

Four questions and four answers:

⁴Then I saw thrones and people were sitting on them, and judgement was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus, and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast, nor his image, and they had not received the mark on their forehead or on their hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come alive until after the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. We can put our exposition in terms of four questions and four answers.

1. Who are the people mentioned here? They are the 'over-comers'

1. **Who are the people mentioned here? They are 'over-comers'!** They are the martyrs, the faithful. The people who are reigning are the same people who in other parts of the book of Revelation are said to be reigning as priests with Christ^{□1}, wearing crowns^{□2}, possessing royal authority over the nations^{□3} and are said to be seated with Christ on his throne^{□4}. They experienced some of this even before they died, but John is given a vision of the triumph they are enjoying beyond this life.

□1 1:6; 5:10
 □2 2:10; 3:11
 □3 2:26-27
 □4 3:21

2. What happens to them? They are given glorious resurrection-bodies before anyone else

2. **What happens to them? They are given glorious resurrection-bodies before anyone else.** As in 6:9–11, they are given a special reward. The vision of 6:9 revealed 'the souls of the people who had been slaughtered because of the word of God, and because of the testimony that they had maintained'. They cried out, 'How long?' But they were comforted in that each was given a white robe and told that the final judgement would be somewhat later^{□1}. The martyr-church beyond the grave 'came alive'. The question is: what kind of 'coming alive' is this? Is it literal or symbolic? And when does it take place? We read: ⁶Blessed and holy is the person who has a share in the first resurrection. Over such a person the second death has no authority, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him a thousand years. One gets a very strong impression (although the text does not **exactly** say it) that at the end of the thousand years there is a second phase of resurrection. The text seems to imply that the martyrs came alive first in 'the first resurrection'. The rest of the dead did not come alive until after the thousand years were completed^{□2}. But (the text seems to imply) then the rest of the dead did come alive, and that is a second resurrection! If we are correct in seeing this implication in the text it very much implies that the first resurrection is quite a literal resurrection – because the second resurrection is a literal resurrection!

□1 6:11

□2 20:5

• Martyrs 'come alive' – literal or symbolic?

• Implied second resurrection after a thousand years

3. Who are the rest of the dead? Everyone else

3. **Who are 'the rest of the dead'? Everyone else.** It will involve the lost, and it will include the rebellious Christian (a thought to which we shall return in connection with 20:15). The disobedient Christian will be 'hurt by the second death' and will miss the joys of 'the first resurrection'.

4. What is the reward? Companionship and involvement with Jesus

4. **What is the reward? Companionship and involvement with the Lord Jesus Christ.** 'I saw thrones', says John. He also sees those who had suffered for their loyalty to the word of God sitting on thrones of authority and royalty with our Lord Jesus Christ.

• Martyr-church will be reigning with Christ before the day that the gospel is vindicated

Revelation is dealing here with **epochs of time**, not simply with individual experience of 'going to heaven' (although that is involved). In Revelation 6 the martyrs ask, 'How long?' – and Revelation 6 is closely parallel to Revelation 20:4–6. The answer to the martyrs' question comes here. There will be a day when the gospel is vindicated^{□1}, but even before that time the martyr-church are given a resurrection body, and when the thousand years of gospel-victory comes they will **already** be reigning with Christ in resurrection-glory.

□1 20:1-3

• *A level of resurrection that some attain but not others – a prize to be won and a stimulus to godly endeavour*

All of this makes one think of Philippians 3:10–11: ‘My purpose is to get to know him . . . in the hope that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.’ Of course, sooner or later, everyone will attain to resurrection. But Paul thinks of a resurrection which is a stimulus to godly endeavour (which is also the point of 1 Corinthians 15:58). It is a goal to be attained, a prize to be won. Paul has not yet won ‘the prize’ that will be given him in his resurrection body. Paul also uses an unusual word for resurrection, not *anastasis* (‘resurrection’) but *exanastasis* (‘resurrection-out’). The two words are more or less identical in meaning, yet *exanastasis* has a more emphatic note. Paul’s sentence contains the idea that there is a level of resurrection that some attain but not others. Paul wants to ‘attain’ to something that not all people get to, that not all **Christians** get to. One star differs from another star in glory; so it is in the resurrection of the dead.

• *Resurrection received at death for the obedient*

Such a view also makes sense of 2 Corinthians 5:1.^a There is a resurrection to be received at death for the obedient. One also thinks of Matthew 27:52–53, when at Jesus’ death many received a resurrection-body immediately!

• *Early reward from holiness and faithfulness-to-the-point-of-death*

This approach to Revelation 20:4–6 is a simple and straightforward one. It takes both first and second resurrections in the same way. It accepts the text just as it stands in seeing it has something to say about the martyrs of the church. It fits with the question that arises from 20:1–3. It makes sense of the ‘blessing’ that follows the description: *Blessed and holy is the person who has a share in the first resurrection*. There is particular emphasis on holiness! It is sanctity and spirituality and faithfulness-to-the-point-of-death that lead to earlier reward.

• *General resurrection – at the end of the world*

Perhaps it is asked: ‘Is the **general** resurrection not to take place at the end of the world?’ I answer: Yes, but some resurrections have already taken place. The ‘general resurrection’ is more a time of publicity and presentation. Judgement takes place at the end of the world^{□1} and yet ‘it is appointed to men and women once to die and after **that** is judgement’^{□2}. Judgement always takes place in the body, since it is the ‘deeds done in the body that get judged’. The resurrection of the godly is anticipated. The event takes place at death; presentation-day^{□3} is at the end of world-history.

□1 2 Timothy 4:1
 □2 Hebrews 9:27
 □3 Colossians 1:22-23

Note

a. See my comments on 2 Corinthians 5:1 in M.A. Eaton, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, Preaching Through the Bible (IBTB, 2011), ch. 95.



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 *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* 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.



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