

TEXT: Revelation 20:1-6
 THEME: WHO IS IN CONTROL?

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. 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 for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his 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. Blessed and holy are those who have part 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. NIV

Dear Christian Friends:

WHO IS IN CONTROL?

You, dear Christian, are living in the best of times. These are the last days, the time before Jesus comes to judge all people and create a new heaven and a new earth where we will live with him forever. Satan is bound. The gospel is going out into the world, and God's elect are coming to faith.

SATAN IS BOUND, BUT CHRISTIANS STILL MUST SUFFER

But you and I are also living in difficult times. Immediately after John sees Jesus bind Satan and throw him into the abyss, he sees you and me and all those who have been brought to faith during these days. He sees two things. First he sees thrones from which we are judging. Second, he sees **“the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God.”** Through the news, we have seen people beheaded or killed simply because they were Christians.

Wait a minute? Isn't Satan bound? Isn't Jesus in complete control? Yes, he is. And as proof of that, you have come to faith and now live at peace with God. But on this side of heaven you are called to suffer just as Jesus, your Savior, suffered. You are one of the beheaded souls. Whether you are literally beheaded for your faith as some are today or bear the cross for Jesus' sake, slowly and gradually over the course of your life, you will be “beheaded” by the world because you confess Jesus' name and because you fearlessly hold on to the Word of God.

That is how Revelation always speaks of the saints. John himself was exiled because he preached God's Word. God's people are seen under the altar asking God to avenge their blood (6:9-11). The believers in heaven are described as **“they**

who have come out of the great tribulation” (7:14). God’s powerful witnesses—when their witness is finished—are killed and cast out into the street where unbelievers gawk at them (11:7-10). Christians are pursued by the dragon into the desert, away from the richness of the earth (12:13-14). They suffer martyrdom, prejudice, and economic hardship at the hands of those who worship the dragon (13:15-17).

But this is how it must be for God’s people this side of heaven. God is calling on us to suffer for his name. Great will be our reward in heaven, for **GOD IS IN CONTROL.**

CHRISTIANS ARE IN CONTROL EVEN WHEN WE SUFFER

But now it gets fun! Earlier John had said, **“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge” (Rev 20:4).** Now he tells us who are on those thrones. They are you and I. Through repentance and faith, through the message that God has forgiven the world’s sin in Christ and is at peace with us, you and I have become God’s children. In terms of Revelation, we have come to life and have experienced the first resurrection. In St. Paul’s terms, **“You were dead in your transgressions and sins, but...God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Eph 2:1,4-5).**

Throughout the days of the New Testament—the thousand years during which Satan is bound in the abyss and kept from deceiving the nations—people are being brought to life in Christ. They are then set on thrones of judgment and begin to rule along with Jesus.

We pray, “Lord, lead people to faith and judge those who hinder the gospel and destroy your church.” As our answer, we hear Paul tell us, **“God placed all things under [Christ’s] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:22-23).** And in Revelation we see the saints under the altar, having direct access to God, asking God to judge the wicked for their wicked acts and hearing God say that he will indeed judge them at the right time (Rev 6:10).

Even as we suffer, we reign along with him. We pray, “Dear Lord, cause all things to work for the good of your church.” And we hear God’s answer in his Word, **“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).** And in Revelation we hear God’s promise that his people who reign over the earth during the thousand years of the New Testament **“will reign forever and ever”** in heaven (Rev 22:5).

This is you. Right where you are sitting. Right now. All because **GOD IS IN CONTROL.** Amen.

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Dear Father, in your tender love, you have given great and precious promises to your children. Because of the effects of sin on the world and in us, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that Satan is bound and you are in control of all things. Preserve us from the doubts that assail us, and increase our faith. When life puzzles or disturbs us, teach us to fix our eyes on Jesus and to stand firm in the assurance of his promise to uphold and deliver us. Compel us by the self-sacrificing love of Christ and empower us by the gifts of your Holy Spirit to be witnesses of your gospel in our words and in our actions.

Merciful Lord and Savior, you have promised to be with your believers everywhere and in all circumstances of life. May the assurance of your abiding presence and loving care comfort and sustain your servant, Ruth Birsching, as she faces and undergoes knee surgery this coming Tuesday. Remove all anxiety and fear from her heart, and lead her to rest all her confidence in you. Bless the work of the surgeon, and give success to the surgery as it pleases you. Be with Ruth as she recovers, and fill her with an abiding thankfulness for all your blessings.

Holy Spirit, help us to identify friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors who need to know Jesus as their Savior. Give us opportunities to share the Gospel with them, and then give us the courage to make use of those opportunities. Bless our Festival of Friendship so that your name is glorified and more people share eternity with us. Strengthen us so that we abound in love, humility, patience, and prayer until we receive the crown of eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray:

THE LORD'S PRAYER (modern)