

#164

THE FIRST RESURRECTION

An Address by Percy W. Heward
At Forest Gate,
29th July, 1918

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Read Revelation, chapter 20.

The Scripture lays a great stress on resurrection. Among the first things which Paul taught were the facts that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and raised the third day according to the Scriptures. The angelic message was definite - Go and stand in the temple, speak all the words of this life, and therefore the apostles preached Jesus and the resurrection. This emphasis is clear and also that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus was not only a historical fact, but a prophecy of the resurrection of His people. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. Those who have been in the likeness of His death will be in the likeness of His resurrection. Resurrection is set before believers, therefore, not only as something to be believed, but also that which is a bright hope, a hope which leads believers to press forward as they realise by infinite grace they will be those who will be satisfied when they awake with their Lord's likeness. The apostle's desire was not only to know Christ and the power of His resurrection now, but that he might attain to the out-resurrection from the dead.

Therefore we have that which is of doctrinal importance, of practical importance, of prophetic importance, affecting God's people today. Let me repeat it, they seek to enjoy the power of Christ's resurrection. They have been raised from the death of sin, but the resurrection is not past already with regard to the body,

but in the future they shall be those who are marked out as sons of the resurrection. As through one man sin entered into the world and death by sin, so through One, the Lord Jesus, there is come a glorious resurrection. "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive". The whole of Corinthians 15 deals with the resurrection in GLORY, and therefore speaks exclusively of believers who are in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is always a peculiar attraction for God's dear people in the study of prophetic events, their order and inter-relations. There is a right and spiritual desire to know what God has revealed, and to have that instruction as to the future which will be used by the Holy Spirit to guide to an intelligent faith, and an intelligent preparation to meet our Lord. We are therefore to ponder this evening the meaning of the words "This is the first resurrection".

You will recollect that we have brought before us two aspects of resurrection in John's gospel, and they are contrasted. The Lord Jesus declared that there would be a resurrection of LIFE and a resurrection of JUDGMENT, John 5. We see, moreover, in the first Psalm that the ungodly will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. Consequently we have a hint of a resurrection of life as distinct from one which is a resurrection of judgment, and in accord with this in Luke 14 we read, "They shall be recompensed at the resurrection of the just". Christ laid a great emphasis upon the promise which He gave to His people "I will raise him up at the last day", a promise full of encouragement. Undoubtedly other Scriptures bring before us the resurrection of all, but the way in which the Lord gives that promise would seem to indicate more than a bare fact of resurrection in the thousand years. It would im-

ply a special resurrection belonging to the saints, and as ether Scriptures show, would imply a resurrection before the last day has far advanced in order that those who are raised up may SHARE the glory of Lord in the day when He is exalted, Yea, before the last day has advanced at all, other Scriptures show that the resurrection of the saints shall introduce the blessings, or be an accompaniment to that which introduces the blessing of the "Sabbath-keeping" which "remains for the people of God". Hence we are not surprised in Acts 26 to find the statement concerning our Lord Jesus that the prophets and Moses set forth how He should suffer and that He should be the First that should rise from the dead. But we may read this "That He should be the First of an out-resurrection of the dead ones", the First belonging to this out-resurrection. It seems that the Holy Spirit uses an expression with ~~two~~^{two} meanings, "The First one by reason of a resurrection of the dead" or springing out from the resurrection of the dead, and "The First one of an out-resurrection". Thus the Lord Jesus Christ is marked before us as the One Who will take the glorious position as the Prince-Leader of His people on resurrection ground. In accord with this thought of an "out-resurrection", which implies others left behind, we read in Phil. 3 "If by any means I might attain unto the out-resurrection of the dead" and Rev. 20 confirms this by saying "The rest of the dead lived not UNTIL the thousand years were finished". It shows definitely that there are TWO resurrections which John 5 hints.

So far the teaching is clear, - two resurrections. But when is the first resurrection, and who are in it? This is our problem. We want at the same time to be simple enough to take Scripture as it stands and to be willing to compare Scripture with Scripture. When is the first resurrection? That it takes place before the thousand years is clear. Rev. 20 cannot be interpreted otherwise. The first resurrection cannot include anything after the beginning of the

thousand years. But why is it called the first? Is it the first resurrection in that there is nothing before it, or is it the first of the two resurrections, or have we brought before us that which is first in what I may call a moral and spiritual sense? The word "first" occurs in other Scriptures. We read of "a first commandment" in more than one passage. Our English version rather veils the thought and says "THE first commandment". We should render it "A first commandment". A commandment of the first importance and of primary position. We also read of "the first man Adam" and "the first heaven and the first earth". Here we have not only A first heaven and A first earth, but THE first heaven and THE first earth, and this in the immediate context which is before us. We must distinguish between A first and THE first. THE first is emphasized in this passage, for twice over we read it thus - "This is THE first resurrection", "Blessed and Holy is he that hath part in THE first resurrection". Not only A first resurrection but THE FIRST ONE. I take it therefore that we put aside the interpretation that this merely suggests a resurrection of first importance. It is not only A first resurrection, it is THE first, and the Holy Spirit repeats the word THE. Is it called "the" simply with reference to the second resurrection? This is the first resurrection. After the thousand years there will be the second resurrection. That it alludes to the other resurrection as a second one is plain, yet the exact word is not employed, and the silence of Scripture awakens our respect. The first resurrection is not simply so named because the second resurrection is named in the context also. There is the word "second" here, but it is NOT linked with resurrection. More than once we read of the second death. For example, "On these the second death hath no power" and more strikingly parallel in verse 14 "and death and hell (or hades) were cast into the lake of fire, this is the SECOND death", and who-

soever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire". Thus we have brought before us the first death and the SECOND death. We also have the first resurrection. Now the first resurrection is distinguished from the subsequent resurrection even as ordinary death is distinguished from the second death. They are contrasted. The first resurrection is stated here with respect to certain "unnamed" persons, verse 4 - "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". This resurrection is not confined to the martyrs, though it includes the martyrs. Those who are unnamed first are, I believe other Scriptures show, all saints. The martyrs are particularly specialised. These, together with all faithful believers live and reign with Christ a thousand years, but the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. Consequently we have no statement of others sharing in the first resurrection but those who are BELIEVERS. The resurrection of life is thus brought before us. I am aware that in verse 6 we read "Blessed and holy is he that hath PART in the first resurrection" and that the word "part" is capable of two meanings. It may denote a share or an inheritance. It may therefore imply that there could be those who were in the resurrection but not having a share, or it might refer to all who were in it. The Holy Spirit seems to put the expression vaguely like this for a purpose, and the purpose includes the thought "Shall I not only be in the first resurrection, but have a share, an inheritance in it, not only be there, but have fellowship with the Lord Jesus reigning with Him and receiving reward when He comes and His reward is with Him to give to every man according as his work shall be". It is another of the examples of the general rule that

God employs all prophetic teaching to humble our hearts, and to make us search ourselves. Merely mental knowledge is a sad failure. We need as we look into the passages which tell of what shall be, to apply truth with power. Thus in the middle of a passage of awful grandeur and solemnity we read, "This is the patience and faith of the saints" to awaken the saints to be willing to suffer. All truth when applied by the Spirit of God is intensely practical.

We see, therefore that there is no Scripture in this context which suggests or emphasizes any but saints in the first resurrection. Those who are in that privileged resurrection, a resurrection out from the dead, toward which Paul stretched forward with intense earnestness, they are HAPPY ones; they are those who are HOLY. Unholiness will mark the ungodly when they are raised even as when they die. But happy and holy will be the condition of those who are the ones about whom the first resurrection can be predicated. It is a beautiful link, happy and holy, - happy because holy, - holy because happy, holy in accord with a REAL happiness. Believers may have sorrows NOW; happy and holy shall be he that hath part in the first resurrection. Oh beloved friends, let us consider this precious subject, and rejoice in the prospect of the Lord's redeemed. But one more important point remains - is the first resurrection actually the first, or is there any other resurrection which precedes it? Is there a select resurrection of another character before it? I need hardly say that past resurrections, through an Elijah or an Elisha or in the life of the Lord Jesus, or by the ministry of Peter or Paul, were resurrections which left the body in the same physical liability to die. Therefore they were NOT resurrections in the prophetic interpretation of the word. There is no contradiction in the existence of those resurrections first. But you say, "How about those who were raised when Christ was raised in Matthew

27 who came out of the grave? " That they were an evidence of what will take place we must thankfully acknowledge, but we do not know what happened to those bodies AFTERWARDS; we do not know what arrangement God made. We therefore accept the fact and what it states, but we do not add to the fact what we imagine. We leave what happened afterwards because God leaves it out. He knows and that is sufficient for us. Though the term "First resurrection" would not of itself necessarily imply more than first as distinct from second, yet the great stress on the word THE, and the context, seem to imply this means not only first relatively, but first absolutely. Therefore the only difficulty which remains is, "Will the first resurrection be a resurrection in a moment, or will it have certain parts, certain stages? This Scripture does not state in THIS passage: we must THEREFORE ponder various passages together. When we read "The rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection", we are no more told that it takes place in a moment than we are told that death takes place for a large number in the same moment. Death may be spread over a certain period, yet the deaths of thousands are not the second death because the second death is future. The word "death" and the word "Resurrection" do not necessarily prove an action which takes place in one moment for all the persons involved therein. Here then we have brought before us that it could be the first resurrection for a considerable period of time, but OTHER Scriptures will surely give us the Lord's guidance. We turn to a verse like 1 Cor. 15:50, there we read "Now then I say brethren that flesh and blood ^{cannot} inherit the kingdom of God neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold I show you a mystery, we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be

changed". At the time when that was written it was not easy to say exactly all that it meant. - "We shall not all sleep, but WE shall all be changed" alluded plainly to the saints who were then living. Now is the "we all" to be limited to the saints then, or does it apply to the saints afterwards? I need hardly say in the light of passages like the twelfth chapter, the "we all" and the "ye all" must be very carefully handled, lest we imply that what was true of all saints at Corinth is necessarily true of all saints now. If we read of certain privileges they had, can we assume that after wandering from the Lord, all God's people have those privileges now? We must be very careful, but the Holy Spirit ALWAYS gives the key. We may not always find it, but it is always there. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. Years after this event the interpretation became clearer because all who were then living had fallen asleep; therefore, since the Apostle says "WE shall not all sleep", the word "we all" must be used in the wider sense, meaning "we believers". Thus the Holy Spirit has shown us how the "we all" is to be interpreted here - "we believers shall not all sleep" but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trump, for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed". Here then we have brought before us that this will take place at the LAST trump, and the dead will be raised then and raised incorruptible. Now the Holy Spirit, by saying they will be raised incorruptible at the last trump, implies they will not be raised before. If the language were "they should be incorruptible at the last trump" you might say they would be in that condition, yet the Lord could in other passages give a promise to put them in the condition earlier but when they are to be brought INTO that condition at the last trump, it is plain they are bodily in a corrupti-

ble condition or in a corruptible condition before, or in a condition resulting. They are NOT incorruptible previously. Therefore the saints' bodies have not been raised before, and as this passage is dealing with all believers, we have an evidence that all believers are missed at the seventh trump, which is, as Revelation explains, the last of a series introducing and leading up to the LAST DAY, when the Lord HIMSELF descends. This mortal must put on immortality and this corruptible must put on incorruption. So when this corruption 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". In like manner in 1 Thess. 4 the resurrection of ALL saints is associated with the same period. The trumpet sounds and there is the raising up of the dead who are raised incorruptible, the dead in Christ therefore, the first resurrection. Now the first resurrection we have seen takes place at the beginning of the thousand years reign - "They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years". They are therefore raised at the beginning. The Lord Jesus Christ says "I will raise him up at the last day". The last day is the last thousand years. There is no promise of resurrection apart from the last day. Here then we have a definite statement as to what takes place. Acts² definitely declares "The sun shall be turned into ~~black~~ darkness and the moon into blood before that great and terrible day of the Lord come" Matt. 24, indicates "immediately after the tribulation shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven; ~~then~~ then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall gather together His elect from the four winds". Thus we have the tribulation; immediately after the sun is darkened, that is just prior to the last and notable day of the Lord. The first act of the last and notable day of the Lord is the fulfilment of Christ's promise "I will raise

him up at the last day". The dead in Christ rise first, hence the first resurrection which is the promise is the beginning act associated with the last trump, the beginning act of the last day of the week which began with Adam being placed in the garden. We know how failure came in, and how failure has been manifest for nigh six thousand years, but in the seventh thousand years the Lord will be exalted. Hence the promise of resurrection of the saints is brought down to a very narrow limit of time. There is no room for a period. It is an event, not a period, with a suddenness. Not a period of resurrection, but ~~it~~ THE first resurrection at the last trump sound that the believers may be raised together and then caught up together "to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord". This is a beautiful thought to contemplate in its bearing as to the ages. The mark of the day of the Lord is that the Lord alone shall be exalted. Up till the end of this ^{day} the bodies of saints go to corruption. Satan particularly desires the bodies of saints that they may go to corruption. The first act of the day of the Lord when the Lord alone shall be exalted is to deliver these bodies from corruption and here is a reply to Satan's authority upon this earth. The beginning act of the Lord's assumption of the kingdom, all authority being given unto Him in heaven and on earth, is to take a position in the heaven and to raise up His saints out from the graves of earth, and to raise them up from standing on the earth that they may share His glory in heavenly places, and then return to be recompensed in the earth. Resurrection in the present age for the saints of God would as a general event be unbecoming. The present time is that of the patience and faith of the saints. They are remaining under, and their bodies are remaining under, and are left in the grave until

the day of the Lord starts. Any theory of resurrection BEFORE the day of the Lord is without Scriptural warrant and without Scripture teaching. That which is in accordance with Divine revelation is, as always, in Divine harmony with the whole plan of God. How precious is the prospect that this body of humiliation will be fashioned anew like unto the Lord's body of glory. Oh, beloved friends, if we have proved the Lord's saving work in our hearts, let us live as those who long to have its fruition when we shall not only have a ~~xxx~~ earnest or firstfruits of the Spirit, but the climax and fulness of spirit, ~~x~~ soul, and body preserved blameless in the presence of our Lord Jesus because of His once-finished work.
