

UP FROM THE GRAVE

By

Curtis Dickinson

Once a year the Easter celebration draws attention to the resurrection of Jesus, but its meaning is generally lost in the mixture of mystical concepts and the claim by so many that it is the evidence of the soul's survival of death.

We hear it at funerals that the deceased has not died, but is now more alive than ever. Death, they say, is a transition, where one leaves the body and goes to live in heaven. When I was still in my teens two of my dearest friends died in accidents. According to the church's teaching, they were in heaven; able to watch earthly activities, and suddenly I found myself concerned about what they might think of my decisions and acts.

My wife, who was reared in the church, testified that as a youngster she was often disturbed by the idea that her deceased grandfather could see her in her most private moments. The standard teaching of the church has essentially substituted Greek philosophy for the gospel of resurrection. Many now teach that the resurrection is something that takes place at the time of death.

This is an extension of the Pagan dogma that man's body is only the house for his immortal soul. This doctrine neutralizes the gospel in 6 ways: (1) It eliminates the clear issue of life or death; (2) It opens the door to pagan beliefs such as reincarnation; (3) It gives credence to Satan's lie to Eve: "Thou shall not surely die;" (4) It makes Christ's death a contradiction, for he partook of flesh and blood in order to pay the penalty for sin, that we might live in the body glorified; (5) It by-passes judgment. If one goes immediately to heaven or to destruction, judgment day is superfluous; (6) it makes nonsense of all the many scriptures that speak of resurrection to life as the great and blessed hope.

Resurrection means that the dead are brought to life again. Death is the opposite of life - a cessation of life. Resurrection restores the life which had ceased to exist. Just as darkness is the absence of light, death is the absence of life. Death is the end of being; resurrection is the restoration of being.

It was not just the body of Jesus that died. According to the prophet, "He was cut off out of the land of the living" and "poured out his soul (life) unto death" (Isa. 53:8, 12). Jesus' statement was, "I lay down my life" not "lay down my body" (John. 10:15).

The promise of the resurrection gave hope down through the ages, and that hope had nothing to do with the widely believed pagan idea of soul-immortality. Rather it was the hope of coming back from the dead to live again.

Job had such a hope. “And though after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God.” (Job 19:26)

Certainly David did not think he was merely going to shuck off the body and rise spiritually to live with God. Rather he expected to remain dead until the day of resurrection. “I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness.” (Ps. 17:15). He sang, “But God will redeem my soul (life) from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me.” (Ps. 49:15. See Acts 2:25-31)

Isaiah proclaimed “Thy dead men shall live; together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, you that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead” (Is.26:19).

To Daniel resurrection meant coming forth from the grave. “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2).

Hosea also understood the resurrection to be the reversal of death. “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, where are thy plagues? O grave, where is thy destruction:” (Hos.13:14. Compare 1 Cor. 15:55)

Jesus died as a sacrificial offering, just as animals had been slain as sacrificial offerings to atone for sin. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 3:23), not that one’s body is to die, with the person continuing to live, and not “spiritual death” as many now say. On the cross, Jesus completely died to meet the penalty for sin. His resurrection was the restoration to life of the complete person.

Jesus had emphasized that his resurrection would be physical. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John.2:19). John explained that he was speaking of the temple of his body.

After His resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples, taking care to prove that He had actually come forth from the dead. He invited them to examine him. “Handle me and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see me have.” To demonstrate further that he was more than a spirit, he asked for food, and they gave him a piece of fish and a honeycomb, which he ate before them. All this he did in his resurrected body. (Lk.24:37-43)

The central theme of every sermon reported in Acts is the resurrection. In Paul’s discourse in the synagogue of Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). Everything he said led up to Christ’s resurrection, in agreement with prophecy. Note Paul’s speech on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). All of God’s work, he said, will culminate in a final judgment “by the man whom He (God) has ordained, whereof he has given assurance unto all men, in that he has raised him from the dead.”

In his defense before Governor Felix, Paul stated, “So serve I the God of our fathers, believing all things which are according to the law, and which are written in the prophets: having hope toward God, which these also themselves look for, that there shall be a resurrection both of the just and unjust” (Acts 24:14-15). Later, before King Agrippa, Paul used the same defense. “And now I stand here to be judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers...Why is it judged incredible with you if God does raise the dead?” (Acts 16:6, 8) It is clear that Paul saw resurrection as the restoration of life to the dead, not as the continuation of life of some part of man that doesn't die.

In defining the gospel he preached, Paul wrote, “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” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). He then wrote to Timothy that Jesus “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim.1:9-10). But if immortality is only the continuation of something invisible, the so-called “soul” as taught by Plato and most orthodox churches, it could not be “brought to light” through the appearance of Jesus in the flesh.

While Jesus took care to show the disciples that he was the same one who had been crucified, now returned to life, he also demonstrated that his body had been greatly changed. He could enter rooms with the doors shut, and could appear or disappear at will. Paul explained that we, too, would be raised from death as Jesus was, and that our bodies also would be tremendously changed. “It (the body) is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:43-44). We must keep in mind that this is addressed to Christians. While all the dead are to be raised; only the redeemed have the promise of eternal life. Unbelievers will face final death, the ultimate penalty for sin.

To the Philippians Paul wrote that the Lord Jesus “shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it might be conformed to the body of His glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto Himself” (Phil. 3:21).

Our “natural” bodies are perfectly designed for life in the world in which we live. Our resurrected bodies will be designed and perfectly fitted for the new creation, a new and different environment. That's why Paul wrote that “we all shall not sleep (in death), but we shall all 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” (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Christ's teaching was revolutionary because it was totally contrary to the philosophical delusions of Plato, who taught that man has a self-conscious immortal “soul” trapped in a mortal body, waiting to be free when the body dies. Such teaching cannot be found in the scriptures. “The whole person is a soul; the whole person ‘returns to dust’ (Gen. 3:19, Job 34:15, Eccl. 3:20) when life departs; and the whole person is restored to conscious being when life returns.” (R L. Whitelaw) The whole person will either perish or have eternal life. (Jn.3:16)

Christ's death is a demonstration of the consequences of sin, and the means of our forgiveness. Christ's resurrection is His conquest over death, and a demonstration of how we, too, may defeat death to live forever in His likeness. Praise Yahweh!

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