

THE FIRST RESURRECTION

By

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In the Book of Revelation God has given a dramatic portrayal of the victorious destiny of the church, but, unfortunately, many have spoiled the meaning of the drama by their obsession with the stage settings, and their futile effort to establish a timetable for God's work.

If the Book of Revelation were intended as a schedule of events, as many interpreters insist, it certainly has failed in its purpose, for devout scholars have been coming up with the wrong timetables for centuries. But when we read it as the experience of Christ and His church triumphing over the world, the flesh and the devil, we receive great encouragement and come away giving praise and thanksgiving to God.

The climax of the triumph comes in the twentieth chapter, probably the most disputed chapter in all scripture. Among the other poetic expressions is the one about the first resurrection: "Blessed and holy is he that has part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Rev. 20:6). What is the "first resurrection"?

Both Christ and Paul spoke of the resurrection as one single event in which all the dead would be raised. "The hour comes in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). Concerning the believer Jesus said, "He that rejects me, and receives not my sayings, has one that judges him: the word that I spoke, the same shall judge him at the last day" (John 12:48).

According to these two statements, both the resurrection to eternal life and the judgment of unbelievers will occur at *the last day*. Paul writes of the coming of "the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he shall come to be glorified in his saints...in that day" (II Thess. 1:7-10). From the plain words of Christ and the clear writings of Paul, all that are in the grave will be resurrected in the "last day," the saints to receive eternal life and the unbelievers to receive the punishment for sin. Here there is no room for a "first" and a "second" resurrection.

The resurrection of the body will not take place until the end of time, as Job said: "Man dies, and wastes away: yes, man gives up the spirit, and where is he?...Man lies down, and rises not: 'til the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep" (Job 14:10-12, 19:26-27).

If the first resurrection of Revelation twenty is a physical one, then two resurrections are required, separated by a thousand year interval. Jesus repeatedly spoke of the resurrection as occurring in "the last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). The gospels and epistles are too emphatic on this to give credence to two resurrections separated by a long period of time.

While the resurrection from the grave is emphasized as the grand event of the last day, when Christians receive bodies that are immortal and glorious (I Cor. 15:54), there is another kind of resurrection described in Scripture.

Paul reminded the saints of Colossae that they had been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into Christ's kingdom (Col. 1:13). He then reminded them that this involved a resurrection to a new way of life. "Having been buried with Him in baptism, wherein you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, did he make alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses" (Col. 2:12–13).

Conversion to Christ is described by inspired writers as being "raised." Further on (Col. 3:1) Paul writes, "If then you were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above." One reason so little thought has been given to the fact that regeneration is a resurrection is because of the general neglect or denial of baptism as a burial and resurrection. In writing to the Romans he is even more graphic. "We were buried therefore with Him through baptism into death that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Had men never substituted sprinkling for the original practice of immersion, perhaps there would have been less confusion today about the "first resurrection." Where baptism is viewed in the light of a burial in water and a resurrection to a new life, it is easy to follow the expression in Revelation of a first resurrection.

Jesus spoke of His power to "give life to whom He will" (John 5:21), referring both to a new life now, and eternal life at the last day. "The hour comes and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25). Here He speaks in the present tense—the hour "now is". Then He said, "Marvel not at this; for the hour comes at which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice and shall come forth..." (John 5:28–29). If it seems marvelous that some should hear the gospel and enter into a new life *now*, think what it will be when Christ comes to raise the dead from the tombs to give immortality to the believer and sentence the unbeliever to destruction!

Note the blessed condition of those who have part in the first resurrection:

(1) Among them are the martyrs — "beheaded for the testimony of Jesus." The passage does not say that only martyrs make up the group in the first resurrection, but that it includes the martyrs.

(2) They "worshiped not the beast." This includes all saints of all time. They have never accepted his teaching (mark on the hand).

(3) They reign with Christ. All saints are "raised together with Christ" (Col. 2:12, 3:1) for he "raised us up with Him and made us to sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). This includes all Christians since the day of Pentecost.

(4) They are priests of God and of Christ. Peter declared that all Christians are "an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation..." (I Pet. 2:9); compare Rev. 5:10).

These conditions all apply to Christians here and now. Before conversion a person is "dead in trespasses and sin," but when he becomes a Christian he passes from death

into life (I John 4:13). From the ascension of Christ until He returns all believers have been “raised together with Christ” and have enjoyed the victory over Satan and the blessings of Christ’s triumph over sin. They have all had a part in the first resurrection. At the last day, when the “one thousand years” — the total time period of the gospel — is finished, all the dead will be raised from the tombs for their final and eternal destiny. All those in Christ who have experienced the first resurrection to new spiritual life will be changed into immortal people like Christ (I John 3:2–3). But all who have remained in sin, not having believed in the one and only sin-offering, will be raised up to face judgment, then cast into the lake of fire. John labels this the “second death.” They are already in the grip of death while living on earth — dead in sin — and they suffer the dissolution of body and spirit when their life span ends. Yet they are raised to judgment, and being still guilty of sin, they then have to pay the penalty of sin, which is death — death in the “Gehenna” of fire, where God is able to “destroy both soul and body” (Matt. 10:28). “This is the second death, even the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14). The second death is identified here again in Rev. 21:3 with the Lake of Fire. “Death is swallowed up by a greater and final death” (C.H. Roberson). John is expressing symbolically what Paul wrote directly, “The last enemy that shall be abolished is death” (I Cor. 15:26). This Lake of Fire is the Gehenna of fire Jesus spoke of, the final and eternal punishment which “is both the reverse and the alternative of eternal life. The negation of eternal life is eternal death (Roberson, “Studies in Revelation” page 172).

The faithful saints in the church at Smyrna were told not to fear the devil, for if they were faithful they would “not be hurt of the second death” (Rev. 2:10–11). The reason was that they had experienced the first resurrection by their obedience to the Gospel and the guilt of their sin had been borne by Jesus. Their resurrection would be to eternal life. Partake of the first resurrection and you escape the second death, the destruction by fire. Reject the first resurrection and you must die twice: the temporal death all must suffer because of our mortal nature, and the second and final death because of sin.

The first resurrection take place when the believer obeys the gospel, dies to sin and is raised to a new life. “Or are you ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death that like as Christ was raised from the death through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4). When we are raised from the grave at Jesus’ command, it will be our second resurrection, only it will be to immortality. Paul wrote that we who are in Christ are no longer under condemnation (Rom. 8:1), but are “in the spirit” which gives life and we already have the first fruits of the spirit. Still, he said, we are waiting, “waiting for our adoption, to wit the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23).

Eternal and immortal life is assured the righteous in this life because they are “in Christ” and have experienced the first resurrection from a state of deadly sin into a life “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). Therefore, “when Christ, who is our life shall be manifested, then shall you also with him be manifested in Glory” (Col. 3:4).

Such is the glory and triumph portrayed in the revelation given to John on the isle of Patmos. It is not given to confuse us nor to stir speculations as to the time of Christ’s coming, but to show us that in spite of all the beastly opposition the world can mount against Christ, the victory is assured to Him and His chosen.

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