

9. The Resurrection of the Dead

Close Connection

In this chapter, we come closer to examining the Rapture itself. The preceding chapters are important because we must properly see the general structure of the last age and how events relate to one another. We must especially see how all this relates to Christ, our only Savior and eternal King. Christ stands at the center from beginning to end, also in the last age.

When Christ returns in glory from heaven, the Rapture will also take place. In order for the Rapture to occur, however, there must first be the resurrection of the dead. We therefore need to focus on the time and manner of this resurrection.

Resurrection and rapture are very closely connected. The word “resurrection” (*anastasis*) means to stand up. For someone to stand up, an awakening or rising up is needed. The Bible then uses the word *egesis*.

There are those who say that life ends in death and there is no resurrection. Dead is dead; there is no comeback. Some are even convinced that death is the natural ending of life. We live and we die, and some would have us believe that this is normal.

But the Bible teaches us that death is not natural or normal. In the beginning, when God had created a perfect world, there was no death. It is true that God warned Adam and Eve about the judgment of death that would come if they rebelled against the LORD. When Adam and Eve indeed rebelled, death became an inescapable reality for all.

The apostle Paul mentions that “sin entered the world through one man (Adam), and *death through sin*, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). When Adam fell into sin, humanity fell. The consequence is that now we are all conceived and born in sin, and we therefore have to face the ultimate reality of death.

We also learn from Paul that “the wages of *sin* is death” (Rom 6:23). Death is always the result of sin. It does not stand on its own or appear without reason. Death is an aberration in a world that has entered into terrible apostasy and immorality. Death is God’s curse over a fallen world.

Let it be clear that God hates death. He also hates sin. He warned for both. And when sin did occur, God showed his purpose in overcoming sin and conquering death. He did so in His Son Jesus Christ to whom alone this task could be entrusted.

Therefore the Bible tells us in Romans 5 that just as sin and death entered the world through one man (Adam), so also is sin and death overcome in one man (Jesus Christ). Christ did not rebel against God but submitted himself perfectly to God’s law. He even gave himself as atonement for our sins on the cross of Calvary. Therefore, he has defeated Satan and sin. This is the very heart of the Bible. The line is simple but compelling: where Christ has removed sin, he has also conquered death. He took away the cause (sin) and therefore the effect (death) also disappears.

The first evidence of the victory over death lies in Christ’s own resurrection. Death could not hold him because he had committed no sin. He did not only prophesy his own death, but he also confidently spoke of his resurrection. On this point, there was no doubt in his mind.

Denial of the Resurrection

In Christ’s own time, there was already a major group of Jewish leaders called the “Sadducees” who denied the resurrection and considered any such event to be illogical and ridiculous. They approached the Lord Jesus on this point in his last term of teaching at the temple (Luke 20).

We read here that “some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, [come] to Jesus with a question” (Luke 20:27). They present a case that could have been hypothetical, but also may actually have happened. In either case, it does sound a bit far-fetched.

Their story is simple. A man marries a woman but dies childless. He has six brothers who each marry the woman in turn, all being childless when they, too, die. Finally, the woman herself dies. The question they present is, “Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” (Luke 20:33).

The notion is that if there is a resurrection, it will lead to problems in the “after-life” for all seven may claim her as wife, and a great dissension may arise. If there is no resurrection, as the Sadducees believed, there is no problem after death.

The Lord Jesus answers them calmly and clearly. In the resurrection, there will be no marriage. Earthly bonds will no longer exist as before. Having children or not plays no role in heaven. Thus the question about marriage in the resurrection is impertinent. The dilemma is false.

But the resurrection itself is a truth that must be believed. The Lord Jesus refers the Sadducees to the Scriptures of old: “...Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are *alive*’” (Luke 20:37-38). There is a resurrection as sure as believers who have died are alive to God.

Some Jewish teachers responded that Christ had spoken well (Luke 20:39). And no one really dared to ask him any more questions (Luke 20:40). The matter of the resurrection was closed, but not settled.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, we read that death is the “last enemy.” It will disappear only when Christ returns. Until that time, we have to deal with death and walk in faith that Christ has overcome it. It is still an enemy, and it is the *last* enemy to be removed. The return of Christ will lead to a general resurrection and a specific Rapture.

A Two-Fold Resurrection

The Bible teaches a general resurrection. No matter where someone lies buried or where his/her remains are scattered, he will rise. While all people

will be raised from the dead, not all people will share in the *joy* of the resurrection and live eternally with Christ on the new earth.

In John 5:28-29, we find this: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” One resurrection leads to *life*, the other leads to *condemnation*. In this light, we may speak about a two-fold resurrection. All rise from the dead, but not all are saved from condemnation.

There is a new heaven and a new earth that will be given to the just. There is also a hell that will be the place for the unrighteous. The prophet Isaiah speaks about the terrible lot of those who rebelled against God: “...their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (Isa 66:24).

The book of Revelation completes the picture. The place for the ungodly will be “the lake of fire” which is the second death (as mentioned in Revelation 20). There is a two-fold resurrection, and no one will be able to escape the day and moment of the last judgment. All will rise, either to glory or to shame. No one should therefore think that this life has no consequences for the life to come. Dead is not dead. Death is the portal to the judgment seat of the eternal God.

Everyone will face judgment. Paul writes to the Corinthians in his second letter, “For we must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). The final judgment is inescapable for all people, no matter of what time, race, or religion.

Where Are the Righteous Dead?

The question of where the dead are *before* the resurrection really falls outside the scope of this book. In the past, this has been a matter of some controversy. In view of what has been said until now, however, a few remarks may be necessary.

Many Christians will readily accept that believers go to heaven when they die. Simply said, they are with Jesus. But many are not so sure what happens to *unbelievers* in the interim between death and resurrection. I have been asked by students more than once, “Where do the unbelievers go?”

The Bible is clear that *believers* who die go to be with Christ. In that sense, death is a step ahead. We leave behind this body of sin and this life with all its troubles. The apostle Paul, facing a possible death sentence, was therefore able to write to the Philippians, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is *gain*” (Phil 1:21). Paul indicates that if he must stay on this earth longer, he will *walk* with Christ. If he dies, he will *be* with Christ. I find this passage the best proof-text for the confession that when we die, our soul immediately goes to Christ, its Head (see also *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 22).

It is remarkable that the apostle finds it hard to choose between living in the body and going to be with Christ. “Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” (Phil 1:22b). It is a good thing that we do not have to make the decision when we should die. We leave this to God who alone is sovereign over life. When our earthly task is finished, God calls us home. Our body goes into the grave; our soul goes to Christ.

From this viewpoint it also is clear that *suicide* is wrong. Just as we may not murder others, so we may also not take our own life. There was a time when known suicides could not be buried in a church’s cemetery which was considered to be consecrated land. It would be unseemly to bury an unrepentant sinner in a hallowed place. But this position is today fortunately not shared by many.

In the case of suicide, we must take into account the factors involved. Under normal circumstances, no one will end his own life. There may even be a mental illness at the bottom of suicide attempts. Also, we do not know what a person’s last thoughts were. Hence we leave the judgment to the Lord and apply the measure of compassion.

Back to the question: where exactly do the souls of believers go? We could suffice with a general statement: they go to heaven. Whenever it comes to

the topic of heaven, we are dealing in categories totally unknown to us. Whenever I am asked what heaven will be like, I usually answer, “Don’t worry about that, for you’ll see when you get there.” A more urgent question is, “Am I on the right path that brings me to heaven?”

If there is any indication in Scripture as to where the souls of believers go, it may be found in Revelation 6:9. There we read how John witnesses the opening of the fifth seal on the scroll of the Lamb, and he writes, “...I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.”

We understand that there is no sin-altar in heaven because Christ has made the great sacrifice for sin. The altar that is mentioned in Revelation is the altar of incense. In the Old Testament, incense was burned at the time of the official prayer, after the sacrifice, and it signified the prayers going up to heaven as a pleasing aroma.

Psalms 141 especially speaks about this occurrence. It says in verse 2, “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.” The prayers were presented especially after the evening sacrifice, and the rising of incense was a sign to the assembled people that the priestly prayer was now going to heaven. After the prayers, the priest came out of the sanctuary to bless the people.

Today, we no longer use incense with our prayers. This is because our great High Priest, Jesus Christ, has entered into heaven and personally intercedes for us. He now pleads our cause at God’s right hand. To use incense in worship now would be a step back in the history of salvation. Christ is now our “fragrance” before God, as it were.

The altar of incense in heaven is also the place on which the prayers of the saints on earth are placed. In Revelation 5:8, we read about twenty-four elders who are “holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” In Revelation 8:3ff, we read that “the prayers of all the saints [are placed] on the golden altar before the throne.” And since we read that the souls of the slain are under this altar (Rev 6:9), it is clear that the saints on earth and those in heaven are *united* in the work and activity of prayer and praise.

It is difficult for us to visualize how all this is structured. “Under the throne” seems like an awfully small space in which put a large quantity of souls. We do not know, however, what a soul looks like and how much space, if any, it occupies. In any case, we learn from Scripture that the souls of those who have died in faith are before the throne and under the altar of incense, where all the prayers of the church are also placed.

The above applies especially to those who were martyred. More than once, it seems that the martyrs receive special recognition. Perhaps this emphasis is due to the fact that Revelation was written in a time of great persecution. The church needed to be comforted over its slaughtered members. But the reality applies also to all who have died in the expectation of the coming of the Lord and the great Rapture. The church in heaven is *one* with the church on earth. In her prayer, she inquires ardently about the coming of the Lord Jesus. Together, we have one prayer: Maranatha, come Lord Jesus (Revelation 6:10; Revelation 22:17).

Where Are the Dead Unbelievers?

Many Christians will readily accept that believers go to heaven when they die. Simply said, they are with Jesus. But many are not so sure what happens to *unbelievers* in the interim between death and resurrection. I have been asked by students more than once, “Where do the unbelievers go?”

This question is not easily answered. I think that this is partly because the Bible gives more information about the place of the believers (who have died) than about the place of the unbelievers. The destination of unbelievers’ souls may not be any of our business or of special concern to us. Perhaps it is enough to know where children of God go when they die.

Scripture does, however, teach us something about this subject. Like the souls of believers, the souls of those who died in unbelief are preserved and will be united with their bodies on the day of the resurrection. But these reunited souls and bodies will not share in the Rapture. They will indeed be left behind. We will examine this further when we focus on the Rapture itself.

The Bible uses the term “Sheol” for the realm of the dead. While some passages give the impression that *all* people go there when they die, other passages imply that it is specifically the place where the souls of the *wicked* go.

In the NIV, the word “Sheol” is translated with the word “grave” and this may often be the general sense of the word. In Psalm 49, however, where life and death are contrasted as righteousness and sinfulness, the word “Sheol” has a very strong sense as the place of the dead in which there is no meaningful fellowship and from which there is no return to happiness.

All people, rich and poor, low and high, must face death. If there has been no ransom for their lives (Ps 49:7), which is the ransom of Christ, they are destined for Sheol. But of those who trust in God and serve him, it is said, “But God will redeem [his/her] life from the grave (Sheol); he will surely take me to himself” (Ps 49:15).

Psalm 16 applies this especially to Christ, and we also find a reference to it in Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:27). It says in that Psalm: “...you will not abandon me to the grave (Sheol), nor will you let your Holy One see decay” (Ps 16:10). This applies also to the believers in Christ.

Is there any difference between *Sheol* and *Gehenna*?

We note that the Bible uses two words in connection with death: Sheol and Gehenna. The first word (which we have already discussed) is the word *Sheol*. It indicates generally the place where all the dead go and from where believers are immediately taken up to Christ, their heavenly head. In Revelation 20 we read about the “first resurrection” and this means the believers’ going to Christ upon leaving this earth. (For further information on Revelation 20, see my book *Celebrating Salvation*, Premier, Winnipeg, 1997, pp. 265-293).

The second word that is sometimes used in the Bible is the word *Gehenna*, also translated as *Hades*. The word Gehenna itself is a contraction of

Ge hinnom which denotes a ravine outside Jerusalem which functioned as a kind of garbage dump or landfill site. It was a desecrated place where some wicked kings of Israel once sacrificed to the Ammonite god Molech. The words Gehenna or Hades are often interpreted as *hell*, a place of torment and punishment.

The idea about Hades as a place of burning fire was in the early Christian church combined with the notion of purification, and in this way the teaching about Purgatory came into view. Even someone like Augustine spoke in terms of “*poenae purgatoriae*” (purgatorial punishments).

Purgatory has in Romanist theology become the place where sinners go to be purified of remaining sin and finally to be considered worthy of life with Christ in heaven. This Romanist teaching is not in accordance with Scripture which tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ gave *complete satisfaction* for all our sins. When we die in faith, there is nothing left to cleanse (see Hebrews 10:10). Here the doctrine of divine grace is supplanted by the teaching of human merit, a typical Romanist heresy. Purgatory does not exist and is not needed.

But the Bible does speak besides Sheol about Gehenna and Hades. Do these words all mean the same place? What is the function of Gehenna over against Sheol? I think that we should not try to delve deeply things that are beyond our comprehension. While Gehenna and Sheol speak about the same, the realm of the dead, yet the accent is not the same in both words. The word Gehenna emphasizes that death is a curse, while the word Sheol emphasizes that death is a realm, but these are two sides of the same coin. The difference is one of emphasis, not of meaning.

When it is said in the Apostolic Confession that Christ *descended into Hades* this means that He endured the agony of God’s curse and wrath over our sins, The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 16 (Question and Answer 44) correctly explains the expression as denoting our Lord’s “...unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which he endured throughout all His sufferings, but especially on the cross....” The Catechism correctly adds that the benefit for us is that we have thus been delivered “from the anguish and torment of *hell*.”

It is important to note that the Bible uses these words intermittently and somewhat casually. When we die, we enter into a different realm, namely that of the dead (Sheol), and all contact with this life is broken. That realm of death is also a curse in which we experience the wages of sin (Gehenna). But believers may fully trust that their “soul after this life [will] immediately be taken up to Christ...” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 22).

It seems, then, that the souls of unbelievers are kept in Sheol or Gehenna until Judgment Day, while the souls of believers may go to be with Christ. In both cases, these souls have not yet arrived at their final destination. The ultimate place is either hell or the new earth, when the resurrection has taken place. There will be a gracious Rapture, which also means that there will be those left behind in God’s righteous judgment.

It is noteworthy that Revelation 20 tells us that after the final judgment, also death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire, which is eternal judgment. Without doing an extensive word study, we can conclude that also Sheol will be no more. It will have served its purpose; its time will be over.

The above section is perhaps an answer to our curiosity. But the main line of Scripture is to accentuate the positive and to make all those who die in Christ ready for the Rapture.

How Does the Resurrection Itself Take Place?

It is clear that all who ever lived and died will be raised from the dead. Their bodies will be assembled and life will return to them. If anyone thinks this is impossible, perhaps he should read Ezekiel 37, where the prophet is given a vision about the valley of dry bones. We read there that all the dry and brittle bones receive flesh and skin, and that breath enters them. It says, “...they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army” (Ezek 37:10).

The resurrection means that people rise from the state of death and are given a physical body. It does not matter where a person is buried or how he died; the body shall be restored to all. In Revelation 20:13, we read, “The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the

dead that were in them....” The time and manner of one’s death has no bearing on the reality of the resurrection. The dead are called by the powerful voice of God and rise up at his command.

This means that billions of people will rise – all who ever lived from the beginning of time. Will there be room for everyone? We know that God sovereignly governs time and space. He is able to make room wherever he wants so that all may stand in their flesh on the earth to witness the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What about Cremation?

Sometimes, people have their bodies cremated and their ashes spread out over a vast area. There may be many reasons for this, and not all of them are necessarily wrong. Some people feel, however, that cremation will prevent resurrection. How can ashes be re-assembled? Again, this is the power of a sovereign Creator and God. *All* will rise. Soul and body will be reunited because only then is a person whole, and we must all stand before the Judge as complete persons.

Christians do not favor cremation. A Christian funeral is an event in which we profess that the dead have a future and will rise. Burial is like sowing a seed that will sprout and blossom at a determined time. The apostle Paul speaks about this: “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable...” (1 Cor 15:42).

There is a deeper analogy here. A seed that is sown into the earth falls apart in the process of germination. But out of that seed appears a new plant with fruit. This is symbolic of what happens in the resurrection. Death is not the end. Even if our bodies decay and fall apart, there will be a new beginning out of the old. Death leads to growth and the reaping of a great harvest.

If cremation is demanded, by government decision due to lack of space, for example, Christians can accept it. God can easily assemble ashes into new bodies. Christians favor burial simply because it more clearly expresses the Christian expectation of the resurrection.