

# The Relationship of Resurrection to Judgment



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It is not my intention to discuss all of the judgments that I believe Scripture describes. Nor is it my purpose to defend premillennialism, which is the belief that Christ will return to resurrect and glorify His saints and then set up a one thousand-year reign upon the earth. This article assumes that the premillennial view is correct. Premillennialism necessarily teaches two future resurrections—the resurrection of believers before the one thousand-year kingdom, and the resurrection of unbelievers following that kingdom. In this article I will demonstrate the inconsistency of affirming premillennialism, with its two distinct resurrections, while also affirming that there will be only one general judgment during which all humanity will stand and be judged.

Two Inconsistent Premillennialists—Who are these inconsistent premillennialists who hold these contradicting views? Let me quote two of them. First, Millard J. Erickson identifies himself as a premillennialist. He states, "Premillennialists observe that here [in Rev. 20:4–6] is evidence of a thousand-year period and two resurrections, one at the beginning and the other at the end" (*Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998, 2nd ed., 1216). Later in the same chapter he says, "We note here that there are no biblical passages with which premillennialism cannot cope, or which it cannot adequately explain. We have seen, on the other hand, that the reference to two resurrections (Rev 20) gives amillennialists difficulty. Their explanations that we have here two different types of resurrection or two spiritual resurrections strain the usual principles of hermeneutics. The

premillennialist case appears stronger at this point” (Ibid., 1223). And after examining further biblical data, Erickson concludes, “Accordingly, we judge the premillennial view to be more adequate than amillennialism” (Ibid., 1224).

Under the general heading, “The Final Judgment,” Erickson describes “The Subjects of the Judgment.” He states, “All humans will be judged (Matt. 24:32; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 9:27). Paul warns that ‘we will all stand before God’s judgment seat’ (Rom. 14:10). Every secret will be revealed; all that has ever occurred will be evaluated. Some have questioned whether the sins of believers will be included that would seem to be unnecessary inasmuch as believers have been justified. But the statements concerning the review of sins are universal. Louis Berkhof’s perspective on this matter is probably correct: ‘Scripture leads us to believe that [the sins of believers] will be [revealed], though they will, of course, be revealed as pardoned sins.’” [Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 732, in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1208-1209). Louis Berkhof, being an amillennialist, believed in a general resurrection and a general judgment. His comment quoted by Erickson with approval is hardly something a believer in Christ would eagerly anticipate! J. Theodore Mueller, a Missouri Synod Lutheran, was also amillennial and taught that believers and unbelievers alike would stand at the same judgment, but he was able to relate his end-time views to the gospel with more success than either Berkhof or Erickson, in my opinion, when he wrote, “The norm of judgment . . . will be the works of men, 2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:35-45. But the righteous will be judged only according to their good works, Matt. 25:34-40; Rev. 12:11, since their evil works, or sins, have been cast into the depths of the sea, Micah 7:19, or forgiven” (J. Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934, 630).

The second theologian whom I characterize as an inconsistent premillennialist is Wayne Grudem. He identifies his view as “classical premillennialism,” which is a posttribulational form of premillennialism (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, 1114). He states:

After that time of tribulation at the end of the church age, Christ will return to earth to establish a millennial kingdom. When he comes back, believers who have died will be raised from the dead, their bodies will be reunited with their spirits, and these believers will reign with Christ on earth for one thousand years. . . . According to the premillennial viewpoint, at the end of the thousand years Satan will be loosed . . . and will join forces with many unbelievers who have submitted outwardly to Christ’s reign but have inwardly been in seething rebellion against him. Satan will gather these rebellious people for battle against Christ, but they will be decisively defeated. Christ will then raise from the dead all the unbelievers who have died throughout history, and they will stand before him for final judgment. After the final judgment has occurred, believers will enter into the eternal state (Ibid., 1112).

In answering the question, “Will there be more than one judgment?”, Grudem explains the dispensational premillennial view and then offers the following evaluation: “Thus, in a dispensationalist view there are different judgments: (a) a ‘judgment of the nations’ (Matt. 25:31-46) to determine who enters the millennium; (b) a ‘judgment of believers’ works’ (sometimes called the bema judgment after the Greek word for ‘judgment seat’ in 2 Cor. 5:10) in which Christians will receive degrees of reward; and (c) a ‘great white throne judgment’ at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:11-15) to declare eternal punishments for unbelievers. The view taken in this book is that these three passages all speak of the same final judgment, not of three separate judgments” (Ibid., 1141, emphasis mine).

And, just like Millard Erickson, Wayne Grudem confuses law and grace when he says, “Will all the secret words and deeds of believers, and all their sins, also be revealed on that last day? It seems that this is so. . . . But it should not cause terror or alarm on the part of believers, because even sins that are made public on that day will be made public as sins that have been forgiven, and thereby they will be the occasion for giving glory to God for the richness of his grace” (Ibid., 1144). Right! Once we get over the horrible embarrassment! Will we be giving glory to God or will

we be accusing Him of not honoring His promise of Hebrews 10:17, “And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more”?

## **An Examination of Key Passages**

There are several major passages in the New Testament that will help us understand that separate resurrections require separate judgments.

**Luke 14:1–14.** In this passage Jesus is invited to dine in the house of one of the chief Pharisees. Since it was the Sabbath, the Pharisees watched to see if Jesus would heal someone. As a matter of fact, He did heal a man and then asked His audience whether or not it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. He also asked which of them would leave their donkey [some texts read son] or ox in a pit if it fell in on the Sabbath (verses 1–6). Then He focused on the meal itself, noting their striving for the best places (verses 7-11). Finally, He spoke to the man who had provided the lavish meal and instructed him to provide free dinners for those who were poor and handicapped. If the man would do this, Jesus said, he would be blessed, because the poor could not return the favor, and thus he would “be recompensed at the resurrection of the just” (verse 14). Two things should be noted. First, “the resurrection of the just” implies a distinction between this resurrection and that of the unjust. Second, Jesus is connecting the resurrection of the just with a reward that would be given.

**2 Timothy 4:6–8.** In verse six, Paul speaks of his impending death: “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.” The word offered shows that Paul considered his death as a drink offering ready to be poured out, while the words my departure remind us that Paul believed that the state of being “absent from the body” meant for a Christian “to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). In verse seven Paul uses two athletic metaphors—“I have fought a good fight,” which can refer either to a boxing contest or to the exertion of energy in an athletic competition, and “I have finished my course,” which refers to running a race—to describe his life and ministry, which are summarized in the words, “I have kept the faith.” In verse eight Paul says that a crown or wreath, given to winners in the Olympic games, was reserved for him because he had fought the good fight and finished his course. Christ as the righteous Judge does not speak of a courtroom but of an awards ceremony: “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day, and not to me only, but unto all them also that love [literally those having loved] his appearing.” The phrase that day refers not to the time of Paul’s death but to Christ’s appearing, the time when the righteous Judge will award crowns to all who have loved this appearing and lived their lives accordingly. It seems that in these verses Paul is looking forward to Christ’s appearing as the time of both his resurrection and his rewards.

**Revelation 20:4–6.** These verses state: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them; and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. 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.”

Three things may be seen from these verses. First, in verse four, certain people are said to live with Christ for a thousand years. These people include, according to verse six, all who have part in the first resurrection. So there is at least one resurrection, a resurrection of believers, prior to the one thousand-year rule of Jesus Christ. This fact is underscored in verse five, where we read, “but the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were

finished.” Second, these people who have a part in the first resurrection not only live with Christ for a thousand years, they also reign with Him: “And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (verse four), “and they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years” (verse six). And third, “I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them” (verse four) requires that these who judge others would have themselves undergone judgment themselves. Resurrection and reigning requires being judged and rewarded; otherwise these people have no basis for sitting on thrones and judging others.

The objection of novelty—Historical or classical Premillennialists sometimes criticize their dispensational brothers for teaching beliefs that had not been taught before the 18th or 19th centuries. Granted that many of the Christian writers from A.D. 100 until A.D. 400 were premillennial and even posttribulational, the issue of premillennialism did not occupy the attention of church bodies until the 18th and 19th centuries. Why? Two responses to this question have been given. The first response is that an examination of church history for premillennial teaching must go back farther than the early church fathers. The focus should begin with what the New Testament writers taught. The second response is expressed by James Orr (1844-1913) in his book, *Progress of Dogma* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), the published lectures he gave in 1897. On pages 21 and 22 he states:

*Has it ever struck you, then—you will not find it noticed in the ordinary books, but I am sure your attention cannot be drawn to it without your perceiving that there must be more underlying it than meets the eye—what a singular parallel there is between the historical course of dogma, on the one hand, and the scientific order of the text-books on systematic theology on the other? The history of dogma, as you speedily discover, is simply the system of theology spread out through the centuries—theology, as Plato would say, “writ large”—and this not only as regards its general subject-matter, but even as respects the definite succession of its parts. The temporal and logical order correspond. The articulation of the system in your textbooks is the very articulation of the system in its development in history. Take, for example, any accredited theological textbook, and observe the order of its treatment. What we ordinarily find is something like this. Its opening sections are probably occupied with matters of Theological Prolegomena—with apologetics, the general idea of religion, revelation, the relation of faith to reason, Holy Scripture, and the like. Then follow the great divisions of the theological system—Theology proper, or the doctrine of God; Anthropology, or the doctrine of man, including sin (sometimes a separate division); Christology, or the doctrine of the Person of Christ; Soteriology (Objective), or the doctrine of the work of Christ, especially the Atonement; Subjective Soteriology, or the doctrine of the application of redemption (Justification, Regeneration, etc.); finally, Eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things. If now, planting yourself at the close of the Apostolic Age, you cast your eye down the course of the succeeding centuries, you find, taking as an easy guide the great historical controversies of the Church, that what you have is simply the projection of this logical system on a vast temporal screen.*

In other words, James Orr reminds his reader that the theological controversies that have occurred throughout church history have followed the same order of doctrinal issues as found in a textbook of systematic theology. Thus, one would not and should not expect a detailed formulation of eschatology until the other major doctrines had been debated and resolved. It is natural, then, for any detailed eschatological view to be relatively new in the history of Christian doctrine. Newness does not make such a view either right or wrong. To evaluate its accuracy, one must look at the appropriate scriptural data. And when the scriptural evidence is examined, I am convinced that belief in a premillennial resurrection of believers also demands a premillennial judgment of those believers.