The First Resurrection and the Second Death

Revelation 20:1-15

Key Verse: 20:6 “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.”

 Last Thursday, I visited one of my neighbors to have lunch together with him. There, I had a chance to share the gospel story, especially about resurrection of the dead. He said that he had never heard about resurrection of the dead, and I was surprised. I explained the resurrection of the dead based on 1 Corinthians 15. Easter Sunday is coming up. We plan to have our Missouri Valley UBF United Easter Worship service on April 4th. It is always joyful when celebrating the resurrection of Christ in the Easter season. Let us pray that the resurrection of Christ may be empowered in our life through this Easter worship service, especially by overcoming this pandemic. Amen.

 Revelation 20 consists of three parts: 1. The thousand years (the Millennium) (1-6), 2. Final judgment of Satan (7-10), 3. Final judgement of mankind (8-14). According to the note from the UBF HQ Education committee, the thousand years (2,4,5,6,7) is symbolic of Jesus’ reign at the present time and should not be taken literally; in keeping with the amillennial view. A-millennium means that there is no specific millennium before Jesus’ second coming. In other words, we are now in the era of millennium. Pre-millennium means that Christ returns before the millennium comes. Post-millennium means that Christ returns after the millennium comes. It is up to you, which theory you believe according to your personal viewpoint. So, it is not necessary to argue about which view is right or who is wrong. If they are not essential subjects, we must be tolerant for each other. The important thing is that Jesus will come again, and we will reign with him for a thousand years. Let us study the thousand years based on today’s passage.

First, the thousand years. (1-6) Look at verses 1-3. “***And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. 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.***” The thousand years start with the arrest of Satan. Satan, who is also called the devil, will be bound with a great chain and thrown into the bottom of the pit for a thousand years. Satan’s purpose is deceiving people. He deceived the woman in the Garden. He has deceived many people and nations for generations. But now, he can’t deceive us anymore because an angel arrested him and put him into the Abyss for a thousand years.

 What did John see next? He witnessed the first resurrection. Look at verses 4-5. “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. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection.***” John saw the resurrection of the souls who had been beheaded because of Jesus and because of the word of God. Here, the souls indicate the martyrs. They overcame persecution and sufferings. Despite life-threatening persecution, they kept their faith. They did not worship the beast or any idol. They did not tattoo the beast on their foreheads or their hands. Saint Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna. He was ordered to deny Jesus by the Romans, but he kept his faith and ultimately burned at the stake. John Knox was one of those who sat on the thrones in heaven. There are many great heroes of faith who sat on the thrones.

 John said that the souls came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. They are the firstfruits of the first resurrection. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years ended. Who are the rest? Some say that the rest are all who died excluding the martyrs, including both believers and unbelievers. Others say that the rest are unbelievers who are resurrected to be condemned, whereas the first resurrected are believers who are resurrected to be saved. This is according to John 5:28-29, which says, “*Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned*.”

Verse 6 is the fifth Beatitude in Revelation. This verse promises God’s blessing on those who share in the first resurrection. Look at verse 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***.” There are three blessings for those who share in the first resurrection. First, the second death has no power over them. This means that they are exempt from the second death, which is destined for all unbelievers. (21:8) Second, they will be priests of God and Christ. They will be mediators between God and his people. Third, they will reign with Christ for a thousand years. What does it mean that we reign with Christ in his kingdom? We’ll will share Christ’s privilege and task as priests, governors, mayors, administrators, and so on. Do you remember what Jesus promised to those who made ten and five minas in the Parable of the Ten Minas? In Matthew 19:17-19, “*Well done, my good servant!” his master replied. ‘Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.’ “The second came and said, ‘Sir, your mina has earned five more.’ “His master answered, ‘You take charge of five cities*.” (Mt 9:17-19) Here, we can interpret ‘taking charge of cities’ symbolically, implying ruling and governing as a reward from the Lord. The first mission God gave men after he had created them was, “*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground*.” (Ge 1:28) The first mission for men and the last reward for the saved men is ruling, managing, and governing all God’s creatures. Some people say that life in heaven may be boring and that we won’t have to work. This is not the case! We will reign with Christ Jesus and share his blessing, power, fruit, joy, and glory. *Amen! Hallelujah!*

Second, final judgment of Satan (7-10) Look at verses 7-10. “***When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever***.” Satan had been seized in the Abyss for a thousand years, then released for a short time to deceive the nations. Are there still people who can be deceived by Satan? With the pre-millennium point of view, the answer is ‘Yes’! For the thousand years people give birth and increase in their numbers, there will be those among them whose sinful nature are succeeded. Satan will deceive those whose desires are not toward God and gather them to fight against God and God’s people. They will surround the holy city Jerusalem. But fire will come down from heaven and devour all of them. And the devil, Satan who deceived them, will be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur. Satan and all his followers will be tormented in the burning hell forever and ever. This is the final judgment of Satan. There will be no more action or influence of Satan on this earth or in heaven.

Third, final judgment of mankind (11-15) John saw another vision, which is the final judgment of mankind. Look at verse 11. “***Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them***.” All things in heaven and earth disappeared. The earth and the heavens disappeared and only a great white throne appeared. What happened around the great white throne? All mankind in time past and present appeared before the throne to be judged. Look at verses 12-13. “***And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done***.” The multitude of the dead stood before the great white throne to be judged according to what they had done. There are two kinds of books before the throne. The first are books that have recorded their entire lives on this earth. They are like report cards which tell everything about students, including their scores, attitude, activities, and so on. They will be judged according to their life report card. The other is the book of life which records the name of the saved. It is like *Schindler’s List*. In the movie *Schindler’s List*, those whose names were written in Schindler’s list were saved from the gas chamber. In the same way, the book of life holds the names of those who are saved through faith in Jesus Christ and who overcame the beast. Verse 15 says, “***Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire***.” Are you sure that your name is written in the book of life? Those whose sins are washed by the blood of Jesus have the confidence to answer, “Yes, my name is written in the book of life. Amen!”

 In verses 12-13 John repeated twice that the dead will be judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. This reminds us of several Bible verses in the New Testament. Hebrews 9:27 says, “*Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*.” 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad*.” All men die. This is an absolute truth because no one on this earth can escape death. All men die sooner or later. As death is an undeniable absolute truth, so judgment is also an undeniable and inescapable truth. Therefore, all men, including you and me, should be prepared for judgment after death. We don’t know when we die. Therefore, we must be prepared every day.

 What are the criteria of God’s judgment? The Bible says that we will be judged according to what we have done on this earth. Paul explained this in Romans in detail. In Romans 2:6-10 he says, “*God will repay each person according to what they have done.” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentiles; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile*.” In these verses, we know that the criteria of God’s judgment are what we seek for on this earth. Those who seek God’s glory, honor and immortality will receive eternal life. But those who seek self-glory by rejecting the truth will become the objects of God’s wrath and anger. What we seek for while we are living is very important. All martyrs in God’s history did not seek their lives, but God’s glory. They sought glory, honor and eternal life and received them all as their heavenly rewards. Abraham sought God’s reward when he was called, even though he did not know where he was going. He received the heavenly reward as his inheritance. (Heb 11:8-19) Moses left the palace of Pharaoh and sought sufferings with his people. This is because he valued the sufferings of Christ more than the pleasures of sin in Egypt. (Heb 11:24-27) Moses sought God’s glory, honor, and peace. Jim Elliot, an American missionary in Ecuador, sought glory, honor, and immortality and received the heavenly throne as his reward. So, he said, “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose*.” There are many buried American and Canadian missionaries who had given their precious lives for Korean people in the early 20th century. They were buried with their children in the same place after they died. Why are they there? Because they sought and lived for God’s glory, God’s kingdom, and God’s will in the peninsula of Korea.

 While I wrote this passage, I asked myself, “What have I been seeking for thus far for the last 60 years?” God’s glory, honor, and immortality? Or self-glory, wealth, and pleasures of the world? All things are recorded in the book of my own life and I will be judged according to what I have done. What do you think is recorded in your book of life? I believe that we all will escape from the second death, but the reward from the Lord will be different according to what we each have done on this earth.

 In conclusion, the darkness of human history is over with the final judgment of Satan. It is a blessing and honor to reign with Christ for the thousand years. It will be exciting when we take care of God’s city with our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray for those who are lost, wandering in darkness to be saved. Let us pray for those whose names are not written in the book of life so that they may not be thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur and tormented day and night forever. Amen!