

By-Passing the Resurrection

By

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Pagans of the first century were struck by the way Christians faced death without fear but with the bold assurance of a resurrection. The world today may have reason to doubt that modern Christians have such an assurance.

From the Sunday School quarterly to the morning sermon to the funeral oration, people are reminded that when a Christian dies he goes to his reward in heaven, thus by-passing the resurrection and rendering it meaningless. Grieving loved one are told that their dead are more alive than ever and are now enjoying the glories of heaven with Jesus.

Does this prevailing concept have biblical support? Is it what Jesus and apostles actually taught? The way to answer this is to see what the scriptures actually say.

“Marvel not at this; 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 5:28–29). If all these have already “gone to their reward,” and the saved are already with Jesus, why would He say that they are to be brought forth from the tombs to life or judgment?

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you unto myself...”(John 14:3). Here Jesus promises to receive His people, NOT at their death but at his coming. How often have we heard this quoted at funerals where the audience was told that the deceased was already with Jesus?

“Brethren, I may say unto you freely of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with unto this day...For David ascended not into the heavens...”(Acts 2:29, 34). Peter argues that David is not now in heaven, therefore his prophecy of one sitting on his throne referred to Jesus, who did rise and ascend to heaven. If David went to heaven at death, then Peter was terribly mistaken.

In the Roman letter Paul writes of suffering with Christ that we might be glorified with Him. “For I reckon that thee sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). He then explains that this revelation will take place at the time of resurrection: “...we groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Vs. 23). In this great chapter of hope, Paul says not one word about going to heaven or being with Jesus at death.

“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). But they certainly cannot have perished if they are alive in heaven! The fact that life depends on resurrection could not be stated more clearly and emphatically than here by the apostle Paul.

“In Christ shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first-fruits; then they that are Christ’s at His coming” (I Cor. 15:22–23). Note that the believer is “made alive” at Christ’s coming, not at their death!

Often it is said at the death of a Christian that he has “won the victory,” but this is contrary to what Paul writes: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall 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...But when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’.” (I Cor. 15:51–54). Victory is not in one’s death but in his resurrection!

John writes: “We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him, for we shall see him even as he is” (I John 3:2). He adds that we are to abide in Him, that “we may have boldness and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (I John 2:28). According to these verses the prospect of seeing Jesus is not at death but at His coming!

Peter wrote that God “begot us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fads not away, reserved in heaven for you...ready to be revealed in the last time” and “at the revelation of Jesus Christ;” not at the time of our death (I Peter 1:3–7). In verse 13 of the same chapter, Peter says to “set your hope perfectly on the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Peter’s writing is consistent with that of Paul and John, all of them pointing to the resurrection as our hope rather than going to heaven at one’s death, as is generally taught in the churches today.

The same teaching is found in Hebrews 9:28. “Unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation.” We are to expect to see Him as His second coming, and not before. Paul wrote the same thing to the Colossians, “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4).

The well-known “rapture” passage of I Thessalonians 4:13–18 was written specifically to comfort those whose loved ones had died. According to the customary comfort offered at funerals today, one would expect Paul to have written: “Sorrow not, because your loved ones are not dead. They are more alive than ever and already are enjoying the bliss of heaven in the presence of Jesus...” But what he wrote negates this popular idea, and instead, informs them (and us) that their dead will be restored by a resurrection. “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 so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

Not only does he explicitly say that it is after the resurrection that we will be with the Lord, but he instructs us to use this **resurrection hope** in comforting the bereaved: “Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

For lack of space we cannot quote the any other texts, including the parables, which indicate that **Resurrection Day will be the first time each saint will see Jesus**. As in other Bible studies, one can cite texts for support of contrary views, for example: “The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns unto God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7). But this scripture harmonizes with those above. The spirit which returns to God is not the person. As Jesus died, He said, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit,” but Jesus as a person did not return to God until He ascended forty days after his resurrection. The spirit (Greek = *pneuma*, identical to the Hebrew *ruach*) is that life-force breathed

into man at creation (Gen. 2:7) and returns to God at one's death. Had Jesus been returning to God at death, it would not have made sense to yield merely His spirit to God.

This discussion is not presented for form a basis of contention; we are all fallible, and total agreement is not essential to brotherly love. Nor is full knowledge of how God handles events at death necessary for our salvation. Nevertheless, Jesus and His apostles held that the resurrection of the dead is an essential doctrine and very important in connection with other doctrines (throwing light upon them). It was the only hope Jesus offered and was at the center of apostolic preaching. Without it there is no gospel (good news). It is the doctrine above all others that stands out in contrast to all pagan religions in the world. It is the crowning glory of the work of Jesus and, more than any other theme, exalts and glorifies God and gives us the hope of immortality in His image. Let us not try to by-pass the resurrection!

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