

"THE INTERMEDIATE STATE"

I. Introduction

- A. Death is the great enemy that looms before us all.
 - 1. But death is not the same experience for Christians as it is for non-Christians.
 - 2. For those who die apart from Christ, death marks the point of no return, the point when their destiny of eternal condemnation is unalterably confirmed.
 - 3. But for those who die in Christ, death means being set free from what the apostle Paul once referred to as "this body of death."
 - 4. For the Christian, death brings an end to all sin and suffering, and it brings us one step closer to the consummation of our redemption.

- B. The Scriptures make these things clear in numerous passages, and for those who hold to the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, it is what is being taught in the verses that we have just read.
 - 1. As I explained when we surveyed the various interpretations of the millennium in last week's sermon, the amillennial position says that the thousand year period in this chapter is a symbol for the age that we are presently in.
 - 2. During this period, as Satan is restrained from being able to cloak the nations in utter deception, the gospel is advancing among all the peoples of the world.
 - 3. That was the basic idea in verses 1 through 3.
 - 4. Here in verses 4 through 6, the focus shifts to what is taking place in the heavenly sphere during this same period.

5. In other words, this text depicts what deceased Christians experience as they wait for their bodily resurrection on the day of Christ's return.

II. Reigning with Christ

- A. John begins this part of the vision by telling us that he saw thrones with certain people seated on them.
 1. One of the key interpretive questions about this passage has to do with the location of these thrones.
 2. Are they on earth, or are they in heaven?
 3. In other words, is this vision about something that is taking place in our world, or is it about something that is taking place in the heavenly dimension?
 4. There are 47 occurrences of the term "throne" in Revelation, and with the exception of three references to the thrones of Satan and the beast and two references to the throne of God and of the Lamb in the new Jerusalem, the term is always used to refer to thrones located in heaven.
 5. Another factor that informs our answer to the location of these thrones is that John says that he saw the "souls" of deceased Christians in connection with these thrones.
 6. This brings to mind what was described back in chapter 6, where John said that he saw the souls of the martyrs under the altar in the heavenly sanctuary.
 7. These things indicate that the thrones mentioned in verse 4 are located in heaven.
 8. This means this vision is about what is sometimes referred to as the intermediate state, which has to do with what happens to believers when we die.

9. The doctrine of the intermediate state is summarized in question 37 of our Shorter Catechism, where it says that when believers die, our souls are made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory, during which time our bodies, which are still united to Christ, rest in their graves till the resurrection.
- B. John also tells us that authority to judge was committed to those seated on the thrones.
1. While that is a possible way to translate this part of the verse, it is more likely that it means something like this: “and judgment was rendered for them.”
 2. The reason why this translation is preferred is because it is more reflective of the parallels in Revelation 6 and Daniel 7.
 3. In Revelation 6:10, the souls of the martyrs cry out to God saying, “how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”
 4. And in Daniel 7:21-22, it says that the beast “made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.”
 5. These parallels suggest that the point being made in Revelation 20:4 is that when the souls of deceased saints enter into heavenly glory, their faith is vindicated over all their foes.
 6. Although they were persecuted and opposed when they were living on the earth, they share in Christ’s reign once they are received into heaven.
 7. This is the initial fulfillment of what Jesus promised earlier in Revelation when he said, “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” (Rev 3:21 ESV)

- C. Another question that arises about what is said in these verses has to do with who participates in the heavenly reign that is described here.
1. John describes them as “those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.”
 2. Is this two groups of Christians, or just one?
 3. Is John referring to martyrs and to other believers who refused to worship the beast, or is the second phrase simply a further description of the martyrs?
 4. Both are grammatically possible, but it seems most likely that the second phrase refers to all Christians.
 5. Even if it is referring to the martyrs, we would still have to see them as representative of the church as a whole.
 6. The book of Revelation has consistently depicted the church as facing persecution and opposition throughout this present age.
 7. While not all Christians are martyrs at the individual level, the church’s collective identity is that of a martyr church.
 8. After all, every believer is called to lose his or her life for Christ.
- D. We should also note that verses 5 and 6 distinguish those seated on the thrones from “the rest of the dead” by saying that “the second death” has no power over them.
1. As we will see in a few moments, the second death is a reference to eternity in hell.
 2. It is not just martyrs who are set free from the power of the second death.

3. That is something that is true for all believers.
 4. This further supports the notion that all believers are represented by those whom John sees coming to life and reigning with Christ during the millennium.
- E. One other important detail concerning this question is that those who share in this millennial reign are described as priests and kings.
1. This marks the fulfillment of things that are said elsewhere in Scripture of all believers, not just martyrs. (see 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 5:10)
 2. For example, in 1 Peter 2:9 believers are referred to as “a royal priesthood.”
 3. By depicting deceased Christians as reigning with Christ in heaven, this vision provides us with great comfort in the face of the opposition that we have to endure in this world on account of our faith in Christ.

III. The First Resurrection

- A. I want to turn our attention for the remainder of this sermon to the meaning of the phrase “the first resurrection.”
1. John uses this phrase as a way of summarizing the experience of these souls who come to life and reign with Christ during the millennium.
 2. What is the nature of this “first resurrection”?
 3. Is it a bodily resurrection, or is it a way of describing what the souls of believers experience in the intermediate state?
 4. The phrase “come to life” in verse 5 clearly refers to the physical, bodily resurrection that will take place at the end of the age
 5. Some interpreters point to this and contend that this requires us to say that the phrase “first resurrection” is also describing a physical,

bodily resurrection.

6. Here is how one premillennial New Testament scholar expressed this argument: “in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned... [if] the first resurrection may be understood to mean spiritual rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from the grave; — then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.” [cited in Beale, 1004]
 7. While that is a pretty strong assertion, the matter is not nearly as clear-cut as this scholar makes it out to be.
 8. For one thing, if we go ahead and say that the first resurrection is physical, then we are saying that there are going to be two waves of bodily resurrection.
 9. There will be a resurrection that takes place at the start of a supposedly earthly millennium, and there will be another resurrection that takes place at the end of the age.
 10. The problem with that is that Scripture consistently says that there is one general bodily resurrection, and that it takes place at the end of the age. (see Dan. 12:2; Jn. 5:28-29)
 11. For example, in John 5 Jesus says this: “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” (John 5:28–29 ESV)
- B. Another problem with the argument put forth by those who insist that the first resurrection is a physical resurrection is that there are numerous passages that speak of resurrection in both spiritual and physical senses in the very same contexts.
1. In Romans 6, Paul talks about how our union with Christ in his death means that we are dead to sin and alive to God, and how it also means that we will be raised with Christ on the last day.

2. In John 5, Jesus says that those who believe in him have passed from death to life, and he also says that when he returns all who are in their tombs will be bodily raised from the dead.
 3. And in Colossians 2, Paul speaks of conversion as a matter of being buried and raised with Christ. (v. 12)
 4. These parallels, along with the fact that John says in verse 4 that he sees "souls," support the interpretation that says that the first resurrection is not a literal, bodily resurrection but is rather the spiritual resurrection that believers experience when their souls are separated from their bodies at death.
 5. Even though their bodies are physically dead, their souls are no longer bound to this body of death.
 6. Their souls immediately enter into glory.
 7. The dead in Christ experience what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5 when he says that for believers, the separation of soul from body at death means that what is mortal is swallowed up by life.
 8. When you think about it, it is not really all that surprising that John would describe such an experience as "the first resurrection."
- C. This understanding of the first resurrection is further supported by the fact that it is set in contrast to "the second death" in this passage.
1. What is this "second death"?
 2. We are told at the end of the chapter what it is.
 3. It is the eternal death that will be experienced by those who are condemned to hell.
 4. By calling this the second death, an implied contrast is set up with the first death.

5. The first death is merely physical and preliminary, but the second death is of an extensive and ultimate nature.
 6. The first death is something that every human being experiences, but the second death is something that is only experienced by those who die apart from Christ.
- D. If there are two kinds of death, it is plausible that there are two kinds of resurrection.
1. Just as the phrase “second death” sets up an implied contrast with the *first* death, the phrase “first resurrection” sets up an implied contrast with the *second* resurrection.
 2. While the phrase “the second resurrection” is not used in this passage, the idea is clearly set forth in the first half of verse 5 when it speaks of the rest of the dead *coming to life* at the end of the thousand years.
 3. The contrast between the first resurrection and the second resurrection is similar to the contrast between the first death and the second death.
 4. The first resurrection is spiritual and preliminary, but the second resurrection is physical and ultimate.
 5. The first resurrection is something that is only experienced by believers, but the second resurrection is something that is experienced by everyone.
 6. As Jesus said in the verses we quoted earlier from John 5, at the second resurrection some are raised to eternal life, and some are raised to everlasting judgment.
- E. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that other passages use the idea of “first” and “second” to describe things that are qualitatively different from each other.

1. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, "The *first* man Adam was from the earth, a man of dust; the *second* man is from heaven." (v. 47)
2. In Hebrews 8, the writer of that epistle says, "if that *first* covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a *second*." (v. 7)
3. And in Revelation 21 John says, "I saw a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, for the *first* heaven and the *first* earth had passed away." (v. 1)
4. In all of these examples, "first" refers to things that are preliminary and impermanent, things that eventually give way to "second" or "new" things that are final and permanent.
5. This is how the terms "first" and "second" are being used in Revelation 20.
6. The first death and the first resurrection are preliminary, while the second death and the second resurrection are final.
7. And take note of the ironic relation that this sets up between death and resurrection.
8. In the words of G.K. Beale, "the first physical death of saints translates them into the first spiritual resurrection in heaven, whereas the second physical resurrection translates the ungodly into the second spiritual death." [1005]

IV. Conclusion

- A. The doctrine of the intermediate state is of immense comfort to us as Christians.
- B. It assures us that death will not be able to separate us from our God.
- C. Because Christ has overcome death for us, death is now forced to render us a kindly service.

- D. Death ushers us into glory.

- E. This great truth prompted Augustine of Hippo to write these words in his great treatise *The City of God*: “Of this at least I am certain, that no one has ever died who was not destined to die some time... That death is not to be judged an evil which is the end of a good life; for death becomes evil only by the retribution which follows it. They, then, who are destined to die, need not be careful to inquire what death they are to die, but into what place death will usher them.” [1.11]