelation 20:1-6 NIV) And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. ⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given 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 worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed 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 reign with him for a thousand years.

In Christ Jesus, the Conqueror over sin, death and Satan, dear fellow redeemed,

Have you ever started watching a movie so disturbing that you couldn't see it through to the end? You were sure that if you watched it, you'd have nightmares for weeks. But what if you knew how the movie ended—that the bomb was diffused in the nick of time, that the hero lived, and the world was saved? Then you could watch the movie. Fear would give way to confidence. Don't you wish you could do that same thing with your life? Maybe you'd like to fast-forward to see how this all works out. Today we get to do just that through the images and symbols that comprise so much of the book of Scripture we call Revelation. We get to see how this all turns out. Having said so, I'll offer this spoiler alert: Jesus Gives Us the Victory! 1) in life; and 2) in death.

You may have noticed that our Scriptures lessons for today took us from the first book of the Bible to the last, and from the beginning of human history to the end. From our reading in Genesis, we heard what happened after the perfect people God had created for himself rebelled against him. The sin of Adam and Eve separated them from holy God. They tried to run away from him and the punishment they deserved. But God caught up with them. He described the pain and sorrow their sin would bring to them and to all who would come after them. But then, in an amazing turn of events, God promised deliverance from death and the devil at the hands of the Champion whom God would send, the promised Offspring of the woman.

And now we fast-forward to the book of Revelation where St. John sketches out for us, in picture language, the story of our Champion: **“I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.” (Revelation 20:1-3).** The angel that John sees could be Jesus who at times was referred to as the Angel of the Lord in Old Testament Scriptures, the same Jesus who says in Revelation 1:17, **“I hold the keys of death and Hades.”** But whether the angel is Jesus or not, here's what's important: in just a few short sentences, John describes for us the saving work of Christ on earth – specifically all that he accomplished on Good Friday. To the eyes of so many, the crucified Christ looked like such a loser. But John shows how, through his sufferings and death, Christ defeated Satan – a victory he secured for and shares with all sinners.

The sin we inherited from Adam and Eve made us all captives of the devil. We had no hope of escaping from him because there was nothing we could do to pay for our sin and so make things right with God. Left to ourselves we would have to spend all eternity with Satan in the debtor's prison of hell. Oh, and like the bully he is, Satan wants to remind us of this every chance he gets. You know the way he works. First he tempts us to sin, and then when we do, he beats us up with our guilt, haunting us with the memory of our sins past and present. Satan's got "the goods" on us.

Or does he? Not anymore! All charges against us have been dropped, not through some clever plea deal. No! Jesus took care of everything. As our Substitute he went to the cross and from there straight into hell where he owned every sinner's every sin. For these, for us, he suffered until all God's wrath was spent and all our debt was paid. "Finished!" he cried from the cross and then, to prove it, the first thing he did on Easter morning was to go right back to hell – not to suffer but to celebrate his victory. St. Paul says, **"...having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."** (Colossians 2:15).

The Bible's word pictures all paint the same story. Paul speaks of "disarming" Satan. In our gospel reading today Jesus talks about "tying up" the strong man, Satan. Here in our text, Satan is chained. Because Jesus paid for all sin of all times, Satan has lost his power over us. He can no longer accuse and convict us of sin that has already been punished in the person of Christ! Jesus has won the war against sin and Satan on our behalf and gives his victory to us through the power of his gospel in Word and sacrament. This victory brings us blessings for time and eternity, a point John makes when he talks about the "thousand years."

Just like the key, and the chain, and the dragon, the thousand years are to be understood figuratively rather than literally. They symbolize a long, but determined period of time that begins with Jesus' first coming and that will end with his return. During this time the dragon, namely Satan, is kept from deceiving the nations. How? He's held in check by the preaching of the gospel that exposes him for the liar that he is. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, souls are snatched away from the devil. They are rescued by and for Christ.

This does not mean that Satan gives up. Even though his eternal fate is sealed, for the time being he poses a great threat to the people of this world, including all of us. In the picture language of Revelation, we find Satan bound, not in a straitjacket, but like a vicious dog on the end of a chain. Or, more in keeping with another Bible picture, he's a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Satan is on the prowl. He's doing damage every day and he'll do more as this age draws to a close. You may have noticed that John says in verse 3 that the devil, **"...will be set free for a short time."** That chain that he's on seems to be stretching a bit in these last days. How? Why? It happens as people reject God's Word and will. When and where the Word of God is rejected, Satan can deceive more and more people. It's a viscous cycle as Jesus himself points out. Speaking of the end times and the signs that point to their arrival, he says: **"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."** (Matthew 24:9-13).

Right now the devil seems to be having a field day. But don't worry! The same gospel promises that found you when you were lost and alone in your sin, the same promises that made you God's own child, will keep you safe in his care. Remember, things are not what they seem to be. The world looks like it's out of control, but it's not. In fact, our Savior says of the time in which we are living: **"If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened."** (Matthew 24:22). How about that for control! This is our Brother's world. He is ready, willing, and able to pull the plug on time itself to make sure that you remain his forever.

But what about those Christians who have already fallen victim to the world's hatred and have died for the faith? Didn't Jesus fail them? Not for a second! In fact, John shares the heavenly vision given him, in part, to set the record straight on this very subject. John reports: **"I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given 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 worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4).**

Through John's eyes, we are looking at the disembodied souls of those Christians who were put to death because of their testimony about Jesus. They are a subset of all who have died trusting in Jesus. Why mention them in particular? Like the Savior before them, they looked like losers—people who died for a foolish cause. John sees and says that nothing could be further from the truth! He sees these same people in heaven right now. They didn't give in to Satan's lies. They were not marked as unbelieving Christ-haters. They bore the mark of Jesus – the sign of his cross on their heads and hearts – the same mark we received at the time of our baptism.

Our English translation says that "They came to life..." A more accurate translation of the Greek would be: "They lived and reigned with Christ thousand years." There was no need for these souls to come back to life. The soul of the believer doesn't die. That's what Jesus says: **"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."** (John 11:25–26). The believer's body returns to dust. His soul lives on, enjoying the blessings of Christ's victory for the remainder of the New Testament age.

"This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priest of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years." (Revelation 20:5-6). John draws one more word picture to comfort and encourage us in life and in death. What is this "first resurrection"? Paul supplies our answer in **Colossians 2:13: "When you were dead in your sins...God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins..."** We were born on earth spiritually dead on arrival. But God raised us from spiritual death to spiritual life at our baptism. Because of this first resurrection, the second death – eternal death in hell has no power over us. We who have been made spiritually alive will now live at peace with God forever. So blessed are we by him who declares us holy for the sake of his Son – so holy in fact, that God appoints us to high office as John witnesses and Peter testifies: **"...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."** (1 Peter 2:9). This explains those thrones John saw in heaven. As royal priests, we offer sacrifices of thanks and praise to our Savior God here on earth. Those who die in the faith, don't miss a beat. Their songs of praise and thanks continue in heaven itself. Picture your loved ones and friends who have died in Christ, in heaven at this moment offering their perfect praise to God.

There are times when it feels like we're in the middle of a horror movie in which evil seems to triumph and we can't fathom a happy ending. But don't let your eyes fool you. You've seen the happy end through the eyes and pen of John. Our God reigns and we reign with him. This is his world. Everything that happens here fits the perfect plan he has for us. Nothing can separate us from his love – not even death. On the contrary, because Jesus has defeated sin and Satan and has risen from the grave, death must now serve God's people by delivering the souls of believers safely to the heavenly thrones that await them, that await us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.