



## Irenaeus and the Two Resurrections

### Review

Chapter 21 surveyed the teachings of some of the early millennialists, such as Papias, Justin, and Tertullian. Papias was a disciple of John and was able to ask John what he meant by some of the things he wrote in the stealthy book of Revelation. Papias also gathered oral history from others who knew Jesus, and with this information he composed an entire book describing the millennial kingdom of Christ.

Because of this access to an oral history of the teachings of Christ and the apostles, the views of these early millennialists have an inherent credibility. These early millennialists created a direct link between the first resurrection and the resurrection of a natural body that would inherit the messianic kingdom, as described by Ezekiel (Ezek. 37). And they linked the final resurrection to the resurrection of an eternal body not given in marriage that would inherit the Father's eternal kingdom of heaven, as described by Jesus in his answer to the Sadducees (Luke 20:34–36). This correspondence to these Scriptures should erase any doubt as to how they understood the two resurrections.

### Irenaeus (c. AD 120–202)

Irenaeus was a prominent ante-Nicene millennialist who lived not long after John. Irenaeus did not know John, but as a teenager he was

taught by Polycarp (c. AD 69–160), who was discipled by John. Polycarp was in the unique position to be able to ask John exactly what he meant by the millennial reign of Christ. We do not have any surviving writings by Polycarp that reveal his view of the millennium, but we do have a large collection of the writings of his student, Irenaeus, who was only one generation removed from John. Irenaeus's teachings on the millennial kingdom are found in his books *Against Heresies*. These books can be difficult to read because their primary purpose was to refute the strange and heretical Gnostic teachings that were negatively influencing the church in his day.

### Gnosticism

The following is a short summary of the Gnostics' beliefs. They believed the human body and the material world were created by an inferior god or angel. As a result, the material world is flawed and the human body is inherently evil and defective, which explains why it has so many carnal and sinful passions. One day, a superior God will annihilate this defective creation and our evil physical bodies. Only our liberated human spirits will ascend to the mysterious spiritual realms of heaven. The spirits of the more "enlightened" Christians will ascend to the higher levels of heavenly paradise. Christ, a highly enlightened man, did not experience a resurrection of his evil body; only his enlightened spirit ascended to heaven. Thus, Christ escaped his evil body and this flawed creation.

Irenaeus agreed that our human spirits are contained in sinful human bodies of flesh and blood, but he refuted Gnosticism by affirming that before the fall the Genesis creation and the human body created by the sovereign God were indeed "good." Further proof of their inherent goodness is the fact that this same Creator will restore this Genesis creation *and* our natural Adamic bodies in the millennium. If the natural body and this creation are so intrinsically evil, then why would God the Creator, as the superior God, affirm their goodness by restoring them to their Edenic condition in Christ's future millennial kingdom? Why not just destroy our bodies and this defective creation and take our liberated spirits to heaven?

Even further proof of the inherent goodness of the body is demonstrated when God resurrects it once again after the 1,000-year res-

toration at the final resurrection, which is another resurrection of the human body. It will be transformed into an incorruptible body and will reside on a real eternal earth. Irenaeus believed that the current Genesis earth is only purged by fire when it transitions to the eternal new earth.

### **Irenaeus and the First Resurrection**

Like other early millennialists, Irenaeus linked the first resurrection and the millennium described by John directly to the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel and their visions of a resurrection of the natural body residing on a restored natural earth. Irenaeus's favorite expression for the first resurrection is "the resurrection of the just." Notice in the following excerpt how he created a direct correspondence between the nature of the first resurrection to the type of resurrection defined by Isaiah and Ezekiel when the saints inherit the messianic kingdom:

Then, too, Isaiah himself has plainly declared that there shall be joy of this nature at the resurrection of the just, when he says: "The dead shall rise again; those, too, who are in the tombs shall arise, and those who are in the earth shall rejoice. . . ." [a reference to Isa. 26:19]. And this again Ezekiel also says: "Behold, I will open your tombs, and will bring you forth out of your graves; when I will draw my people from the sepulchres [tombs], and I will put breath in you, and ye shall live; and I will place you on your own land, and ye shall know that I am the LORD" [a reference to Ezek. 37:12–13]. . . . "And they shall dwell in it in peace; and they shall build houses, and plant vineyards, and dwell in hope" [a reference to Isa. 65 and the renewed earth during the messianic kingdom]. . . . "God will remove men far away [evil men], and those that are left [who inherit the renewed earth] shall multiply in the earth [marriage and reproduction]. And they shall build houses, and shall inhabit them themselves: and plant vineyards, and eat of them themselves" [a reference to Isa. 65]. For all these and other words [of the prophets] were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just [the first resurrection], which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all

nations under his rule; in which the righteous shall reign in the earth [during the subsequent millennial reign of Christ].<sup>20</sup>

Irenaeus connected John's teachings in Revelation 20 with the teachings of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The millennium corresponds to the messianic kingdom described by these prophets, and the first resurrection corresponds to the kind of resurrection they described so that the departed saints can inherit Christ's earthly kingdom. When Christ rules the world during the millennium, an age of righteous humanity will dawn, and the resurrected saints in their natural bodies will multiply, build houses, and plant vineyards on a restored Edenic earth.

In the next excerpt, Irenaeus observed that believers often experience a great deal of misery on this earth and are sometimes martyred for their faith. It is definitely not paradise on earth. In "the resurrection of the just," however, they will inherit a paradise on a restored Edenic earth as a reward for their faith. They will come back to life in the same kind of natural bodies they had before they died. The first resurrection has to be of the natural body because it is destined for the restored natural earth:

. . . of the resurrection of the just, . . . when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated, . . . For it is just that in that very creation in which they toiled or were afflicted [in natural bodies on this Genesis earth], . . . they should receive the reward of their suffering; and that in the creation in which they were slain because of their love to God, in that they should be revived again [in the same Adamic bodies in the same Genesis creation]; . . . It is fitting, therefore, that the creation itself, being restored to its primeval condition [restored Edenic earth], should without restraint be under the dominion of the righteous.<sup>21</sup>

The saints were in their natural bodies when they toiled, suffered, and, in some cases, were slain on this earth. When the creation is renovated and "restored to its primeval condition," the saints will be "revived again" at the first resurrection. They will have restored natural

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20 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.34.1—V.35.6.

21 *Ibid.*, V.32.1.

bodies for a restored natural earth and will fulfill the original creation mandate by subduing the earth “under the dominion of the righteous.” The millennium is a restored Edenic paradise for the resurrected saints.

Irenaeus also linked the millennium to the conversation Christ had with the disciples when he promised them that they would one day drink wine with him in his kingdom (Matt. 26:29). And Irenaeus referenced the conversation Christ had with the disciples when he promised them a hundredfold reward in this age as their reward for sacrificially following him. In that conversation, Jesus also taught that the disciples will occupy twelve thrones to assist him in ruling Israel (Matt. 19:28–29). Irenaeus connected these thrones to the thrones described by John in Revelation 20.

In interpreting these promises, Irenaeus taught that in order for the disciples to drink wine with Christ in his kingdom and inherit the hundredfold reward in this age with houses, land, and extended human families, they must be resurrected into the same kind of natural bodies they had while they were with Christ on the earth:

He promised to drink of the fruit of the vine with His disciples, thus indicating both these points: the inheritance of the earth in which the new fruit of the vine is drunk, and the resurrection of His disciples in the flesh [real bodies for real wine]. For the new flesh which rises again is the same which also received the new cup [both are natural Adamic bodies of flesh and blood capable of drinking real wine]. . . . And again He says, “Whosoever shall have left lands, or houses, or parents, or brethren, or children because of Me, he shall receive in this world a hundred-fold, and in that to come he shall inherit eternal life.” For what are the hundred-fold in this world, . . . The predicted blessing therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom [the millennial reign of Christ], when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead [the first resurrection of the disciples when they will sit on twelve thrones ruling over Israel]; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth [the regenerated earth].<sup>22</sup>

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22 Ibid., V.33.1–3.

During Christ's millennial kingdom, the disciples will drink wine with Christ again in an age of righteous humanity. When the disciples are resurrected into their natural bodies, they will experience "the inheritance of the earth" and will inherit a hundredfold reward in this age as restored human beings in the same kind of natural bodies they had when they were on this earth. In fact, the resurrected bodies of the departed disciples at the beginning of the millennium must "unquestionably" be of their natural bodies because the resurrected disciples will experience an Adamic paradise with houses, land, and children on a fertile earth with "an abundance of all kinds of food." This occurs when this Genesis creation is "renovated and set free" from the curse and is "under the dominion of the righteous" again, as it was in the beginning before the fall.

Irenaeus uses almost identical phrasing ("the new flesh which rises again is the same") when he described the resurrection of the natural bodies of both the widow's son and Lazarus:

The widow's dead son, . . . and Lazarus, who had lain four days in the tomb—in what bodies did they rise again? In those same, no doubt, in which they had also died.<sup>23</sup>

The widow's son and Lazarus had natural bodies when they died, and they had the same kind of natural bodies when they were resurrected. Likewise, at the first resurrection, all the saints will have the same kind of natural bodies they had before they died.

### **Oral History from Christ**

Irenaeus affirms that these teachings of an Edenic paradise on this earth came directly from elders such as Papias and Polycarp, who learned these truths from the apostle John, who, in turn, learned them from Jesus. Irenaeus claimed that the teachings of a literal messianic kingdom inherited through a resurrection of a natural body came directly from Christ himself:

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23 Ibid., V.13.1.

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; . . . as the elders who saw John [likely Papias and Polycarp], the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him [John] how the Lord used to teach in regard to these times [Jesus taught John about his earthly kingdom], . . . [the Lord taught] that a grain of wheat would produce ten thousand ears, . . . and that all other fruit-bearing trees, and seeds and grass, would produce in similar proportions; and that all animals feeding [only] on the productions of the earth, should [in those days] become peaceful and harmonious among each other, . . . when the creation is restored, all the animals should obey and be in subjection to man, and revert to the food originally given by God, . . . the lion shall [then] feed on straw.<sup>24</sup>

According to the elders instructed by John, Jesus taught that the restored earth will produce great quantities of wheat, fruit-bearing trees, and wine, in keeping with the vision of the messianic kingdom. Seeds and grasses will become so nutritious and abundant that animals will no longer feed on each other. The earth will revert to the garden of Eden ruled by righteous humans, when animals lived peacefully together.

Irenaeus claimed that these oral teachings that the saints will be resurrected into natural bodies to experience the restored Edenic creation came directly from John, who in turn learned them directly from Christ. This is an extraordinary claim! And it should compel any amillennial theologian to reconsider his position that there is no literal millennial restoration of this Genesis creation before the eternal kingdom of heaven.

Irenaeus also alluded to an incident that Papias recorded in his fourth book, which was devoted to the millennium. Papias wrote of a discussion between Jesus and the disciples in which Judas found these teachings about a future paradise on earth incredulous. Irenaeus wrote:

And these things are borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book; . . . And he says in addition, "Now these things [about the restored

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24 Ibid., V.33.3–4.

earth and its incredible abundance] are credible to believers.” And he says that, “when the traitor Judas did not give credit to them, and put the question, ‘How then can things about to bring forth so abundantly be wrought by the Lord?’ the Lord declared, ‘They who shall come to these [times] shall see.’”<sup>25</sup>

As this conversation indicates, Jesus probably taught the disciples a great deal about the future restoration and the hundredfold reward on the regenerated earth. But much of this material was not included in the New Testament for reasons alluded to in chapter 20, which explores the stealthy nature of his earthly kingdom. Had the apostles emphasized Christ’s future reign over the nations, it would have posed a serious geopolitical threat to the Romans. And had they focused on the material blessings of Christ’s earthly kingdom, people might have been attracted to the material pleasures of the kingdom rather than to God himself.

Fortunately, Papias was able to question John and others who had known Christ in person, and with that oral history he wrote an entire book about the future restoration. I find this truly remarkable, and it is a tragedy that this book was lost in antiquity.

### **The Promises to Abraham**

When developing his theology of the future, Irenaeus linked all these promises of resurrection and restoration found in Revelation and in the Gospels to the promises made to Abraham and his spiritual descendants:

Now God made promise of the earth to Abraham and his seed; yet neither Abraham nor his seed, that is, those who are justified by faith, do now receive any inheritance in it [in today’s cursed creation]; but they shall receive it at the resurrection of the just [when Abraham and his spiritual seed are resurrected in the millennium]. For God is true and faithful; and on this account He said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”<sup>26</sup>

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25 Ibid., V.33.4.

26 Ibid., V.32.2.

Irenaeus reasoned that all spiritual *and* material blessings promised to Abraham are extended to his seed, which is made up of all believers of all time who have been justified by faith. The restored earth during the millennium that the prophets described is the land promised to Abraham and his seed. All these promises of a restored earth made to Abraham and his spiritual descendants are confirmed by Jesus' promise that the meek shall inherit the earth.

But Abraham and his faithful descendants died before this restoration has taken place. How, then, can they inherit Christ's kingdom? According to Irenaeus, the only way Abraham and the departed meek of all nations can inherit the promised restored earth is through the first resurrection of their natural bodies. That is because God is "true and faithful" to all the promises he has made to his people.

### Origen's Observations

One of the early critics of millennialism was Origen, a famous amillennialist who lived from AD 185 to 254. He was a highly educated man and started a famous school of theology in Alexandria. Origen held some Gnostic beliefs and frowned upon the pleasures of the flesh and any worldly kingdom, particularly one that was Jewish in nature. The Jewish prophets described the messianic kingdom as an earthly kingdom accessed through a resurrected natural body. Origen read much of the Bible allegorically, and he seemingly arbitrarily decided that the Old Testament Jewish vision of an earthly messianic kingdom should be interpreted metaphorically without any corresponding reality on this Genesis earth. He believed that Christ's eternal kingdom will be a *spiritual* kingdom accessed through a *spiritual* body, not a material body.

Origen was a brilliant man, however, and it helps to read what he wrote about the millennialists of his day to further confirm what they actually taught. He was a young man when Irenaeus was getting old, but he surely would have been familiar with Irenaeus's teachings. In the following quote, it is clear that Origen believed Irenaeus and the other millennialists of his day were teaching that the first resurrection would be of a natural body given in marriage:

Certain persons . . . are of opinion that the fulfillment of the promises of the future [millennium] are to be looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury [a worldly kingdom]; . . . after the resurrection [the first resurrection], such bodily structures as may never be without the power of eating, and drinking, and performing all the functions of flesh and blood, . . . that after the resurrection there will be marriages, and the begetting of children [natural human body], . . . Such are the views of those who, while believing in Christ [true Christians], understand the divine Scriptures in a sort of Jewish sense.<sup>27</sup>

Origen understood that the millennialists of his day believed that the first resurrection will be of the natural bodies of the departed saints. These resurrected saints will experience all the normal functions of the human body, including “marriages, and the begetting of children.” These millennialists adhered to a literal interpretation of both the promises to Abraham and the Jewish prophets’ vision of an earthly paradise.

### The Final Resurrection

Irenaeus believed that God has a predetermined number of people who will become his children and that once that number is reached, this Adamic creation will come to an end on Judgment Day. He believed the final resurrection will include believers and unbelievers who will inherit their eternal destinies. Irenaeus also taught that the transformed saints will no longer be given in marriage on the eternal new earth. Surprisingly, he taught that unbelievers will also no longer experience marriage and reproduction when they are resurrected and sent to hell, which seems obvious, since they are destined for eternal destruction. Yet, Irenaeus clearly placed the rapture of the saints after the millennium on the last day at the final or general resurrection:

And therefore, when the number [of saints] is completed, which He [the Father] had predetermined in His own counsel, all those who have been enrolled for [eternal] life shall rise again [at the

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27 Origen, *De Principiis*, II.11.2.

final resurrection], having their own bodies, and having also their own souls, and their own spirits, in which they had pleased God [body, soul, and spirit united in resurrected bodies]. Those, on the other hand, who are worthy of punishment [unbelievers], shall go away into it [the lake of fire], they too having their own souls, and their own bodies [body and soul], in which they stood apart from the grace of God. Both classes [resurrected believers and resurrected unbelievers] shall then cease from any longer begetting and being begotten, from marrying and being given in marriage.<sup>28</sup>

Once the Father's predetermined number of saints has been reached, reproduction of our kind as human beings comes to an end. After the final resurrection on the last day of the human experience, resurrected believers and unbelievers will no longer marry and reproduce children in the eternal age to come. Most important, according to Irenaeus, the rapture of the immortal children of God who are no longer given in marriage will occur on Judgment Day at the final resurrection—not at the first resurrection at the beginning of the millennium, as claimed by modern premillennialists.

Irenaeus's understanding of the two resurrections in Revelation 20 can be summarized as follows:

**First resurrection:** This resurrection will be of the natural bodies of the departed saints when they inherit the messianic kingdom, as defined by Christ, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the prophets = “The inheritance of the earth . . . and the resurrection of His disciples in the flesh. For the new flesh which rises again is the same which also received the new cup.” + “And they shall build houses, and shall inhabit them themselves: and plant vineyards, and eat of them themselves.’ For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just.”

**Final resurrection:** This resurrection will be of the eternal bodies of the sons of God, as defined by Jesus in his answer to the Sadducees = “All those who have been enrolled for [eternal] life

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28 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.33.5.

shall rise again, having their own bodies, and . . . shall then cease from any longer begetting and being begotten, from marrying and being given in marriage.”

The only significant difference between Irenaeus's view of God's endgame and the view presented in this book is that instead of Christ returning to this earth to rule the world, postrestorationism proposes that Christ will rule the world during the millennium *from his throne in heaven*. The second coming will occur *after* the millennium on Judgment Day in conjunction with the final resurrection, when the raptured saints inherit the Father's eternal kingdom.

### Summary

The Gnostics claimed that a superior God will one day save our enlightened spirits from our evil bodies and this defective earth when we ascend to the super-spiritual realm of heaven. Irenaeus built his biblical case against these heresies by teaching that both this current Genesis earth and the human body are inherently good as the Creator originally created them. Proof of their goodness is borne out by the fact that God plans to resurrect this same kind of human body when the saints inherit the restored Edenic earth in the millennium.

In fact, God never abandons the good body he created for his people. Instead, he resurrects the body twice—once as a restored natural body to experience the Son's messianic kingdom, and then again as a new kind of incorruptible body no longer given in marriage at the final resurrection on Judgment Day. On Judgment Day, the predetermined number of saints chosen by grace will be taken to be in the presence of God the Father for eternity.