

# WILL THERE BE TWO OR THREE GENERAL RESURRECTIONS?

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Does the Bible teach that there will be three general resurrections or just two? The general and official teaching in the Church of God has been that three general resurrections will occur, but some believe only two will take place. Both sides in this controversy agree about the first resurrection at Jesus' Second Coming, which will bring to life all the truly called and converted down through the ages. As Paul described it (I Thess. 4:16): "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first." The saints will then receive spirit bodies, just as Jesus has today after His own resurrection (I Cor. 15:42-54). But those both uncalled and never saved, the vast majority who were ever born, will be in the second resurrection at the end of the millennium during Christ's rule on earth (Rev. 20:5): "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed." These people will receive their first opportunity to be saved (not a "second chance"), much like the unsaved Israelites who are placed in the land of Israel after their resurrection (Ezekiel 37:10-14). Unlike the Christians and other believers down through the ages resurrected when Jesus returns, this passage shows these people will be given physical bodies of flesh after they come to life again. Finally, we know by inference and deduction when analyzing the Biblical evidence that a third resurrection will happen to those called but who ultimately rejected a life of faithful obedience to God (Daniel 12:2): "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these [already saved] to everlasting life, but others [called but unresponsive or fallen away] to disgrace and everlasting contempt." So this essay makes the case for the traditional Church of God teaching, that there will be three general resurrections, not just two.

## **Some Texts Mention Two Resurrections Together**

No one text clearly states how many general resurrections will occur overall. But some texts mention together two resurrections. For example, there's Revelation 20:4-6, already partially cited above: "They came to life, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection [i.e., at the beginning of the millennium, not at its end--EVS]. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has now power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years." Jesus said, in another text that refers to two resurrections taking place but passes over the size of the time gap between them (John 5:28-29): "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." Revelation 20's description of the great white throne judgment can be seen as starting with the second resurrection in verses 11-12 before moving on to the third resurrection in verses 13-15. Texts like these and Daniel 12:2 decisively prove at least two general resurrections will come about.

## **Discovering by Inference Three Resurrections**

But to show three resurrections will happen requires someone to sift carefully through the Biblical data to build a case for a third resurrection based upon inference from the available evidence. By comparing and contrasting how different texts describe various resurrections and the fate of the wicked, we're inevitably led to conclude that one physical resurrection will allow people to still get saved, but another one won't. The resurrection described in the second line of Daniel 12:2, one to "disgrace and everlasting contempt," cannot be the same resurrection as the one Ezekiel saw in vision in the valley of dry bones, which places the resurrected house of Israel into the land of Israel, not the lake of fire. Therefore, another resurrection will happen after the one right at the end of the millennium.

## **First Resurrection Is to Spirit, the Second to Flesh**

Indisputably, one resurrection takes place when the millennium begins, as Christ returns, which Paul explains in I Cor. 15:51-53: "Behold, I tell 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 trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." But this resurrection to spirit life plainly differs from the resurrection to physical life that comes about after the millennium ends. In Ezekiel's vision (chapter 37), the resurrection is one to mortal, physical life, not eternal, spiritual life, for "the whole house of Israel" mostly died unsaved. After all, weren't most of them (cf. I Kings 19:14, 18) unfaithful idolaters worshipping false gods using statues? Ezekiel's vision shows, by its graphic description of the reconstruction of human bodies, that this is resurrection to physical life, not spiritual (Verses 5-6): "Thus says the Lord God to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you and that you may come to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord.'" The ambiguous word in Hebrew translated "breath" here can mean "spirit." But because God in verse 14 promises, "I will put **My** Spirit within you," the "breath" referred to in verse 6 isn't the Holy Spirit, but the same breath of life that God breathed into Adam to make his body a living soul (Genesis 2:7). In this case, God uses the same word to refer to different things in the course of Ezekiel's vision.

## **Billions of the Unsaved but Ignorant Can Still Be Saved**

During the great white throne judgment to come, the book of life is still open, not closed, to those just resurrected (Rev. 20:12), which indicates this precedes the third resurrection apparently described in verse 13. Likewise, these unfaithful Israelites will not be automatically fed into the Lake of Fire after their resurrection, but instead brought into the land of Israel (Ezekiel 37:12), as already noted above. Why should this be a surprise? Didn't Paul declare that all Israel would be saved (Romans 11:26)? How was God going to make that even possible if everyone is judged right when they die? Ezekiel's vision is one of the main supports for the teaching that the ignorant dead, such as the billions of ignorant Chinese and East

Indian peasants down through the millennia who never heard of Christ, won't just be tossed into the lake of fire without getting an opportunity to be saved. Isn't the Church of God's view so much more compassionate than the classical Calvinist view that the vast majority of the world's population is born doomed to be thrown into an eternally burning hell fire that they can't do anything by their own free will to escape?

## **No One Receives a “Second Chance”**

So then, would two resurrections be enough to take care of both the saved and unsaved (but previously ignorant) dead? By inference it can be shown the second resurrection doesn't include the unsaved dead who knowingly rejected God during their first life. God doesn't give second chances to the called but unrepentant wicked (Hebrews 6:4-6): “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” Would these people rise up and receive another chance, like ignorant, unsaved dead? Obviously not. They will be executed by being totally burned up, not eternally tortured. Isn't that a much more compassionate view than the traditional Christian teaching of eternal hell fire?

## **The Hundred Year Gap Between the Second and Third Resurrections**

The Church of God has generally taught that this period will be a hundred years long for the unsaved but ignorant dead to make up their minds after rising up at the end of the millennium. Isaiah 65:20 describes a period during which, “The one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed.” This Scripture isn't being yanked out of context, for verse 17 says, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” Doesn't Revelation 21:1, 4 allude back to this text? The two general resurrection theory now runs into a major problem: Will the defiantly wicked dead be brought up at the

same time as the ignorant dead? Will the former get to hang around for one hundred years while the latter figure out whether or not to go God's way? What balderdash! Instead, they are raised to be executed by burning instead (Rev. 20:15). Notice carefully yet again the wording of Rev. 20:5: "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed." Since this wording doesn't say exactly when **after** the millennium they will come to life again, this verse doesn't contradict the eschatological view that they will be split up into two classes separated by a hundred years.

## **All the Unrepentant Wicked Must Be Burned**

The defiantly wicked dead will not be left dead for all eternity. They have to be burned, so they won't be left unresurrected. Scripture repeatedly says the wicked will be executed by fire, such as in Mal. 4:1, 3: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoers will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." . . . "And you will tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the Lord of hosts." When separating the sheep from the goats, Jesus declared (Matt. 25:41), "Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels." Christ also explained that the branches that didn't abide in Him as the vine would be burned (John 15:6): "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." Jesus warned his listeners to fear God because He could cast the disobedient into fiery Gehenna (Matt. 10:28): "Rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Christ even went so far as to metaphorically advise people that it was better to sacrifice a body part and be saved rather than keep it and (Mark 9:43-46) "be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." These warnings to the wicked about being burned aren't merely for those uncalled and resurrected at the millennium's end, but they are also for those now called (John 6:44, 65; Matt. 13:11-16) but ultimately unfaithful. Furthermore, if ALL the dead are going to be resurrected during the Great White Throne judgment (see Rev. 20:5, 12-13), the previously called and unrepentant wicked are included as well. Everyone will be resurrected; no general class will

be left out, such as here (apparently) the unrepentant wicked (Rev. 20:13): "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds." Since the second resurrection can't sensibly include the defiant, knowing, and ultimately unrepentant wicked, the Church of God's traditional teaching that there are three general resurrections is well founded.

Everyone will die the first death, except for those few true Christians who are translated/born again when Jesus returns. The second death results from the unrepentant wicked being cast into the lake of fire, whether they got their chance at salvation the first time in this life or in the next, after coming to life again. Who then will be thrown into the Lake of Fire? It must include the incorrigibly sinful, whether they got their chance to be saved in this life or the next, whether they rose up at the end of the millennium or a hundred years later, for their ultimate fates shouldn't be any different.

## **God Will Execute All the Wicked at the Same Time**

It's also been observed that there can't be multiple "lakes of fire" for multiple resurrections since **God deals with all the wicked all at once when he burns up the present physical earth** (II Peter 3:10) to make way for the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1). Both the incorrigible who died before Jesus returned and the previously ignorant who came up in the second resurrection and who later reject God during the hundred years mentioned in Isaiah 65:20 **are executed at the same time**, after the great white throne judgment. There will be only one time of execution, not two, after both the millennium and the hundred years have ended. The second death will be inflicted on all the ultimately unrepentant at the same time. Why do the incorrigibly wicked have to be executed? They won't be left dead for all eternity after their first deaths, since nobody should think "they got away with it." Furthermore, nobody could suffer a second death (Rev. 2:11; 21:8; 20:6, 14) if he or she didn't have a second life to begin with! There is no second chance for anyone; each man and woman gets only once chance, whether it's during their first or second lives. Hence, it's a dangerous thing to be called now since the chance of falling away is greater for us than for those who'll live during and after the millennium. But what's our

compensation? Those in the first resurrection will have higher positions in the kingdom of God (Rev. 20:6), which was already quoted from above.

## **Conclusion: We Shouldn't Become Careless about Salvation**

Plainly there will be three resurrections, not just two. This conclusion can be deduced from the Biblical evidence after carefully examining what it says about the resurrections and the fate of the wicked. What is the practical spiritual lesson of the third resurrection for Christians trying to live Godly lives today? Scripture warns us that punishment by fire will come our way if we're so careless with our salvation as to completely and irretrievably fall away (Hebrews 10:26-27): "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a **fire** which will consume the adversaries."