

The Resurrection Hope

By

Curtis Dickinson

Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Was His resurrection the “first-fruits,” the demonstration that all believers will rise to live in glorious immortality? (I Cor. 15:21, 53, 42–44).

The answer given in the New Testament is a resounding Yes. Jesus not only predicted His own death and resurrection, but repeatedly promised that in the last day He would raise the dead, and give immortal life to believers. Resurrection was the focus of the preaching recorded in Acts, and Paul’s ambition was to know the power of Christ’s resurrection, the he might “attain unto the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10–11).

But already in the first century the resurrection hope was being crowded out by popular pagan notions concerning life after death. Paul was greatly disturbed that some in the Corinthian church did not believe in the resurrection of the dead ((I Cor. 15:1–2, 12). They seemed to have no trouble with believing in Jesus’ resurrection, but did not relate this to their own resurrection. That’s easy to understand, since Corinth was a Greek cultural center where the pagan philosophy of Plato was very strong. According to Plato there was no need of a resurrection, for man had a dual nature, consisting of the physical which was mortal, and the spiritual which was immortal. This philosophy denied the horrible reality of death, for when the physical died, the spiritual was released to live in greater freedom and joy. With this kind of religion, who would want a resurrection?

Paul wrote to these Corinthians, “Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead (This they had accepted and believed), how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ been raised (For He was a flesh and blood man—see Heb. 2:14): and if Christ has not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we witnessed of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead are not raised. 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. 15:12–18).

Note how clearly Paul argues that if the dead are not raised, then all those who have died (fallen asleep) in faith are lost! Paul hastens to add, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of them that are asleep” (I Cor. 15:20). Paul’s argument is that Christians now dead will be raised and “made alive” (Vs. 22) at Christ’s coming (Vs. 23) and at that time will be made immortal. His teaching was diametrically opposed to the Platonic view that death was only a separation from the body, with greater freedom for the spirit. To the world his preaching was foolishness (I Cor. 1:22–23).

The Greek philosophy which had seized the Corinthian church has so dominated religious thinking on immortality until the Biblical teaching of resurrection is bypassed in favor of abstract theories, which have much more in common with pagan religion than they do with the revelation of Jesus.

Funeral services for Christians afford an appropriate opportunity to proclaim the great truth of resurrection. While it is customary at funerals to read scriptures on the

resurrection, it is also the custom for the officiating minister to instruct the hearers that the deceased is not truly dead, but “more alive than ever.” Frequently we are told that the deceased has “gone to his reward,” or “now enjoying the perfect bliss of heaven” in the company of all the loved ones who were already there. Scripture presents death as an enemy (I Corinthians 15:26) to be defeated at the resurrection, but in modern religion death is treated as a delusion; people do not die but merely experience a change to another form, or, as many have said, to live on in a “larger room.”

Such a view is inconsistent with belief in “the resurrection of the dead.” There can be no sense in speaking of raising the dead to life, if they already have life more abundantly than before they were pronounced dead.

The usual answer to this is that when speaking of the resurrection, they merely mean a resurrection of the *body*—that bodies will come forth to be reunited with their “immortal souls.” This is to believe that death freed these spirits from bodily limitations so that for years, decades, and even centuries, they could glory in all the joys of heavenly bliss, but eventually they must be re-imprisoned in a body on Christ’s return. It is no wonder that there is little excitement over the message of the resurrection, and that it is seldom mentioned except at “Easter,” and then only with reference to Jesus’ resurrection, not a resurrection of the saints.

Paul writes, “We shall not all asleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet shall sound and **the dead shall be raised** (From the Greek *egeiro* = awaken, raise) incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality... **then** shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (I Cor. 15:51–54).

How can one understand this passage if he accepts the popular idea that the dead are already immortal and victorious? Paul teaches that immortality is conferred at the resurrection, and that this takes place at Christ’s coming (I Cor. 15:22) at the “last trumpet.” And we must not forget his earlier statement, that those who sleep in Christ will have perished if they are not resurrected (I Cor. 15:18). While the New Testament states that Jesus has “passed into the heavens (Heb. 4:14), it makes no such statement of others who have died. In his Pentecost sermon Peter boldly stated that David is still dead and buried and “ascended not into the heavens” (Acts 2:29–34).

A passage often cited to promote the belief that death is the doorway to heavenly bliss is John 14:2–3, where Jesus speaks of “many mansions” and says, “I go to prepare a place for you.” Many find comfort in believing that this means that their loved ones are already enjoying a glorious life with Jesus. But this is to ignore the rest of the statement: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself.” It is not at our death, but at Christ’s coming (the day of resurrection) that we are to be received by Him.

This is in perfect harmony with the comfort Paul offered in I Thessalonians 4 with regard to the Christians who had died, and who Paul said had “fallen asleep.” He told the bereaved to sorrow not, as those who had “fallen asleep” will be raised up and restored to them at the coming of Christ (I Thess. 4:13–17). It is highly significant that Paul used none of the expressions heard on such occasions today, that the dead are more alive than ever, living in glorious bliss. The **only** comfort he gave was that connected with the resurrection at Christ’s coming. Then, to instruct us all against the pagan philosophy of

Plato, as well as a variety of the New Age concepts, Paul wrote, “Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (Vs. 18, the words of truth regarding the hope of the resurrection. The New Testament abounds in statements that the fulfillment of our hope is not at death but at the time of resurrection when Jesus comes. Among these are: I Peter 1:3–7, 13; I John 3:2; Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:13; Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:18–23; I Tim. 1:18; II Tim. 4:6–8; II Thess. 1:7; Rev. 22:12, plus all the parables concerning His coming.

Resurrection, as the hope given throughout Scripture, is of the whole person. Jesus promised to raise up the person, not just the body (John 6:40, 44, 54), and Paul speaks of the resurrection “of the dead,” not “of the body” (I Cor. 15:52). This great day of resurrection, the center of hope of the apostles and the early church, has been replaced by the popular Platonic concept of the immortality of the soul. A great part of the church no longer looks forward to Christ’s coming as the day of being reunited with their dead, as Scripture teaches, but they expect this reunion to take place at their death. The last Day, emphasized by Jesus and the apostles, has lost its significance in modern eschatological thought.

The diminishing of resurrection hope has opened the way for all kinds of beliefs, from ancient paganism to New Age concepts of reincarnation, all of which depend on an innate immortality within man, a doctrine totally absent from the Bible. In addition, it confuses the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection. Jesus **died** for our sins, revealing that the penalty of the Divine Law against us for sin is the deprivation of **life**.

But as Jesus’ **death** ransoms man from the sentence of **death**, He now promises to restore life to the believer, and his own resurrection is the grounds of that promise as well as the demonstration of what we are to expect.

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