



## Lactantius and the Two Resurrections

### Review

Chapter 22 explored the teachings of Irenaeus, a prominent early millennialist. To refute the Gnostic teachings of his day that devalued the human body and the material world, Irenaeus made his case for the inherent goodness of this Genesis creation by alluding to the fact that the supreme Creator of this world will restore this cursed creation to its Edenic condition during Christ's future millennial reign over this earth. The departed saints who have experienced hardship and sometimes martyrdom in this fallen world will inherit this material paradise on earth through the first resurrection of their natural bodies. Our bodies and this creation may currently be under a curse, but God's plan of redemption of our bodies *and* this creation during the millennium proves that our bodies and this creation are indeed good.

Irenaeus linked the first resurrection of the natural body and the millennial age of paradise to a resurrection and restoration described by the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. Irenaeus traced these teachings of a future restoration directly to oral history emanating from Jesus himself. To inherit the eternal new earth, Irenaeus taught that the saints will experience yet another resurrection and transformation of their natural bodies into eternal bodies not given in marriage on Judgment Day, when the saints inherit God the Father's eternal new earth. These two resur-

reactions prove that the Gnostics were wrong when they asserted that our human bodies are an inferior dwelling place for our inner spirits.

### Lactantius

Lactantius, who lived between AD 245 and 325, is another well-known early millennialist. Highly educated, he was an important historian of the period who wrote toward the end of the ante-Nicene period. He was an accomplished orator as well as a skillful writer and tutored Emperor Constantine's eldest son, Crispus.

Like other early millennialists, Lactantius believed that the first resurrection of the departed saints will be of their natural bodies. They will experience marriage and bear godly children. Some of these resurrected saints will sit on thrones and rule over the survivors of the Tribulation. Lactantius was also premillennial in that he believed Christ will return to the earth and dwell in the midst of all mortal human beings. Following is his description of the millennium when Christ returns to destroy the Antichrist and rule the world:

But He, when He shall have destroyed unrighteousness, and executed His great judgment [against the Antichrist at his second coming], and shall have recalled to life the righteous [the first resurrection], who have lived from the beginning [all the departed saints], will be engaged among men [survivors of the Tribulation] a thousand years, and will rule them with most just command [the resurrected saints will sit on thrones to reign with Christ over the nations]. . . . Then they who shall be alive in their bodies shall not die [the risen saints will live for the entire thousand years], but during those thousand years shall produce an infinite multitude [marriage and reproduction], and their offspring shall be holy, and beloved by God; . . . About the same time also the prince of the devils, who is the contriver of all evils, shall be bound with chains, and shall be imprisoned during the thousand years of the heavenly rule in which righteousness shall reign in the world [an age of righteous humanity], so that he may contrive no evil against the people of God. . . . the earth will open its fruitfulness, and bring forth most abundant fruits of its own accord; the rocky mountains shall drip with honey; streams of wine shall run down, and rivers flow with

milk [the earth is regenerated to its Edenic condition]: in short, the world itself shall rejoice, and all nature exult, being rescued and set free from the dominion of evil and impiety, and guilt and error.<sup>29</sup>

Lactantius described the millennial kingdom as an Edenic paradise experienced by mortals who survive the Tribulation and by the risen saints from all ages. All the departed saints “who have lived from the beginning” will be “recalled to life” through the first resurrection to take part in this paradise, where they will experience marriage and an almost “infinite multitude” of godly offspring.

### The Eternal Kingdom

Lactantius proceeded to describe the transition of this creation to the eternal new earth and the final resurrection, when the saints will receive immortal bodies that no longer experience marriage. It is also Judgment Day for resurrected unbelievers.

But when the thousand years shall be completed, the world shall be renewed by God, and the heavens shall be folded together, and the earth shall be changed [the new heavens and new earth], and God shall transform men into the similitude of angels [the final transformation of the sons of God into immortal bodies not given in marriage], and they shall be white as snow [holy and pure]; and they shall always be employed in the sight of the Almighty, and shall make offerings to their Lord, and serve Him forever [in the eternal kingdom]. At the same time shall take place that second and public resurrection of all [unbelievers on Judgment Day], in which the unrighteous shall be raised to everlasting punishments [in the lake of fire] (*DI VII.26.2*). . . . After these things [the destruction of this Genesis creation, the final resurrection, and Judgment Day] God will renew the world [the new heavens and new earth], and transform the righteous into the forms of angels [immortal sons of God], that, being presented with the garment of immortality, they may serve God forever; and this will be the kingdom of God, which shall have no end. (*DI VII.72*)

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29 Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, VII.24.1–4.

Lactantius links the final resurrection to Jesus' answer to the Sadducees when Jesus taught that the resurrected immortal sons of God will be like the angels, who do not experience marriage. Lactantius taught that "the thousand years shall be completed" at the final resurrection, when God will "transform the righteous into the forms of angels" so they can serve God forever in his eternal kingdom.

In summary, Lactantius believed that the first resurrection is of natural bodies that will produce godly children because the saints are destined for the regenerated earth during the millennial reign of Christ. And he believed the final resurrection will be of the raptured immortal bodies because the glorified saints are destined for the eternal new heavens and new earth. Like the other early millennialists, Lactantius clearly placed the rapture of the saints *after* the millennium on the very last day of this Genesis creation—not at the beginning of the millennium in conjunction with Christ's second coming.

The early millennialists' timing of the rapture of the saints is very different from that of modern premillennialists, who place the rapture of the eternal bodies not given in marriage sometime *before* the millennium—either before the Great Tribulation (pre-tribulation), midway through the Great Tribulation (mid-tribulation), or after the Great Tribulation (post-tribulation). Regardless of where they place the rapture, modern premillennialists believe the resurrected saints will be in their raptured, glorified bodies when they re-inhabit the earth. This comingling of raptured saints with mortal survivors of the Tribulation would have made no sense to these early millennialists. They believed the first resurrection had to be of the saints' natural bodies as described by the prophets because they are destined to inherit the restored natural earth—an Edenic paradise for real human beings.

### **Creating a Biblical Theology**

Early millennialists understood the distinction between the two orders of being—the Adamic order of being and the new order of being as sons of God. And they used these two orders of being and their corresponding characteristics to interpret and organize the Scriptures to understand God's endgame. Using these hermeneutical principles, early millennialists were able to comprehend the nature of the millennium as the Son's kingdom on earth for the restoration of the Adamic

order of being and the Father's kingdom in heaven as the subsequent eternal new heavens and earth for the eternal sons of God.

In the modern era of the Internet, we create hyperlinks on web pages to link a particular word or subject to related in-depth information found on other websites. In like manner, the early millennialists linked Revelation 20 to other Scriptures to make sense of John's teachings and to create a logical biblical theology of the future. They created a hyperlink between the first resurrection and the millennium to the following key sections of Scripture to make their case for the 1,000-year messianic kingdom:

- Ezekiel 37: the departed saints will inherit the messianic kingdom through a resurrection of their natural bodies.
- Isaiah 65: the wolf and the lamb will graze together in a restored Edenic paradise in God's kingdom of peace, justice, righteousness, and prosperity.
- Matthew 19: Christ promised his faithful disciples a hundredfold reward in this Genesis age, when he rules the world and the earth is regenerated to its Edenic condition.

They also linked these Scriptures to oral apostolic teachings passed along from elders such as Papias and Polycarp, who learned them directly from John and other apostles. This recorded oral history indicates that Christ probably spoke at length about the future restoration of this Genesis creation to an Edenic paradise. Papias gathered so much material that he was able to write a book about these teachings of Christ.

The only major problem with the early millennialists' system of eschatology is that they placed Christ's second coming in conjunction with the first resurrection of the natural bodies of the saints instead of in conjunction with the rapture of their immortal bodies after the millennium on the last day. Paul plainly teaches that Christ's second coming is associated with the rapture of the immortal bodies of the saints, not with the rapture of their natural bodies. This mistake is easily corrected, however, by realizing that it is not necessary for Christ to return to this world to rule over it. As the Son of God, he can simply rule his creation from his throne in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father, where after his ascension he said he would be seated "from now on" (Luke 22:69). His reign will begin when the Father says it is

time for Satan to be bound and for Christ to use his power to govern this world.

When early millennialists assume that Christ returns to this earth at the beginning of the millennium, they never offer biblical justification for this belief. Neither do they refer to John's oral teachings to confirm this assumption. Their mistake concerning the second coming is understandable. The church was young; these budding theologians were just beginning to grapple with the complex book of Revelation and to learn how to create a systematic and logical set of beliefs from what John and other Old and New Testament writers had revealed.

Revelation was the first book of the Bible to reveal the existence of a millennial reign of Christ and to teach that there are two distinct resurrections—one to inherit Christ's millennial kingdom, and another to inherit the new heavens and new earth. These teachings also had to be harmonized with the oral history and the information from other complex books of the Bible, such as Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, as well as the New Testament Scriptures. This was no small task as evidenced by the fact that almost two thousand years later, theologians are still endeavoring to navigate this revelation and make sense out of all the relevant biblical data.

### Summary

Theologians continue to debate three very different eschatological views: amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism. None of these views can be legitimized by referencing the teachings of the early millennialists. Premillennialism is the closest to their teachings, but the premillennial assertion that the first resurrection will be of the raptured saints directly opposes the teachings of the ante-Nicene millennialists.

Postrestorationism, however, is the eschatology that is closest to the teachings of the ante-Nicene millennialists, which gives this view of God's endgame great credibility. The early millennialists understood that the first resurrection will be of the natural bodies of the departed saints because they are destined to inherit the restored natural earth during Christ's millennial reign. They also understood that the final resurrection of the saints after the millennium on Judgment Day will be of the eternal bodies of the sons of God because they are destined to

inherit eternal life in the Father's kingdom of heaven. The only major modification to their eschatology that I have made is that instead of Christ returning to this earth to establish his dominion over this creation for a thousand years, he remains seated on his throne in heaven while he rules the world. Christ's second coming is after the millennium on the last day.

Before the fall, the world was the Son of God's dominion, for this Genesis creation was uniquely created through, by, and for him. As Adam and Eve multiplied and filled an Edenic earth, the Son would have ruled over his wonderful creation from heaven. After the fall, God cursed the earth, and the world became Satan's dominion. When Satan is removed from this world, Christ, as the Son of God, will restore this creation to its Edenic condition and will reestablish his dominion over it from his throne in heaven for a thousand years. When he returns, he will rapture the saints into eternal bodies and will usher in the Father's eternal kingdom.