

## THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

‘All that are in their graves... shall come forth.’ — John 5:28

THERE IS an important passage in the psalms of David which seldom receives the attention it deserves. It is strange, too, in that it helps us to understand the role that the resurrection of the dead will play in God’s plan of salvation for humanity.

‘How precious is thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy wings. They feast on the abundance of thy house, and thou givest them drink from the river of thy delights. For with thee is the fountain of life.’— Psalms 36:9, *Revised Standard Version*

The palmist is saying that God is the source from whom all life proceeds and that all life depends upon God for its continued existence. This is the normal condition of created beings, living in eternal dependence upon the Author of life and in harmony with him. Jesus said it simply in these words: ‘This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent’.{ John 17:3}

It follows from this that death is an abnormal condition—so far as mankind is concerned. ‘Death reigneth from Adam to Moses,’ St. Paul said, and it has reigned ever since. That is why men are so accustomed to the idea that human life must necessarily end in death. We have never experienced anything else than this. What is intrinsically abnormal according to the Bible is made to appear normal. Nevertheless, the Bible insists that death will eventually be overcome and that men will live in complete harmony with God forever. The Bible also explains why death now afflicts mankind. Not only so, it also explains the process by which death will come to an end.

Men and women are distinctly different from other kinds of animal life in this respect. All animal life as we know it has a limited life- span. All plant life as we know it also has a limited life- span. Animate creations pass through their life- cycle and then die. It is a normal process and we all accept it.

The world in which we live is based upon countless interactions between various kinds of living organisms, great and small. Each has a place to fill and having served its purpose it passes away, making room for others. Nature would crumble without this system of processes. Life as we know it would end.

There is one principle that lies beneath all others. The earth, with all its teeming life, exists for the service of man, providing an environment in which he can fully exercise his God- given powers of life and activity.

Man is the only creature to possess reason, introspection, and mental communion with his Creator. Everything upon the face of the earth contributes to man’s exercise of these faculties. That is why God

distinguished between the creation of man and other animals. 'Let us make man in our image... and let them have dominion' over the animal creation. { Genesis 1:26} 'What is man?' asks David, 'Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels... thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands'. { Psalms 8:4- 8} The 'works' he then goes on to define as all of the animal creation. Solomon, that great wise- man and king of Israel, asks the rhetorical question, 'Who knows whether a man's spirit ascends to heaven when he dies or an animal's spirit descends to the earth?' { Ecclesiastes 3:21} His point is that there is nothing unique about the life of man that separates him from animals, except the relationship he has with his creator. All of this is fundamental to the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Death among men resulted from the intrusion of sin into human society. Man was created to be 'very good,' or without sin. That condition did not last very long, however. 'By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and So death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'. { Romans 5:12}

The philosophy of how God included all men in Adam's condemnation is beyond the scope of this booklet. It is, nevertheless, based upon a logical foundation set forth in the Bible.

*For a more complete treatment of this subject see the booklets If a Man Die, Will He Live Again?, What is the Soul?, and What Say the Scriptures about Hell?*

The more one investigates the basis for salvation the more one finds that God could not behave in any other way, given the eternal principles which govern his character. Yet, because he is an unchanging God, { James 1:17} he chooses to limit the expression of his character within certain consistent guidelines. For example, God never lies. If he ever did lie, his creation would never again be able to count on his 'being there' for them. The Bible tells us that God is a God of justice. He does not act unjustly. He is a God of love, but his love never overlooks his justice. He is wise, but his justice never prompts him to act unwisely, nor does his love compel him to foolish courses of action.

One fundamental fact that colors all human history is that God did include all men in father Adam's condemnation. When he was in Eden, Adam sinned against God. That is, he disobeyed God. The penalty of that sin was death.

*'The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord'—Ro 6:23.*

All humanity was thus 'necessarily' involved in the sin of Adam and in the sin of all the world. All men, therefore, die. There are no exceptions. 'What man is he that liveth and shall not see death?' the psalmist asked, 'shall he deliver his soul from the power of the grave'. { Psalms 89:48} There is an answer of course. No man has the power to do so. Humanity's only hope for life after death lies in a 'resurrection' from the dead. What is a 'resurrection'? It is a re- creation of a person: a new

body, with the old identity or character, and a reanimation of that body So that it lives and moves and breathes. Sometimes it is just thought of as a resuscitation from death, but a person who died years ago needs more than just a resuscitation. That person needs a body because the old body has long since decayed and dissolved into its natural elements: carbon, water, etc.

Only God has the power to deliver a soul from the grave. That is why the Scriptures insist that the entrance into the future life is through the door of resurrection.

Jesus stated this plainly, saying, 'The hour is coming in which all that are in their graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth'.{ John 5:28,29} Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary, reiterated this idea to the Lord himself, reinforcing the belief of ancient Israel by saying: 'I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day'.{ John 11:24}

The apostle Paul based his mission on the truth of the resurrection. One reason the philosophers of Athens were interested in what Paul had to say was because 'he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection'.{ Acts 17:18} Jesus demonstrated the truth of the resurrection to the doubting Sadducees.

*The Sadducees were a religious sect in Ancient Israel that denied the resurrection of the dead.*

He reminded them that their own scriptures *What Christians call the Old Testament*. pictured God as the God of the living, and yet called God the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These men had died centuries before Jesus spoke these words, and by denying their 'death' he was telling them that they were not dead forever. Just as death is called the great 'Sleep,' So Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and every person who ever lived will be awakened from that Great Sleep. 'God is not a God of the dead but of the living, for all live unto him'.{ Luke 20:38}

The process of resurrection is easier to understand if one understands the nature of death. It would be easiest to say that death is merely the absence of life. The concept seems So self- evident that the assertion is unnecessary. Unfortunately, that is not true. Christian theology has been overlaid by So many ideas over the centuries that there is a great deal of misunderstanding on this subject. Today's common Christian doctrine has been influenced by many non- Christian sources.

In the beginning God made man from 'the dust of the ground, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul'.{ Genesis 2:7} Today, it is generally accepted that the old confusion about the soul and spirit has to be rejected. In its place must be accepted the idea that the 'soul' is the result of the union of the divinely given spirit of life with the material terrestrial body. 'Man became a living soul.'

The spirit of life comes from God. That spirit in any individual creates a

separate, self- conscious identity. This identity is conscious of its own existence through its five senses and its ability to interact with its environment. When death occurs and the material body returns to its constituent dust, there is no more consciousness until God in his wisdom and by his power reconstitutes that spirit of life in a new body in which the individual again knows himself for what he is and can perceive his place in his new environment. This is ‘resurrection.’

The Ancient Hebrews saw this truth clearly enough, but they did not understand in present- day terms the connection between the living creature and five senses upon which he depends for awareness of life and environment. They pictured the death state as a time of sleep and the resurrection as the awakening. Listen to the prophets’ consistent testimony on this subject:

‘The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.’— Psalms 115:17

‘Wilt thou show wonders to the dead? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness.’— Psalms 88:10

‘Man lieth down and riseth not; till the heavens be no more they shall not awake nor be raised out of their sleep... hide me in the grave... keep me secret until thy wrath be past, appoint me a set time, and remember me... all the days of my appointed time will I wait, until my change come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee; thou shalt have a desire to the work of thine hands.’— Job 14:12- 15

Here is a clear definition of death followed by resurrection from the lips of one who preceded Jesus Christ by fifteen centuries. Listen to Job’s words again: ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. After I shall awake, though this body be destroyed, yet in my flesh shall I see God’.{ Job 19:25,26}

Some individuals have long wanted to offer their own definitions. It has been popular in some Christian churches to teach that there is a conscious state of being for the righteous dead while they wait for the ‘Last Day’ and the ‘Day of Judgment’—two expressions that are always associated in the Scriptures with the resurrection, not with some state of semi- being. These ideas derived from Greek philosophy were incorporated into Christian theology by teachers in the early centuries of the Christian movement. In mythology there were pictured disembodied ‘souls’ existing in what the Greeks called Hades. Hades was a dark and gloomy semi- conscious state. Given a Christian ‘spin,’ this idea gradually became a ‘paradise,’ or state of conscious happiness for the righteous, and ‘hell,’ a state of conscious misery for the wicked. In the following centuries there arose an understanding that this adopted philosophy didn’t fit all the cases, and So a new condition was added to the paradise and hell and they called it purgatory. This was a place for those who were not good enough for the one and too good for the other. All these conditions were expected to end at the Last Day and the

resurrection, at which time men would enter upon their final destiny. Today, most of these ideas have coalesced into a general conception of an 'intermediate state' of usually undefined and very indefinite characteristics. How much simpler the Bible's original and true teaching is!

Needless to say there is no Scriptural basis for these ideas of a pseudo-heaven or a pseudo- hell. There is no need to receive the dead until their awaited resurrection and judgment. The dead are metaphorically 'asleep,' and God will call them back from the dead as easily as you or I might awaken a child in the morning.

Many of the best and most prominent contenders for the faith have understood this at almost all times during the Gospel Age. They have pressed their point home with varying degrees of intensity. William Tyndale said (1530 AD):

'Ye, in putting them [the dead] in heaven, hell and purgatory, destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection... if the souls be in heaven... what cause is there of the resurrection?'

Dr. Priestly (1733- 1804) wrote:

'Had it not been for the authority of Calvin, who wrote expressly against it, the doctrine of an intermediate conscious state would, in all probability, have been as effectually exploded as the doctrine of purgatory itself.'

Strangely, it seems as if Martin Luther was the first to glimpse the clue to reconciling these conflicting views.

'In the sight of God, a thousand years are not even a day. In the sight of the dead it will be similar. When resurrected, it will seem to Adam and to the ancient fathers as though they had been living only half an hour before. There is no time for the dead, because they experience nothing. Therefore there can be no ideal place and no day nor night. To God the resurrection of the dead all happens in an instant. And the dead will not come to the new day any sooner than will we.'

The fiery reformer understood something that is common knowledge today: time as we know it is relative to this earth and life. Time does not necessarily appear the same in other contexts. Our sense of elapsed time is determined by the processes of nature within us. There are various biological processes going on within our body and brain and these determine how we perceive the passage of time. Outside of the body, there is no sensation of time. Not until the spirit of life is 'clothed upon,' to use Paul's expression, { 2 Corinthians 5 } with a new body suited to the individual's new environment, can the sense of time be restored. Luther's suggestion agrees with present day knowledge. The ancients were correct in their perception when they declared (for example), 'There is no work nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave

whither thou goest'.{ Ecclesiasties 9:10} 'His breath goeth forth, he returneth to this earth; in that very day his thoughts perish'.{ Psalms 146:4} Time does not exist to the dead who are awaiting a resurrection. The moment of death is to them the moment of resurrection.

### **Who will be resurrected first?**

The church of God will be the first to rise to eternal life in the resurrection. Who are they? They are a dedicated group of Christians who have been in the process of selection during the Gospel Age. These are individuals who have followed in the footsteps of Jesus as true 'disciples'—with all that the word implies. Those who are selected by God to be part of that group will be associates of Christ in the evangelical work of the Messianic Age. They must be with him in the celestial world when that era commences.

The first work that Jesus Christ does at his Second Advent is raise to conscious life those Christian believers who have been laid aside in death. 'The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout' says the apostle, 'and the dead in Christ shall rise first'.{ 1 Thessalonians 4:14} The same apostle explains ( 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5) that we must not expect this resurrection to be to the human nature upon the earth.

Those who aspire to membership in the Church of Jesus Christ hope that they will be with their Lord in the celestial realm. This implies a resurrection to the celestial realm in bodies adapted to that realm. John stresses this in his first general epistle: 'It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear; we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is'(\ JJo 3:2). Thus we see that the resurrection of the 'dead in Christ' does not take place upon earth but in the heavenly realm. The first conscious perception of those risen ones will not be of earthly surroundings, but of celestial surroundings. The bodies through which they express themselves will not be terrestrial but celestial.

The next aspect of the resurrection is the 'change' of the living members of the Church. We know that there will be some members of this group who are alive at the time of the Second Advent. That will be because the Second Advent takes place at a point in history where this present age is being transformed into the coming Messianic Age. The simile of sleep does not fit those who are alive at the Second Advent. They progress from death to resurrection instantaneously, at least as measured in human time. We know this because of the apostle's statement on the subject: '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'.{ 1 Corinthians 15:51,52} If you compare this passage with earlier verses ( 1 Corinthians 15:39- 49), you will see how Paul talks about discarding a terrestrial body and replacing it by a celestial one. 'As we have borne the image of the earthly we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.' This change involves death. A person ceases his existence as a human and is

recreated by God as a spirit. The net effect of this process will be that the entire church of the Lord will be present with him on a spiritual plane of being. There they will be ready and able to assist him in their appointed work of service. St. Paul described this process to the Thessalonian believers. He told them that the dead in Christ would rise first. Then he goes on to say: 'We which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and So shall we ever be with the Lord'. { 1 Thessalonians 4:17 }

What does the expression 'caught up' mean? The original authors used words that give the idea of an abrupt and sudden transfer from one place to another. It is the same word that the apostle used when talking to the Corinthians about a believer's 'change' { 1 Corinthians 15 } . The passage in Thessalonians is figurative; the place of meeting is not in the atmosphere surrounding this planet, but the spiritual or celestial world itself. This is not the same as the dimensions of outer- space as we know it—it too is terrestrial, composed of the same natural elements of matter that we know and understand as human beings.

A moment's thought will demonstrate this truth. Since the resurrection of the dead in Christ necessarily places them in a celestial body, then those who are changed, So as to be with them, must also be united with them in the same 'place' as their brethren of previous ages.

This is how the resurrection of the church is accomplished. When the Second Advent will have progressed to this point, then 'the kingdoms of this world' can be spoken of as having become the kingdom of Christ. { Revelation 11:15 }

Having asserted his power to take control over earth's affairs, the Lord Jesus Christ will then be free to initiate his Messianic kingdom. The Lord will then be free to begin the general resurrection of humanity. There are some very metaphorical pictures in Scripture where the resurrection is described as a raising of the dead to stand before the 'great white throne.' Why? So that they can be judged worthy of everlasting life or of irremediable condemnation. What must be realized in this illustration is that it describes a process. Before any final decision is made and any irrevocable judicial decree is to be pronounced individuals must first have a complete understanding of what God has required of them. There must first be an opportunity to truly choose life. So many of our decisions in this world are colored by ignorance, misunderstanding, and human hardship. That is true now, in this life, but it will not be true in the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself stated that such a resurrection was a future reality:

'Woe unto thee, Chorazin; woe unto thee, Bethsaida; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon they would have repented long ago.... I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you... it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee.'— Matthew 11:21,24

The day of judgment is consistently associated with the time when the Son of Man takes his seat upon the throne of his glory and gathers all nations before him. { Matthew 25 Revelation 20 } Jesus calls this period the 'regeneration' in such places as Matthew 19:28: 'In the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit upon the throne of his glory.' What does this word mean? Simply, the giving of new life. Thus, the resurrection is the giving of new life to men with the opportunity to have it merge into everlasting life. This is why Jesus said that of all those who will hear his voice and come forth from the grave in that day, some will rise to a 'resurrection to life' and some to a 'resurrection to judgment.'

During this judgment there will be some who choose life and others who choose death. Some will use the knowledge given them by God during that Age to abandon evil and to become sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Others will never depart from sinful practices and will be judged unworthy of continuing life. This is pictured in the destinies of two groups pictured in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. { Matthew 25 } Another picture is given in Revelation (chapter 20) where the dead are described in two groups, the small and the great. They stand before God and are judged from the things written in the books. Only those who are determined to be 'worthy' are eventually permitted to enter the holy city.

## **Practical Problems**

There are some real and significant practical problems to be considered if this teaching about the resurrection of the dead is to be accepted by reasoning minds.

### **Food & Shelter**

If the majority of the dead will be given human, fleshly, bodies, what will be done about housing and food for all those people. Remember that many sects of Christianity have adopted creeds that teach this, for example, 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.' It is a biblical teaching, and a teaching in Christian churches from the earliest of times. How can we answer? Well, the Bible speaks about such necessities. There is a Millennial promise that 'the desert shall blossom as a rose.' This will have to be fulfilled on a large scale before there can be a resurrection. Logically, one of the first works that the new King, Jesus, will do is put a lot of people to work restoring the earth to its proper glory and productive state. Waste lands will need to be reclaimed. Deserts will need irrigation. Homes will need building for those alive and for those to rise from the grave. Much of earth's resources have been spoiled in recent generations. This process must be arrested and the resources restored by the wisdom and power of Jesus Christ, exercised through his church and other means.

### **Overpopulation**

In many circles the threat of overpopulation looms as an ominous threat



to the future of earth. So many infants are born in some of the most impoverished nations! And those who live in developed countries with stable governments view the rate of population growth in poorer countries with great fear.

The beginning of the answer to this fear lies in simply asserting that the impression of danger is largely overestimated. The ideas we have about overpopulation are all based upon human estimates. But even the wisest of scientists must base his estimates on the assumption that human greed and selfishness will always continue. The presence of Jesus Christ will drastically change this condition—worldwide. The daily infusion of solar energy is capable of producing food for many times earth's present population. Scientists are experimenting with various forms of food production which show remarkable gains. When the best efforts of man are multiplied by the unlimited power and wisdom which will proceed from the King, the results will be dramatically different.

No one can doubt this climax of human history—the dead will return! 'Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust,' Isaiah cried, prophesying of the Messianic Age, 'for the earth shall cast out the dead'. { Isaiah 26:19 } We can safely leave the details of how the Creator of all things will accomplish what he has promised. He controls all that his hands have made. Nothing proceeds too quickly. Nothing is delayed. The sphere in which man lives has been created to meet all human needs. Whatever the requirements upon the planet's resources, God will provide them all—in his own wonderful way.

## **Resurrection's Results**

The result of the resurrection will be the end of evil and the reconciliation of humanity to God. Yes, it will be to 'whosoever will,' but under the kind and benevolent rulership of the Savior of all men. Who can imagine very many people refusing him who speaks from heaven? Our human brothers and sisters will be restored to physical, mental, and moral perfection. The physical bodies enjoyed then will not be marred by deformities, sickness, or weaknesses. The environment will return to its original ability to provide for man's needs. These are miracles of transformation, but they will be child's play compared to the change that will take place in the heart and mind of every single human being. The Sun of Righteousness will shine upon them with healing in his beams. They will taste of the grace of God, confirm it in life, and choose obedience and life over disobedience to God and death. That is the true work of resurrection! As man changes he will have a greater and greater beneficial effect upon his environment. As man learns the benefits of seeking God and his righteousness he will yield himself to Christ in allegiance. When a man's heart and mind turn to God, he will find his body progressing toward the perfection that will result in everlasting, continuing life.

In the truest sense, the resurrection of the dead will only be complete when the human race has finally been recovered from sin, from death,

and from all of its effects, and has entered into eternal life.