

The Resurrection of the Dead

Opening hymn: #265—“Resurrection”

On January 31, 2000, *U.S. News and World Report* ran a cover story on hell. As a part of their research they conducted a poll asking people what they believed about heaven, hell, and what they thought happened when someone died. Here’s question #8:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view about life after death?

Certain there is life after death: **52%**

Hope there is life after death but not sure: **26%**

Seriously doubt there is life after death: **15%**

Don't know: **6%**

Refused: **1%**

Because America has been a Christian nation from the time of its founding, most Americans know something about the Bible. They may not have studied it, but even if they are not regular church goers, they know about Jesus Christ’s life and his death on the cross. And it is likely they also know how Jesus was resurrected from the dead on that first Easter morning. Even today Easter Sunday is a time when the churches are filled with people.

Now suppose we asked people to pick the one event in history they would most like to see with their own eyes. I suspect many would pick events associated with the life of Jesus, perhaps when he raised Lazarus back to life after he had been dead several days. Certainly we would all want to see the events that occurred that first Easter morning when Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

Resurrection ... the bringing back to life of someone who was dead. What an incredible thought! In fact the idea is so incredible that people rarely talk about it. Everyone takes the miracle of birth for granted. No-one even thinks about the miracle of the exact positioning of our planet so that it is not too hot to boil off all the water, nor too cold to keep it perpetually frozen. Miracles happen all around us. Bringing back the Jews from the lands into which they had been scattered is a modern-day miracle, one that should never have happened if historical precedent means anything. We continue to live in a time of miracles. And we have become indifferent to them.

On one occasion the great apostle Paul spoke to king Agrippa and noticed he was having trouble with something Paul said. So Paul asked the king directly: “Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?” (Acts 26:8) I suspect the king was not the only one who had trouble with this idea. Even today people seem to find it easier to believe the dead continue to live in some unknown, far-off place than that they will be brought back to life at a future time.

Jesus knew when and where he was going to die. He tried to tell his close associates, but they did not want to hear about it:

Matthew 16:21,22 From that time forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.

Of course Peter wanted certain things to happen then. He was sure a dead Jesus couldn’t do anything. Although a dead Jesus who came back to life would certainly be powerful, this was just too incredible for Peter to believe. It is not that he had not seen someone resurrected. He had. On one occasion Jesus demonstrated the power of God when he raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead. The account is in Luke 8:

Luke 8:51-55 And when he came into [Jairus'] house, he suffered no man to go in, save Peter, and James, and John, and the father and the mother of the maiden. And all wept, and bewailed her: but he said, Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn, knowing that she was dead. And he put them all out, and took her by the hand, and called, saying, Maid, arise. And her spirit came again, and she arose straightway: and he commanded to give her meat.

“She is not dead but sleepeth.” Throughout the Bible death is called a sleep. Why does it use this word? We all know that when people are sleeping, it is natural to believe they will eventually awake. “Sleep” is a wonderful way to describe death because death is a temporary condition that will end some day. Yes, the Bible promises that a day will come when those who are in the sleep of death will “hear his voice and shall come forth.” (John 5:28,29)

Of course it was one thing for the disciples to believe Jesus had the power to bring others back to life, but quite another to believe Jesus could bring himself back to life if he died. Such an idea was beyond human understanding. That’s why they wanted to do everything they could to keep him from foolishly putting himself in a dangerous situation. What they did not understand was that Jesus did NOT raise the dead because of his own power and he would NOT bring himself back to life after he died. The miracle of the resurrection is a direct result of the power of God.

Acts 13:28-30 [Paul is speaking] And though [the Jerusalem rulers] found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the [cross] and laid him in a sepulchre. But God raised him from the dead.

The Empty Tomb

Jesus predicted that not only would he be put to death, he would come back to life after three days.

Mark 8:31 And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

The next verse says he said this openly. This was heard and remembered by his enemies because they went to Pilate after he had been placed in the tomb and quoted these words:

Matthew 27:62-66 Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.

So the temple guards were given the job of insuring that nothing happened to his body. You can be sure they checked the tomb first before taking up their positions. They knew if that body disappeared, they would be serious trouble.

The chief priests thought the presence of the guards would insure that nothing would happen to the body. But that very act proved to be the best proof that a miracle had happened. It was a great

embarrassment to the chief priests that in spite of their best efforts, the body disappeared. What should they do?

Matthew 28:11-15 Behold, some of the watch came into the city, and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

It is amazing that the soldiers were expected to say they were so soundly asleep they never heard anyone roll back the stone and steal the body. What kind of soldiers would be so untrustworthy? But what else could they say? The great adversary of God attempts to spoil God's plan but he never actually spoils anything. Likewise the chief priests' attempt to interfere with the resurrection made the miracle even more credible.

The apostle Paul was not an eye-witness to this miracle, but he talked with others who were. Paul knew that this was the most important event to Christians:

1 Cor. 15:3-8 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: after that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. [note the use of "sleep" for "death"] After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

What Paul found so hard to understand was that some Christians in Corinth had stopped believing in the resurrection. He says in verse 12: "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" And in verse 17: "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished."

The phrase "they which are fallen asleep in Christ" refers to those who have followed Christ when they were alive, and they were now dead. But if Christ is NOT raised, Paul says we must conclude that no one else will be raised either which would make the sleep of death permanent. Those in that "sleep" have "perished."

Essentially the resurrection of Christ, which the Christian world celebrates every Easter, is the guarantee that one day "all that are in their graves shall come forth." If God's mighty power can raise just one person from the dead, it surely is able to raise two people, or a thousand, or a million, or countless billions. We know there are many more stars in the entire universe than human beings who have ever lived. Their creation has not been difficult for God. Why should anyone think the re-creation of several billion human beings is hard? It may be hard for us; it's easy for God.

The resurrection is the first event in a future period we call "the kingdom." Christians have been praying for this kingdom for 2000 years when they say the words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven." It is a time when the dead will be brought back to life, when families and friends will be reunited. It will be a time when everyone will reach the perfection enjoyed by our first parents in the garden of Eden, the same perfection as possessed by our Lord. We read of the time of the kingdom in Revelation:

Rev. 21:2-5 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

This is a marvelous promise, one that thrills the hearts of all who read it. But too many restrict the blessings of the kingdom to those who are saved, who have named the name of Christ. What happens to those who either have not heard of Christ, or who have heard but do not believe?

Don't be too quick to say, "They've had their chance and with God there are no second chances." If that were true, why did Jesus speak to the people in riddles? His disciples certainly did not understand why, so they asked him about it:

Matthew 13:10-17 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. [14] And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: [16] But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. [17] For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

If our eyes are open and our ears unstopped, let us praise God. But if those who don't see or don't hear are "lost," why didn't Jesus open **their** eyes and ears? Did he want them to be lost? Surely not! The obvious answer is that he knew there was a future time for them, a time when "all that are within their graves shall come forth."

Of all the nations of the earth, the one who had been specially favored above all others was Israel. Yet most of Israel did not accept Jesus, did not have the faith to believe that he was the son of God. The leaders of Israel found a way to put him to death. Yet in spite of this murder of an innocent man, even these great sinners will come back in a resurrection:

Hebrews 8:10-12 This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: and they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

All humankind dies because our first parents were sentenced to death because of their disobedience. They could only pass a dying condition on to their progeny. But Jesus changed all that.

1 Cor. 15:21 Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. [25] For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

What a wonderful promise! Because of Adam's sin, all die. Because of Christ's faithfulness, all will eventually be made alive. And when the kingdom processes have done their desired work, even death itself will be destroyed.

Do you think this is "too good to be true"? In fact it is so good it must be true; it must be what a kind, loving creator would do for those he created in his own image. This was his plan from before the foundation of the world, and it shines forth from the pages of the Bible, the word of God.

Some years ago I watched Bill Moyers talk with a panel of experts as they discussed some of the important events in Genesis. Most of his panelists expressed shock and amazement at God's behavior in these early chapters. Not one person suggested that a resurrection from the dead of Abel, Adam, Eve, and those who perished in the flood helps us understand how a loving and benevolent God could allow innocent people to die. The panelists left the impression in the mind of their viewers that the God of the New Testament was quite different from the God of the Old Testament. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Malachi 3:6 For I am the LORD, I change not.

James 1:17 [Phillips] Every good endowment that we possess and every complete gift that we have received must come from above, from the Father of all lights, with whom there is never the slightest variation or shadow of inconsistency.

When Will the Resurrection Begin?

Of course everyone wants to know how much longer before the resurrection begins. It is natural that what we want, we want now. After Jesus was resurrected and was speaking with his disciples, they asked him a question:

Acts 1:6 When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

They probably thought the answer would be "of course," but there could be no harm in asking. What possible reason would there be for a delay? Rather than discourage them by telling them just how long it was going to be, Jesus replied:

Acts 1:7 It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

Even though our question is not about restoring the kingdom to Israel, it is in the same category, and perhaps deserves the same answer. Our Heavenly Father is in charge of times and seasons, and everything is going to happen on his timetable, and at exactly the right time.

Nonetheless, we know it can't be much longer. At the end of prophetic book of Daniel, in chapter 12, we read [NIV translation]:

Dan. 12:1,2 At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake.

We live in times of distress. At the beginning of the twentieth century we had a war so great it was the first to be called a world war. It ended the dynasties that controlled Europe. It was terrible, and the second one was worse. That war ended with the dropping of one bomb on one Japanese city followed by a second bomb on a second city. Those cities disappeared in a mushroom cloud. Since then the world watches to see what will happen next. The fear, largely unspoken, is that if the world's nuclear arsenals are ever used, it will be the end of life on earth as we know it.

Daniel heard the words of this prophecy, but he did not understand them. So he asks in verse 8 when these things would happen, but he was told that the understanding of the words was for a later time. Daniel did, however, receive a wonderful promise:

Dan. 12:13 [NIV] As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest [*in the sleep of death*] and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.

One who sleeps is unaware of the passage of time. Daniel will awaken in the kingdom and feel as though the resurrection had occurred immediately. It will be the same with us. Although we have every reason to believe that the promised kingdom is just around the corner, that this old world cannot hang together much longer, that actual time does not really matter. Whether we are alive when it happens, or in the sleep of death, that time will be marvelous. When it occurs, we, with all of mankind, will praise God for what he has done for his human creation.

One final note. One of the more eminent biblical scholars of the nineteenth century was Adam Clarke. I frequently consult his commentary on the Bible and appreciate his point of view. After extensive comments on the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Adam Clarke wrote: "The doctrine of the resurrection appears to have been thought of much more consequence among the [early] Christians than it is now. How is this? The apostles were continually insisting on it, and exciting the followers of God to diligence, obedience, and cheerfulness through it. And their successors in the present day seldom mention it! So the apostles preached, and so [the early] Christians believed; so we preach, and so our hearers believe. There is not a doctrine in the Gospel on which more stress is laid; and there is not a doctrine in the present system of preaching which is treated with more neglect!" (Adam Clarke, *endnote #3, 1 Cor. 15*)

Christ our Lord has risen from the dead. Thus we have the assurance that through him, all will someday live again. Let us rejoice and give thanks for this precious truth.

Announce free copies of the booklet Resurrection of the Dead, The Herald magazine, and other free booklets on the table.

Closing hymn: #31 — "Christ the Lord is Risen Today"