

# Resurrection of the Dead

By

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At the heart of apostolic faith and teaching was the resurrection of the dead. In Luke's words, "they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:2).

While the word "resurrection" is used thirty-seven times in the New Testament, besides various other words of similar import, and while all the creeds of major denominations declare faith in the resurrection, there is reason to doubt that a belief in the resurrection of the dead prevails in Christian thinking today. True, at "Easter" pulpits ring with the story of Christ's resurrection, and at almost every funeral one may hear from the Bible words on the resurrection, but the scriptures is usually just a formality, as the message usually says something else.

Probably the most popular scripture at funerals is John 14:1-6. People like to hear the words, "In my fathers' house are many mansions" and "I go to prepare a place for you." This then becomes the basis for telling the audience that the deceased is now living in glory, "more alive than ever before" and enjoying all the bliss and beauty of heaven. The hope is shifted from resurrection of the dead, to hope in an indefinite and mystical immortality, which becomes effective at death. This concept negates the Biblical promise of resurrection of the dead.

To stop with the "many mansions" prepared by Jesus is to miss the meaning of His statement. He went on, in the same breath, to say, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, that I may receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also." Why should He come again to receive us, if we have already gone to live with him in Heaven? What Christ promises in John 14 is that at His coming, He will receive us to live with Him, and not before! Nevertheless, in spite of His promise, the prevailing "hope" in Christianity today is not based on being resurrected from death, but on leaving the body at death and beginning life in heaven.

Indeed, many Christians have accepted the concept that death doesn't happen to the "real person." This belief is similar to the religion of the Greeks in the time of Christ and of Paul. Only the body dies, and the spirit is made free to wing its flight to the realms of glory. They accept a resurrection, but only a resurrection of body, not the resurrection of the **dead**.

Christ's teaching was revolutionary in his day because it was a complete refutation of this common concept. Instead of speaking of a continuing life after death, Jesus promised to raise up the dead in the last day and give them life.

Several years ago I wrote an article in which I set forth the Christian hope as a resurrection to life, in contrast to the common idea of immediately going to heaven at death. A good friend, who was then a Bible College professor, wrote to dissuade me from my error, telling me that almost every page of the Bible taught the hope of going to heaven. I asked myself if I could have been so blind to have missed all this teaching. In the Bible.

So I began reading through the New Testament with pen and paper in hand to write down every reference to hope of a future life, immortality, heaven or resurrection. I did this through the entire New Testament.

When I had finished I had several pages of reference under the topics under question. But here is the surprise: I did not have one single reference that promises a person will go to heaven at death. Not even one!

But I did have pages of scriptures that spoke of resurrection, both Christ's resurrection and the saint's resurrection at His coming. In scripture, the hope of the Christian is life through a resurrection from death.

Many base their hope, not on the resurrection of the dead, but on the so-called out of body psychological experiences. These claims would fit the pagan Greek concept, but they do not harmonize with what Christ and the apostles taught. Consider the plain statements of Jesus:

"...for the hour comes in which all the are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection to judgment" (John 5:;28–29).

"And this is the will of him that sent me, that of all that which he has given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up the last day" (John 6:39), also verses 40, and 44).

"...because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again..." (John 10:17–18) — It was His life, not just His body that he laid down!

"...touching the hope and resurrection of the dead, I am called in question" (Acts 23:6, Paul before the Jewish council).

"Why is it judged incredible with you, if God does raise the dead?" (Acts 26:8, Paul before Agrippa. Also verse 22 and 23).

"And God both raised the Lord, and will raise up us through His power" (I Cor. 6:14).

"For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (I Cor. 15:16–18).

In all these passages, and in the other references to resurrection as well, the resurrection refers to the total person being restored to life after he has died. Paul emphasized this by saying that if the saints, who have "fallen asleep" are not raised, then they have perished! Resurrection is essential for life after death.

As faith in the actual resurrection from the dead has diminished, the theology of the atonement has deteriorated in direct ratio. Many think it was only the body of Christ that died, that He just abandoned the body for awhile. But if so, we have no redemption. It is not just my body that sins, it is I, the whole person. It is not just the body that must be redeemed from death, but the whole being. God created man as a unit called him a "soul" or "living being" (Gen. 2:7). So, Christ, the whole person, tasted death for us. In the resurrection the whole person is made alive and changed to fit into the new and eternal creation.

To lose a loved one in death is a heart-rending experience. Friends do their best to give comfort, but often go too far in their efforts at consolation and add frustration to the sorrow by saying that the loved one has not died at all. By contrast, consider the comfort

given by the apostle Paul. He wrote, “But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that you sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope” (I Thess. 4:13). Paul bases his consolation on truth, and seeks to dispel their ignorance. Now would seem to be the time for him to say what we so often hear said about death, that those departed saints have not died, that they are in ecstasy in heaven, that they have gone home to receive their rewards, etc. But instead, Paul enlightens them by telling them the truth. “for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and we shall ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (16–18). Consider his explanation:

(1) The departed saints are asleep. He offers no comfort by suggesting that they are happy in heaven.

(2) They are to be raised up from their state of death.

(3) This resurrection will occur when the Lord comes, and it is then that they will be reunited with loved ones, not before. This harmonizes with that funeral favorite, John 14, that Jesus will come again to receive us to Himself.

(4) it is this message of resurrection that we are to use to “comfort the brethren,” rather than the false idea that they haven’t really died.

Man is bound under the curse of mortality and death. “Dust you are and unto dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). He struggle against this curse all the days of his life, fighting disease, seeking remedies for his ailments, suffering infection and injuries, and ever praying for healing, but finally succumbing to death. For his sin he faces the judgment, the penalty of final death and forfeiture of life. To meet this penalty Christ died. Not only his body died, but that He “poured out his life unto death;” He laid down his life; “He died, the just for the unjust” (Isa. 53:12, John 10:17, I Peter 3:18). On the cross Jesus met God’s justice in order to remove the fearful effect of sin—death!

Yet the final effect is not removed until the resurrection. The dead (in Christ) will be raised up from the grave, and in the twinkling of an eye will be changed. The corruption and mortality will be forever left behind, and the one who was dead shall be raised in glory and power (I Cor. 15:42–44) Permanent healing. Hallelujah!

Such definite and glorious destiny provides incentive to the believer. “Everyone that has this hope set on Him (to be like Jesus at His coming) purifies himself as he is pure” (I John 3:3).

Does it make any difference? Does it matter, so long as we believe that Jesus is Lord? It mattered to Christ, who explained it in exact terms, then appeared for 40 days after His resurrection to demonstrate that He was alive from the dead (CF. Luke 24:39 and Rev. 1:18). It mattered enough to the apostles to die for preaching it. Paul said that it was his preaching of the resurrection of the dead that brought about his arrest (Acts. 23:6).

Truth matters. Jesus said, “The truth will make you free.” However attractive other concepts may be, they must not be allowed to prevail over the truth of the resurrection of the dead, the pillar of our faith and hope.

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