

What do we feel about those who died for the success of the gospel?

- *Triumph of church*
- *Triumph of martyrs*

- *If millennium and judgement day are the same thing, martyrs are raised early and participate in judgement day*

- *Amillennialist*

- *Premillennialist – a millennium to judgement day*

Postmillennialist viewpoints

(i) Spiritual – a resurrection of the influence of the martyrs

- *Unconvincing – implies two resurrections, both physical*

(ii) First resurrection of martyr church raised from the dead as soon as they die

We will be able to follow Revelation 20:4–6 if we realize that it answers a question arising out of Revelation 20:1–3. The first three verses of the chapter presented a picture of the church reaching wonderful success in overcoming the forces of evil. But there is an obvious question in this: what do we feel about those who laid down their lives to contribute to this success of the gospel? It is wonderful that Satan gets to be thrown into the abyss! But how terrible that it should be at so great a cost of the lives of thousands of Christians.

John says: Don't worry about it too much! I had a two-fold vision, says John. I did not only see the triumph of the church^{□1}. I saw also the triumph of the martyrs!^{□2} I saw the blood of the persecuted Christians. But then *They came alive and reigned with Christ a thousand years.*

So what kind of resurrection is in view here? Let us consider the possibilities. If the millennium and the judgement day were the same thing (a view held by Joseph Mede and Thomas Goodwin, seventeenth-century English Puritans), it would mean that the martyrs are raised early in 'the judgement day' and take part in God's judgement of the rest of humanity. For the remainder of the 'judgement day' they are participating with God in judgement. The first resurrection would mean 'the first group to be raised' among the many who will be raised on 'the judgement day'.

If we hold to the **amillennialist viewpoint** it might refer to (i) 'going to heaven' or (ii) 'the new birth' or (iii) 'being united with Christ in his resurrection'.

If we are **premillennialists** it will refer to a literal millennium ahead of the final judgement day – with much more to happen in the history of the world, before the end of the world.

If we are following some kind of **postmillennialism** or '**golden age**' **millennialism**, or if we are following the interpretation I have given of Revelation 20:1–3, then what is the likely meaning of 'the first resurrection'? The martyrs are raised early in the 'golden age', but what sort of 'resurrection' would this be? (i) Most 'golden age millennialists' think that this resurrection is a spiritual matter (as in Romans 11:15 where 'life from the dead' almost certainly refers to worldwide revival). Such interpreters think that the 'first resurrection' is a resurrection of the influence of the martyrs. Their reputation is re-established. The Holy Spirit honours their teaching, and so on. Personally I do not accept this, but this view has been held in the story of the church's teaching. The martyrs are (on this view) 'raised from the dead' in that their influence comes to rule in the world. Something like this was maintained by Thomas Brightman (1562–1607), who regarded this 'resurrection' as the revival of biblical theology and of powerful preaching in the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation. It was taught too by Johann Heinrich Alsted, the German preacher (1588–1638), and by many preachers of seventeenth-century Europe. However, I have to say I think this is unconvincing. The text seems to imply two resurrections, the first resurrection and an implied 'second resurrection'. Both of them seem to be physical, not purely spiritual or metaphorical.

There is, I believe, (ii) a much more convincing approach. I believe the 'first resurrection' is quite literal and that it means the martyr-church of the book of Revelation gets raised from the dead, as soon as they die, before the unsaved and before the backslidden Christians. Let us approach the matter slowly.

□1 20:1-3

□2 20:4-6

• *Christians can pass through fiery judgement and still be saved*

I believe it will help us in understanding Revelation 20:4–6 if we keep in mind the biblical teaching (found in 2:11 and elsewhere in the book of Revelation) that we might call being ‘saved through fire’. 1 Corinthians 3:15 is exceptionally clear that it is possible for a Christian to suffer loss in the last day, to pass through fiery judgement – and yet still to be saved. There is not much debate about this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:15. Most expositors agree that this is what it teaches – although some make use of the idea more than others!

• *The Christian’s salvation is safe*

There is plenty of teaching in Scripture about the Christian being safe in salvation. Jesus said, ‘Of all those whom he has given me I shall lose nothing’¹; ‘I give them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any person snatch them out of my hand’². The exact number of those that the Father has justified are already glorified in the mind of God³. Jeremiah 32:40 says the unbreakable new covenant promise is that God will not depart from his people and (more important at this point) they will not depart from him! God says: ‘I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me’⁴. There could be no greater assurance of safety.

• *God’s unbreakable new covenant promise*

But the other side of this teaching is this. There are plenty of warnings in Scripture about loss of reward and differences in final glory. Christians are warned against sin. There could be no point in Paul’s saying to Christians, ‘On account of these things the wrath of God is coming’¹ if the wrath of God cannot touch us. In the book of Revelation we have seen 2:11: the person who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death. Evidently the person who is a Christian but does not overcome **will** be ‘hurt by’ the second death. The person who does not overcome suffers loss in God’s judgement. The fire of hell consumes their reward; they are saved ‘through fire’². Does every Christian overcome? If so, why should there be so many encouragements telling us to make great **efforts** to overcome? If ‘overcoming’ is somehow one hundred per cent inevitable, then we would not need to be **told** to overcome. Colossians 1:22–23 tells us that a day is coming when God’s people will be ‘presented’ to God without blemish and free from accusation, but this ‘presentation’ will take place only ‘if you continue in the faith, well grounded and firm, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel’. There are differences of reward in heaven. ‘One star differs from another star in glory’³. There will be stunning change and great variety in the last resurrection, including variety of brightness.

• *Warnings of loss of reward*

• *Warnings against sin*

• *The person who does not overcome will be hurt by the second death and suffers loss in God’s judgement*

• *Differences of reward in heaven*

1 John 6:39
2 John 10:28
3 Romans 8:30


4 Jeremiah 32:40

1 Ephesians 5:6

2 1 Corinthians 3:15

3 1 Corinthians 15:41

Let us keep in mind what has been said in Revelation 2:11, and approach Revelation 20:4–6 with this outlook in mind.

		<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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