

# Revelation 20:4-6

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*John's vision continues with a description of the believers who will sit on the thrones and be co-rulers and priests with Jesus during the first resurrection—the thousand years during which Satan will be bound in the pit.*

Between vv 1-3—where we are told about Satan being bound like a dragon and thrown into a dungeon called the “abyss” for a thousand years—and vv 7-8, where we are told about Satan being released for a short time to deceive the nations once again, John's vision continues with another *Then I saw* statement, now moving to *thrones*. Now that Satan is completely removed, having been thrown into the bottomless pit, new rulers are installed upon the earth, and their authority to rule is depicted as sitting upon *thrones*.

It says that *judgement was given to those who sat on the thrones* (vs 4). This means that those on the *thrones* have been given the authority to rule, including the power to judge others. But who is sitting on the *thrones*?

Scripture infers that prior to the creation in Genesis, Satan was removed from being ruler of the world. Then upon the creation of humans he was replaced by humanity. Humans are said to be lower than the angels but crowned with the glory and honor of being assigned to rule over the earth (see commentary on [Psalm 8](#), and [Hebrews 2:5-11](#) ). Humans were created to reign over the earth in harmony with God, creation, and one another.

When humans fell, apparently Satan was reinstated as the prince over the earth, a position he was dislodged from when Jesus overcame sin and death by dying on the cross and rising from the dead (John 12:31). Authority was restored to humans in Jesus, who for the “suffering of death [was] crowned with [the] glory and honor” of being given “all authority” that is “in heaven and on earth” as a human being (Matthew 28:18, Hebrews 2:9). Hebrews says that Jesus desires to bring “many sons to glory” meaning that Jesus desires that many of those who believe gain the same reward as He, which is to be given restored authority to reign (Hebrews 2:10; Matthew 28:18; Revelation 3:21).

Satan currently has no power if he is resisted (James 4:7). Although his power has been broken, he still has influence in the affairs of humans through those he deceives. However, during the thousand years in which Satan resides in the bottomless pit, he will no longer be able to deceive the nations (Revelation 20:3).

It seems the ones who will reign on the *thrones* in vs 4 are those who will share Jesus's throne with Him as a reward for faithfulness, as stated in Revelation 3, where Jesus gives a promise to those who overcome:

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”  
(Revelation 3:21)

Knowing that sharing Jesus’s throne has already been promised to faithful witnesses—those who walked in obedience without fearing rejection, loss, or death—it seems logical that the martyrs described next in Revelation 20 are those on the thrones:

*“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand.”*  
(Revelation 20:4)

The description of *those who had not worshipped the beast* refers back to Revelation 13:

“And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. And he causes all, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, and *he provides* that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark.”  
(Revelation 13:15-17)

Paying attention to the *Then I saw* sequence in Revelation 19-20, it is important to recognize that the phrase *And I saw* before the description of *the souls of those who had been beheaded* in verse 4 is not a part of that sequence, because the word *saw* here was added by translators to aid in the flow of the passage. This means that the vision of *those who had been beheaded* is not a different vision, and therefore this group of people can be the same as those who are sitting on the *thrones*.

But looking at it from a grammatical standpoint, it also makes sense that the martyrs would be sitting on the *thrones*, because John first simply says that *they sat on them* before describing who he means by *they*, which is all those *who had been beheaded* and who *had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand*.

These are also the same souls that were under the altar in the throne room in Revelation 6:

“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained.”  
(Revelation 6:9)

This passage includes anyone “who had been slain because of the word of God” instead of only those *who had been beheaded*, a particular kind of death, or *those who had not worshipped the beast*, which means they would have had to have been alive during the end times in order to receive the blessing of sitting on the *throne*.

Those who *came to life and reigned with Christ* in verse 4 include the following:

- *the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and*
- *those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand;*

It could be that this is the exclusive group that reigns during the thousand years. This would infer that those who overcame but were not martyred will not reign on the current earth, but will be rewarded to reign with Christ only in the new earth. Verse 5 tells us that not all will live on earth during the *thousand years*, for *the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection* (vs 5).

However, it could be that this group is indicative rather than exclusive. It would seem that Daniel was promised he would be resurrected and play a part in the events of the current earth (Daniel 12:13). The twelve disciples were also promised that they would “sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” at the “regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne” (Matthew 19:28).

All of the twelve disciples were martyred for their faith, except for John who died a natural death of old age after recording Revelation. But not all of the twelve were beheaded, and yet they have been promised a throne. The word “regeneration” in Matthew 19:28, speaking of the period the apostles will sit on twelve thrones, refers to the same event as what happens when the martyrs *came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years* in Revelation 20:4—both refer to the inauguration of Jesus’s kingdom on earth.

Taking into account the context of Revelation 3:21 where all who overcome are promised a seat on the *throne* with Jesus, along with the promises in Matthew 19 and Daniel 12 and the fact that the saints are camped together in Revelation 20:9, it can be inferred that this description of the martyrs in Revelation 20 is a representative part of all who are in the throne room.

It could be that this particular manifestation of being a good “witness” (“martyr”) and living a good *testimony* (“martyria”) is elevated to demonstrate the basic attitude or mindset required in order to be a faithful witness, one who lives for Jesus without fearing loss, rejection, or death (Philippians 2:5-10).

The Greek word translated *testimony* is “martyria” from which we get our English word “martyr,” which is used when the context indicates the *testimony* of a believer resulted in their physical death. Such a testimony does not require actual death, but it does appear to require the courage that would face loss and death:

“And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony (“martyria”), and they did not love their life even when faced with death.” (Revelation 12:11)

It would certainly follow that someone *who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God* would have chosen the Philippians 2:5-10 mindset. So perhaps this is an exhortation for all who desire to reign with Christ to adopt this mindset and be

willing to endure whatever loss the world might inflict in order to gain the riches of Christ (Revelation 3:18).

In any event, it does seem that those who fail to overcome will fail to gain the reward of reigning with Christ. This seems to be implied here and is a theme throughout Jesus's parables (see commentaries on [Matthew 8:5-13](#), and [Matthew 25:14-30](#) ).

What else do we know about those who were in the *first resurrection* and *reigned with Christ for a thousand years*? Looking into verse 6, it says that *Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years* (vs 6).

The letter to the church in Smyrna says something similar about the *second death* in Revelation 2:

“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”  
(Revelation 2:11)

This is the promise at the end of the letter to Smyrna that is for the overcomer, the one who is a faithful witness. There Jesus warns the church in Smyrna that they are about to be tempted, but He encourages them to persevere because if they do, they will be rewarded by not being hurt by the *second death*.

First let's look at the meaning of the *second death*, which we see defined as the lake of fire later in this chapter, Revelation 20:

“Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”  
(Revelation 20:14-15)

So those who participate in the *first resurrection* and *reigned with Christ for a thousand years* also have their name written in the Book of Life. Further, they will not be *hurt* by the lake of fire in the *second death*. All these things appear to be promises made to the overcomers.

[See our Tough Topics Explained article What is Hell? The Eternal Punishment and the Lake of Fire.](#)

Therefore, this supports the idea that the specific descriptions of the martyrs in verse 4 are a representative part of all the faithful witnesses who will be in the *first resurrection* and over whom *the second death has no power*. The blessing that is promised to overcomers (that they will not be hurt by the second death) is promised to the believers in the *first resurrection*, which makes it likely that these are the same group of believers.

It is possible that some believers who are overcomers will reign with Christ, but not *reign with Christ for a thousand years* on the current earth during the *first resurrection*. However, all who

overcome are promised that they will reign with Christ, so it seems more likely that all who Jesus rewards as overcomers will get to participate.

In any event, we know that it will be worth whatever loss we might endure for the surpassing riches promised by Jesus. As scripture says:

“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.”  
(1 Corinthians 2:9)

Importantly, the text does not say that those who are blessed to participate in the *first resurrection* will not experience the *second death*, which is the lake of fire. Rather, both instances state that they will not be hurt by it or that it has *no power* over them. This raises the question of how a believer who is an overcomer could experience the lake of fire/*second death* but not be hurt by or under the power of it.

The answer seems to be that those who overcome were proven and refined by the fire of trials during their lives, and therefore were not hurt by the judgment fire of Christ at His judgment of believers (2 Corinthians 5:10). We can see this pictured by Paul as an application of fire in judgment of believers in 1 Corinthians. There Paul tells the church at Corinth, which is divided by competing factions that:

“Each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so through fire.”  
(1 Corinthians 3:13-15)

The model seems to be that all will be tested through the fire of judgement. The fire of judgement is the presence of Christ. We are told that God is Himself a “consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). It would seem reasonable to presume that the presence of God would be the only thing strong enough to consume both death and Hades (Revelation 20:14).

That would infer that the presence of the Consuming Fire is the lake of fire, which is also the *second death* for all who are not redeemed, and who are consumed eternally; unrighteous beings in the eternal brightness of God’s righteousness. We also see two confirming images of this from Daniel. The first is that fire emanates from the very throne of God and consumes a beast who is the enemy of God (Daniel 7:9, 11). This fits with the passage that says the beast of Revelation is thrown alive into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20).

The second image from Daniel that supports a mental model of the presence of God being the lake of fire is the fiery furnace. The three righteous Jews who were faithful witnesses and did not fear death are immersed in the flame of the furnace without any damage whatsoever. They are fellowshiping with the Angel of the Lord while walking in the fire that is killing their adversaries. While they are fellowshiping in the furnace unharmed, the unbelieving revilers of God are outside the furnace being slain (Daniel 3:21-24).

This mental model fits with the idea that we will all experience the burning presence of God, but it will only consume those who do not believe. It will refine those who believe. The overcomers are those who have been refined like gold through enduring trials in this life on earth (Revelation 3:18).

[See our Tough Topics Explained article on Overcomers.](#)

It follows that the reward for those who are not hurt by the *second death* is that *they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years* (vs 6).

Believers who are hurt by the second death are those who were not fully refined through trials on earth, but will be at the judgment seat of Christ. They will still be conformed to the image of Christ, which is the destiny of all believers (Romans 8:29). However, they will not have overcome as Jesus overcame, so they will miss the fulfillment of being restored to their original design, which is to reign over the earth in joy and harmony with Christ and their fellow servants.

We had previously seen the promise to rule and to sit on *thrones* (Revelation 3:21; 5:10), but the description that *they (overcomers) will be priests of God and of Christ* now reappears, having been mentioned previously in Revelation 1:6 and 5:10. Hebrews 7 explains that Jesus is the new high priest in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus was not born into the priestly tribe of Levi, He is of the tribe of Judah, after His ancestor King David. But Jesus has become a priest “according to the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16).

Now those who overcome are to follow in Jesus’s footsteps in this regard and also become *priests* with Him, being king-priests as they *reign with Him for a thousand years* (vs 4). It seems that those who overcome self in order to serve others in love will be those who qualify to serve God’s kingdom as priest-kings. God will reward those who live with a mission to serve the best interest of others.

This thousand-year reign will take place on the present earth. After these thousand years, and the short time during which Satan is released, the current earth will be destroyed and replaced with a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1).

This thousand-year reign of Christ on the present earth, where Jesus rules together with those who overcome as He overcame, is the time when many prophecies of scripture will likely be fulfilled. A few are listed for illustration:

- The disciples asking about Jesus “restoring the kingdom to Israel” in Acts 1:6, which Jesus indicated would occur, but no man would know the time (Acts 1:7).
- The temple of Ezekiel 40-48. Ezekiel’s temple is nothing like anything that has been before, and will not be necessary in the New Jerusalem in the new earth, since Jesus will be the temple in the new earth (Revelation 21:22). It would seem the thousand-year reign is the time this prophecy will be fulfilled.
- Jesus’s prophecy of His twelve disciples ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28-29).

- The time of the lion laying down with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6-9) where the “earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord (Isaiah 6:9).
- There will no more war, the swords will be beaten into plowshares, and God will reign over the earth (Isaiah 2:4).

The new earth will be run by servant-leaders. It will be the greatest possible joy, honor, and privilege to be appointed as *priests of God and of Christ and to reign with Him* in the earth. This is the great blessing that awaits those who read, hear, and keep the words of this prophecy (Revelation 1:3). Revelation exhorts each believer to be a faithful witness (“martyrs”) and live a faithful testimony that is faithful to God’s word (“martyria”). This is the message each believer, each of Christ’s servants, can read, hear, and do. This is the message that leads to our greatest possible blessing stemming from our life on this earth.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.**