

# *The First Resurrection*

## *Revelation 20:6*

by

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THERE are two objects which we have to keep more or less in view when discussing any controverted portion of revealed truth; the one is, that of simply establishing from Scripture the definite teaching there given; the other is, that of maintaining controversially a portion of truth against those who seek to set it aside; for this, it is needful to meet objections, and thus to discuss details such as never would have been connected with the subject had it not been for the erroneous teaching of gainsayers. From time to time, we have to consider new objections, because, whilst truth as revealed in the Word of God must ever remain the same, the multiform developments of error are ever changing.

There are positions which, when once they have been definitely established from Holy Scripture, might be regarded as settled for ever; and this would be the case absolutely if it were not that every truth is questioned as soon as it is found to be of practical importance; and then for the full establishment of those who desire to hold fast Scripture teaching, and with the hope of the deliverance, through the mercy of God, of some who have been led astray, the whole subject may have to be again taken up *controversially*, that is to say, with the definite intention of meeting objections.

What, then, does the Scripture reveal as to the first resurrection? Who are to partake in it? When will it take place? These may be called the primary points of inquiry; and when they have been answered from Scripture, we may next ask,---In what special modes do the introducers of false teaching at present set aside any of these points? What do they set forth instead? On what grounds do they seek to maintain the positions which they assume? and what is the practical consequence of any such erroneous principles?

The one passage in the Scripture in which the First Resurrection is mentioned *by name*, is Rev. xx. 4, 5. The Apostle saw certain symbols, and the interpretation of the vision which he received is: "This is the first resurrection: blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection; on such the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years." It is on this *interpretation* that we have especially to rest, in seeking to understand what is here set before us.

The distinct points to be noticed are:

1. That it is an actual resurrection that is taught; that is, the resuscitation of the bodies of persons that have died.
2. That it is the resurrection of the believers who have died up to that time.
3. That as this is the first resurrection, so no resurrection of believers can possibly precede it.

4. That this resurrection cannot take place till after the development of Antichrist, and his reign; nor yet until the time when God sets his hand again to restore His ancient people Israel.

5. That this resurrection takes place when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again in manifested glory.

To consider these subjects in their order:

I. That this is an actual resurrection which is here taught may be learned from the mere statement of the Scripture itself; for if this is not an actual resurrection, how could we suppose that to be so in which the small and great stand before the great white throne and are judged? If this be not a resurrection of persons, what can be signified when it is said that the rest of the dead live not again until the end of a certain period of a thousand years? But this point is one which need not be dwelt on in detail, since it has often been established in opposition to those who would turn the facts of Holy Scripture into some mere figures, and who seek to substitute principles for persons.

2. But who are they who shall then rise? Some, from a partial consideration of the symbols of the vision, have thought that it was limited to martyrs for Christ, and to them only; others have seen that it must also of necessity include those who have refused to acknowledge Antichrist; the true exposition, however, being that these are here set forth as symbolical classes. Why these classes should be thus seen in the vision is most easily and simply explained. St. John had seen the servants of Christ in vision put to death under Antichrist, or else exposed to extreme suffering for refusing to worship the beast and his image. He now sees them set in this place of glory and blessing. The images in this book relate frequently in their form to the contents of the Revelation itself. It is a great mistake if any suppose that the book of Revelation should be interpreted in such a way as to contradict other Scriptures. This book may throw further light on what had been previously revealed; but such truths communicated before, are to be assumed as already known by those that would learn from this book. Thus the second coming of Christ was a truth known by the Church as her hope before the Revelation had been given to the beloved Apostle; and so, too, the resurrection of the just had been promised as that which should come to pass at that time.

What else do we learn from the latter part of 1 Thess. iv.? The Lord Himself shall descend with all the circumstances of publicity and manifested glory; the dead in Christ shall rise, those who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds; this was to be the comfort of the early church in connection with any of their brethren who had died: it thus teaches us authoritatively that all the dead in Christ shall rise in that day. So too 1 Cor. xv. 23: "they that are Christ's at His coming." An absolutely revealed truth like this can never be set aside by any supposed after limitation; on the other hand, we may be sure that such supposed limitation is based on some entire misapprehension. In Rev. xx., "they that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the Word of God, and they that had not worshipped the beast," etc., must be regarded as a *description* of the class of persons who rise, and not as a *definition* of who and what they are. We know from previous Scriptures that "they that are Christ's" rise without limitation "at His coming"; we know that this was the consolation for the Thessalonian Christians as to their departed friends, whether martyrs or not; but if the principle of limitation were brought in as to martyrdom, it would apparently be right to exclude all who do not suffer in a particular way and at a particular time. No doubt that the specification of those under the

antichristian persecution is wisely given; but the expression, "the *rest of the dead* lived not till the thousand years were finished," must not be supposed as excluding any of those who are Christ's, who at that time must rise. For "they that are Christ's" would comprehend all those that are His, who have departed up to that time, and not one of them can be shut out. Nor can the Old Testament saints be in any way excluded so long as the Words of Christ remain recorded by the Spirit as to those who "shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; the term, "the rest of the dead," means simply all the dead who do not then rise.

3. I should have thought it needless to argue that the *first* resurrection of the saints must be one which has not been preceded by another of any portion of them, had it not been that the plain words of Scripture have been set aside. 1 Cor. xv. teaches us the *order* of the resurrection: "Christ the first-fruits; afterwards [next in order of succession] they that are Christ's at His coming." There is no room left for mistake or doubt, unless we depart from the plain words of Scripture. With all confidence, we may say that God intended to teach in this place, when saying, "this is the *first* resurrection," that He will not raise any of His people with bodies incorruptible prior to the time and the development of circumstances here spoken of.

4. It might seem superfluous to re-affirm that no first resurrection can take place prior to the manifestation of Antichrist, since those who suffer under his persecution then rise; and, indeed, argument is vain when plain Scripture testimony is set aside, except, indeed, as enforcing and re-asserting such testimony. But as some have thought that a first resurrection will occur before the reign of Antichrist, it may be well to ask such, what *the first* resurrection can mean? and whether a *first* resurrection which shall precede *the first* is not such a contradiction in terms as sets aside the Scripture in such a manner as to make it impossible (if such arguments are admissible) for even inspired writers to express themselves in definite language. The fact stands on the face of the passage that there shall be no first resurrection of saints until those of them who shall be cut off in the antichristian persecution have so died; for these are some who then rise.

Also this cannot be until the time of the acting of God for the restoration of Israel; because in 1 Cor. xv. 54, we are taught, "when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, THEN shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "*Death is swallowed up in victory.*" Thus the resurrection of the saints takes place at the same time, when the passage in Isa. xxv. 8 (which the Apostle authoritatively cites) shall find its accomplishment. Any mode of interpretation which would otherwise connect it must of necessity be erroneous; for God has given us His Own note of time in the synchronism of events.

5. If we look at the various Scriptures which speak of the resurrection of the saints, we find that that event takes place when the Lord Jesus comes; and if we ask what kind of a coming it is that we are taught to expect, we find that every adjunct of manifested glory and publicity is specified, as though there should be no excuse for our making any mistake on this point. "Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him"; this is the advent in the hope of which the church responds, "Even so. Amen." "Surely I come quickly; Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

This then is the hope of the First Resurrection; so that through the darkest period of antichristianism, the church may look on rejoicing in hope, because that special and most fearful gloom shall be the

forerunner of the morning; and thus in the time of persecution and of martyrdom to many, the hope of resurrection shall be then possessed of a special power. For how near then shall the resurrection of the saints, "the First Resurrection," be; then will be the time for the people of Christ to lift up their heads, knowing that their redemption (redemption in all its fulness of meaning) draweth nigh. And if we see deepening shadows of moral evil falling on the world, and on that which professes to be the church, then may we see this hope as that which may give us a confidence while seeking to contend for the truth of God in the midst of opposing errors, whether it be Pharisaic ritualism or Sadducean infidelity.

But ours is no mere selfish hope; it unites us to all the family of faith who ever have been; for the First Resurrection embraces them all; it connects us with the glory of Christ; for He shall then be glorified in His saints; it teaches us to look for no present rest; for true *rest* we can have none until that time "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Thess. i. 7, 8.) Such is the plain teaching of Scripture, which, as to the five particulars just specified, might be largely confirmed and extended from what we learn from other portions of the inspired Word. If indeed we are content to follow Scripture, these points might be regarded as axioms. And yet there are those who profess to hold the hope of our Lord's second coming, who deny and oppose almost every one of these points. They have the Scripture; they borrow its phrases, applying them to their own cherished fancies; they take truths from it, but they apply them in connections, not only false in themselves, but even in direct contradiction of what the Word of God distinctly states. How can any learn from Scripture, if they will maintain that events shall come to pass at a different time and in a manner directly contradicting what the Scripture says? Is a man a believer in the Lord Jesus because he uses His name, while denying every material truth as to His very Godhead and very manhood, and the true substitutional sacrifice of His death? What, then, in a similar manner, should be said of those who hold a first resurrection, differing in time, manner, and circumstances, from THE first resurrection of which the Scripture makes mention? who expect a coming of Christ (such as He Himself said should never take place) without publicity, without manifested glory, without His taking vengeance on any, without His so taking the kingdom into His Own hands that thenceforth, antichristian blasphemy and persecution should be impossible? Must it not be said that Scripture terms have been applied to the opposite of Scripture truths?

In opposition to the Word of God, it has been assumed that the hope of Christ's coming is one which excludes the possibility of intervening events having been made known, and that if the Lord has given any warning or indication that His coming draws near, then we cannot be waiting for that day. But what is this assumption except to lay down how God *ought* to have communicated truth, instead of inquiring how He *has* done this? When it has been assumed that no intervening events can be matters of revelation, the difficulty remains that many events are given which will precede the coming of the Lord. How can this be disposed of? By assuming that Christ's coming is to be divided into two utterly different events—a secret coming as the hope of the church, and a public coming when He shall be seen in manifested glory. But what is the warrant for such a division? None whatever, except the previous assumption that there can be no events revealed before Christ comes in connection with His church; this is laid down as an axiom, and the plainest facts and the clearest definitions of Scripture are set aside because they contradict this cherished hypothesis. Those who maintain the doctrine of a secret coming of Christ, often adopt any theory in order to explain away difficulties; thus it is that they have shifted their ground again and again; and distinctions, the futility of which had been long ago felt

by those who once defended them, have again found their places in the array that is exhibited in opposition to truth.

To every mind that is rightly and truly subject to Holy Scripture, the doctrine of the first resurrection sets aside the notion of a secret coming of Christ as a private transaction. For when we are told that the coming of Christ in the air (1 Thess. iv.) to take away His saints may happen any day, while many events precede His manifested appearing, it is well for us to remember that when we meet the Lord in the air, the dead in Christ rise first (i.e., before the change and rapture of those still living); there is no such thing as the living believers going to the Lord without the resurrection of the sleeping saints also having taken place. Thus we find no coming of the Lord Jesus except with the first resurrection then occurring, and that first resurrection cannot be until the events which usher it in, such as the full development of Antichrist and his persecution of some of those who are then to rise, having preceded. To wait for any coming of Christ (or for anything else as the coming of Christ) without the resurrection of His people then taking place, is to substitute some mere fancy for the hope that has been given us. To suppose a resurrection prior to the first resurrection is to deny the truth and exactness of the revelation of God. To say that our hope is a secret coming of Christ, is the same as to teach that 1 Thess. iv. does not set forth that coming; for in that passage, every adjunct speaks of publicity.

A new theory has been circulated of late, that while the first resurrection of Rev. xx. is the portion of the church in general, some for special devotedness, etc., shall previously rise and be taken away. This theory is part of a ramified system of doctrine, the general principle of which is that there exist essential (and not merely circumstantial) distinctions between Christians, according to what they are in the Spirit (as shown in service, devotedness, etc.); and these distinctions quite set aside the oneness in Christ of the saved. I have not now to discuss this theory, and to show its unscriptural character. On this subject, it is enough to say that the words, "This is the First Resurrection," suffice to set aside the arguments advanced for the different resurrections of different classes of saints prior to the reign of Christ.

At present, a danger to which true believers are exposed is that of substituting a kind of sentimentality for truth; seeming spirituality is often used for leading away from the use of the written Word and reliance on its teaching. This ought to cause those who value the truth of God to be the more definite in their testimony; even though they may be sure that their statements will be misrepresented, their doctrines misstated, and they themselves regarded as unspiritual; and that too, by true believers (in many cases), who have so accepted ethereal fancies that *facts* revealed by the Holy Ghost seem to them unspiritual.

A time has come in which men will not endure sound doctrine, and those who maintain it, need that their souls in the midst of opposition be well stayed on the truth of God, and in the hope of His promises as He has given them.

But *patience of hope* is now what sentimentalists specially oppose; and those who thus oppose *idealize* truth and Scripture, so as to leave no definite ground of apprehending revelation as from God.

S. P. Tregelles  
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FATHER, O how vast the blessing,  
When thy Son returns again;  
Then Thy saints their rest possessing,  
O'er the earth with Him shall reign.  
For the Father's sakes beloved,  
Israel to their land restored,  
Shall on earth, their guilt removed,  
Be the people of the Lord.  
Then shall countless myriads wearing  
Robes made white in Jesus' blood,  
Palms (like rested pilgrims) bearing,  
Stand around the throne of God,  
These redeem'd from every nation,  
Shall in triumph bless thy name;  
Every voice shall cry, "Salvation  
To our God and to the Lamb."  
S. P. T.

S. P. Tregelles, "The First Resurrection: Revelation 20:6," ed. John Cox (London: Houlston and Sons, 1876).