

# LIFE AFTER DEATH

BY

Curtis Dickinson

The most revolutionary element in the teaching of Jesus was His promise of a resurrection of all persons from death, with eternal life for one group and eternal death for the other. The popular idea was the Platonic view that at death the “soul” (contrary to the Biblical definition of soul) is released from its limitations of the body, so that death was something that happened only to the body and not to the essential person. In contrast to this, the only hope of life Jesus offered was by a resurrection of the whole person.

The Sadducees, who were strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, challenged Jesus concerning the resurrection. His answer was, “But as touching the dead that they are raised; have you not read in the book of Moses, in the place concerning the Bush, how God spoke unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living: you do err” (Mark 12:26-27). Clearly the meaning is that the three Patriarchs must be resurrected in order for God to be their God.

In establishing His authority as the Son of God, Jesus repeatedly affirmed His power to raise the dead. “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom he will...for the hour comes in which all that 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 of judgment” (John 5:2, 28-29). Giving life and raising the dead amount to the same thing.

“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone that beholds the Son, and believes on him shall have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40), also verses 39, 41, and 54). Eternal life requires a resurrection from the dead.

With all the emphasis that Jesus put on resurrection, it is amazing that this great hope is often completely neglected at funerals. For example, at a funeral I recently attended, the speaker quoted from the well-known passage in John 14. “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you; for I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (Vss. 2, 3). Clearly this says that it is at Christ’s coming (and the resurrection) that He will receive us and then we may be with Him. But the speaker deliberately left out the portion, “I come again, and will receive you unto myself,” and proceeded to tell us that the deceased had not died and had already been received by Jesus and was basking in eternal glory. By such deliberate mutilation of scripture, the resurrection was completely eliminated as having any essential place in God’s scheme of life.

Paul was another who made the resurrection the central theme of his preaching and in doing so brought upon himself the wrath of not only the Jews but the Hellenistic thinkers. At his preaching in Athens, it was said of him, “He seems to be a setter forth of strange

gods: because he preached Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). Later, when he was arraigned before Governor Felix, Paul explained, “Touching the resurrection of the dead I am called in question before you this day” (Acts 25:21). Before King Agrippa Paul affirmed the resurrection as the “hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers,” (Acts 26:6-7).

Paul devoted a large segment of his letter to the Corinthians to establishing the hope of the resurrection. The problem was not that they did not believe in Christ’s resurrection, but some of them did not believe in their own resurrection. He argued, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain...Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor. 15:13, 18). Note that Paul left no place for the Platonic concept of a life apart from a bodily resurrection from death.

This New Testament doctrine of life by a resurrection harmonizes with Job’s understanding. “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). He answers his own question: “So man lies down and rises not; Til the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be roused out of their sleep” (Vs. 12). The time indicated here is at the resurrection and judgment.

Job continues, “Thou shall call, and I shall answer thee” (Vs. 15). This is exactly what Jesus promised: “Marvel not at this: for the hour comes in which all that are in the tombs shall *hear his voice*, and shall come forth...” (John 5:28-29).

Clearly, from the beginning, the hope of life after death, as revealed in scripture, is found only in a resurrection from death. The threat and fear of death is a recurring theme in scripture and said to be the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). Jesus did not portray life as a guaranteed possession of all but as a gift of God for the faithful. Instead of seeing death from the viewpoint Jesus save, religious people generally approach it from the Platonic notion that the body is of no consequence, and when it dies, the essential person merely changes place of residence and lives on. If this is the case, then the resurrection is not essential or at best is secondary.

In my own survey I found that only a very small percentage of those who claimed the Christian faith had any concern for or faith in a resurrection. Their belief in an “immortal soul” (nowhere mentioned in scripture) had excluded the hope of resurrection, the only hope offered by Jesus. They forget that it was Satan who first said, “Thou shall not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). Building faith on this false premise distorts man’s view of himself and the world. It denies God’s sovereign power over life and death, and negates Jesus’ claim: “I am the resurrection and the life,” and reduces to nonsense His claims that only believers may have eternal life and all others are to perish.

Many people place their confidence in the widely reported “near-death” experiences, in which a person feels he is outside the body, hears noises, sees lights, etc. Of course, near-death is not the same as actual death. The powers of the mind have never been fully explored and understood, but we know all kinds of thoughts come before the subconscious mind and its awareness is sometimes heightened in a near-death experience, especially when accentuated by drugs, lack of oxygen to the brain and stressful

experiences. (I had such an experience myself when given an injection of Novocain, to which I am allergic.)

A few years ago a report was made before the American Medical Association at Milwaukee by two doctors of the Witkin Foundation for the Study and Prevention of Heart Disease. They told of many cases of the use of artificial stimuli for re-starting the heart which had completely stopped beating. "In this manner" the report states, "well over 100 persons who had actually died, the physician stated, have been brought back from death." Not one of them had anything to tell of the experience except that they were unconscious.

Since the Bible has proven to be right in every case in which it could be tested, we should rely upon it, rather than human conjectures and unreliable experiences. It teaches that man is mortal, death is a reality, and the only hope for a future life after death is by a resurrection from the dead.

The Bible is not about subjective experiences and mystical theories. It is factual, objective truth. "The soul that sins, it shall die" (Ezek. 18:20). Christ's death, in meeting that penalty, is a demonstration of the truth about sin and death. His resurrection is the demonstration of the truth about life after death. "But now has Christ been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of them that are asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20).

Does Jesus teach that there is "life after death"? Yes, but not in the same sense that is generally thought, that life just continues in some other form. That's closer to Eastern mysticism than it is to Christ. It robs Christ of the glory due for His triumph over death and the grave, for if one enters into life when his body enters the grave, death is only an illusion. The life Jesus promised is by a resurrection, life in a new body that is described by Paul as incorruptible, glorious and powerful (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

Death invaded man's realm because of his sin, and the fear of death holds people in bondage throughout their entire lifetime (Heb. 2:15). But Jesus, by His death and resurrection, "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light" (2 Tim. 1:10). He has liberated believers from the bondage of fear and given us the "blessed hope" of immortality and life in the New Creation, in His presence, in a perfect environment.

Any defeat we suffer is only temporary, and all the powers arrayed against us must ultimately fail before the triumph of the resurrection.

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