



Living after death - a reality

The expectation of resurrection

Not far from my home, someone runs a Bible message telephone answer service. Whenever the subject is concerned with life beyond the grave, the “hereafter”, it is sure to receive a lot of calls. The question of what happens when we die is obviously important to a great many people.

The Bible answer to the questions raised is amazingly simple. It is RESURRECTION.

This beautiful Scriptural truth has often been lost in the mists of complex theology, superstition or speculation. Yet every spring we witness this glorious truth. Trees that have looked barren and dead all the winter are suddenly clothed with green.

Plants which have lain dormant for so long begin to bud and burst. The bare brown earth is all at once a carpet of green again. God’s love brings the seasons round in their turn. His power brings back to life those things which appeared to be dead. Many men and women prefer to call it “nature”. However, the new life of the new

year is evidence of God's work. It is a kind of Resurrection. God's love and power can raise the dead to new life. God has not only given us the Spring to teach this truth. He has given much greater evidence in the Bible. This booklet examines the Bible's promise of resurrection ...

The promise of resurrection

The Old Testament character Abraham lived around 2000 years B.C. Abraham had left the city of Ur at the command of God. He had become a nomad, living in tents and moving from place to place. This was one of the demands that God had made on him. It was a way of teaching him that those who believe in God do not belong to their every day society. Belonging to God means accepting that the circumstances of our lives are God-given and are sufficient for us. Abraham was a man who displayed a remarkable faith in God. Whatever God said, Abraham believed. If it was God's word, that was good enough for him. Abraham's circumstances appeared good. He was a wealthy man. Even though he possessed no land, he had great flocks and herds. But he was an old man now and still had no true heir. The inability to produce a son may sometimes be the cause of sadness today. For Abraham it was a catastrophe. The situation was made worse by the fact that God had said that Abraham would be the father of a nation. A whole race was to be descended from him. How was this to be? Abraham wondered if Eliezer, a servant born under his roof, was to be his heir. God said that one who would come from Abraham's own body would be the heir.

Abraham took the word of God very seriously, but by the age of 99 he still had no son by his wife Sarah. Questions were bound to arise in his mind. Had he misunderstood perhaps? Did God intend that the nation would grow from his son by Sarah's maid? Any doubt was impossible when God spoke again:

"Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?""
(Genesis 17:15-17)

The Glory of Faith

Another New Testament passage gives us even more of an insight into the faith of Abraham at this time. It says:

"Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac..."" (Genesis 17:19)

The sheer impossibility of this would have been too much for most people. Sarah was now around ninety years old. All her life she had been barren. Now in her old age she was less able to bear children than before. The reproductive organs in her body had long since ceased to work. It would require a miracle if Sarah were ever to conceive.

Here again we witness the power of the word of God in the lives of these people. God had spoken and He is true. His faithfulness would ensure its fulfilment however great the odds against it. The New Testament shows how the complete trust of Abraham and Sarah was richly rewarded:

“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude - innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.” (Hebrews 11:11-12)

We must not miss the importance of the phrases used here: “when she was past the age” “and him as good as dead” “by faith”

A Miraculous Birth

We may catch the incredulity in Abraham’s reply. Yet his laughter is not condemned. Clearly it expressed relief and not disbelief. God’s promise now was quite specific:

“And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what he had promised he was also able to perform.” (Romans 4:19 21)

Many people feel that faith in God is a way of escaping from real life. Perhaps for some it is. Here, however, the Bible shows that the true believer in God is a realist. Faith is not an excuse for the unexplained. It is reasoned confidence based on a power greater than our own.

Abraham had seen God’s word come true in other ways. He had every confidence in its worth, therefore, no matter how unlikely it seemed. In this confidence he was able to face up to the cold truth of his situation. He was an old man, Sarah was an old lady. Being realistic, he and his wife were “dead” as far as having children was concerned. Yet, even with these facts staring him in the face, Abraham’s confidence in God was unshaken. God’s power was not affected by human limitations. Abraham believed God.

And so it turned out. At the ripe old ages of 100 and 90 respectively Abraham and Sarah had a son and named him Isaac- his name means “laughter”. Now the other promises of God could be fulfilled. They depended on Isaac. He was central to everything that God had said. At last there was a real prospect of Abraham becoming a mighty nation. At last there was some substance to the promise that his descendants would own the land in which he only wandered.

We would have missed much, however, if we were to think that this was all. The birth of Isaac did not merely strengthen Abraham’s faith in God’s other promises. It did much more than that. Isaac’s birth was evidence that God can bring the dead back to life. He had caused the “dead” organs of Sarah’s body to live again. Abraham and Sarah had “come alive” in terms of being able to have a son.

Resurrection - bringing the dead back to life again - seems incredible to many people today, something hard to accept. For Abraham and Sarah it was not so. It was something which, in miniature, had taken place within their own experience. God had shown Himself to be the God who can bring people back to life, who resurrects. Abraham believed it. The passage referred to earlier from Romans 4 tells us that too:

“...in the presence of him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did.” (Romans 4:17)

A Parable of Resurrection

This faith was now to be tested to the limit. We have seen already that God had made promises to Abraham. Isaac was essential to the fulfilment of those promises. When Isaac had grown into a young man Abraham received a message from God. He was commanded to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

Such a request - outside our experience - is perhaps hard for us to understand. God does not take pleasure in human sacrifice. The demands made on Abraham were a test. Would his love for his growing son be greater than his love for God? Would he be able to obey God in something that was normally contrary to God's own ways? Would he be able to kill the son without whom God's promises had no meaning?

Abraham proved himself equal to the test. He took Isaac to the appointed place, built the altar, arranged the wood, bound his son and placed him on top. Then as he was about to bring down the knife, he was stopped by an angel.

We are right to be amazed at this giant of faith. Abraham's confidence in God was firm and strong. It was also well founded as we have seen. It was no foolhardy optimism. It was a belief solidly based on what Abraham's experience of seeking God had taught him.

Supposing God had not intervened and Isaac had died? To Abraham that would not have been an obstacle. God would fulfil His promises somehow. He might have raised Isaac from the dead. Abraham believed in a God who can bring the dead back to life. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews tells us just this:

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.” (Hebrews 11:17-19)

Abraham's confidence was in God's power. Even if Isaac were to be killed he would live again. Since his very birth had been a miracle, by a miracle he would live again. Resurrection was part and parcel of what Abraham understood of the promises of God.

Summary

1. Abraham and Sarah put their faith in God.
2. God promised that they should have a son.
3. Even though they were too old, they had a son by a miracle.
4. In this way they learned of God's power to bring the dead back to life.

Bible teaching contains more than just the promise of resurrection, however. It contains proof of it too...

The Proof of Resurrection

Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob and repeated the promises to him. He renamed him "Israel". Thus Jacob's twelve sons became the children of Israel -twelve tribes who grew into a nation. That nation was heir to all that God had promised Abraham. Not all the descendants of Abraham displayed Abraham's characteristics, however. For the most part they were lacking in faith. There were only a few notable exceptions.

By its conduct the nation as a whole gave a vote of "no confidence" in God. It rebelled against Him. Of course this was not something that happened overnight. Jacob's children had first gone down to Egypt in a time of famine. There they prospered and became a mighty nation. Then the rulership of Egypt changed and, cleverly demoralising Israel, made them into a nation of slaves.

God miraculously rescued them. He ruined the social and economic fabric of Egyptian life through a series of plagues. Equally miraculously, God brought the Israelite nation out of Egypt into the wilderness. There He fed and kept them for 40 years. Then, when the time was right He gave them the land where Abraham had lived.

Israel had entered God's land in partial fulfilment of the promises He had made. It was substantially the same as the land we call Israel today. God attached terms and conditions to their occupation, however. It was His land and they were to keep His laws and commandments. The long and chequered history of the Jews, as they became known, is the subject of separate booklets. It is an important subject. It demonstrates God's dealings with them through the centuries. Their experiences were foretold in the Bible and are proof of God's existence. In obedience and in disobedience the Jews have been used by God. They are a witness to the fact that He is still at work amongst the nations, even today.

God Punishes His People

Through some 800 years the nation remained in God's land. Their behaviour seesawed between good and bad, but the balance moved towards wickedness. First God removed ten of the twelve tribes who had formed a separate kingdom in the north. The mighty power of Assyria crushed them. Later the two tribes in the south

were also punished. God using the empire of Babylon to remove them. Like bad tenants Israel failed to keep God's terms and were evicted from His land.

For His part God had struggled to keep the nation in balance. Angels, prophets and righteous men were sent to teach the people a better way. They reminded them of their ancestor's faith, encouraged them to obedience, and tried to bring them back to God. Despite the miraculous displays of power, the pleadings and the warning judgements, Israel's decline towards destruction continued.

Still God was merciful. After 70 years in Babylon the nation was re established in His land. Some of their earlier mistakes were avoided, but again they slowly drifted away from God. Heedless of the warnings of God's own Son, they crucified Jesus Christ. In A.D. 70 Jerusalem was destroyed. Pockets of resistance held out until A.D. 132 when the Jewish nation was finally destroyed by the Romans. As a nation it ceased to exist. It "died". Only individual Jews and Jewish families were left, scattered to the four winds. For 1800 years they remained scattered throughout the world.

Yet the Bible always said that they would once more become a nation. This was unusual. Other nations, expelled from their land have disappeared. Deprived of their national inheritance they have mixed with other races, have inter-married, and can no longer be traced.

A Nation Reborn

The survival of a people as a separate and recognisable nation for more than 1800 years may not be especially surprising. But when that nation has no settled territory of its own, its survival would be almost impossible. To remain with their distinctive customs, traits and characteristics clearly in evidence is a miracle. Yet against all the odds, the Jews remained Jews. Clearly identifiable and always there, they were an unwilling reminder of God's purpose.

Their re-emergence as a nation in 1948, therefore, was a miracle. The modern state of Israel was a modern miracle. Within the lifetime of this booklet's author and many of its readers, a mighty miracle has taken place. Yet almost 2,500 years ago, between 500 and 600 B.C., before the nation of Israel was even destroyed, the Old Testament prophet was given a vision of them being re-assembled as a nation. Here are some of the details:

"The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then he caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" So I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!'" (Ezekiel 37:1-3,11)

First the nation of Israel was depicted as a mass of bones strewn along a valley floor. The bones were separated, dried and scattered. They were just like the Jews. They

were not a nation, but individuals scattered throughout the world. Their hopelessness is described in the words, “our hope is lost, we ourselves are cut off...”

Dry Bones!

Yet God declared His purpose to regather them. The bones were to join together to form skeletons. The skeletons would be clothed with flesh to form corpses. The corpses would be given breath to make them live.

“Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.”” (Ezekiel 37:5-6)

This process is not dissimilar from the creation of the first man in Genesis chapter 2. There, however, God created life. He made man. Here, in Ezekiel, is a nation that had “died” as a nation, being re-made. They are brought back to life. It is even described in these terms:

“Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,” says the LORD.’” (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

Not only does the existence of the State of Israel today present us with a 20th Century miracle then. It presents us also with proof of resurrection. A whole nation has been “raised” from the dead and some of us who are old enough saw it happen!

Some have tried to claim that Ezekiel’s prophecy was fulfilled when the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon after 70 years. They argue that God’s words cannot possibly refer therefore to Jews in this century. It is true, of course, that the Jews did return to the land of Israel. There they were ruled successively by the Persian empire, the Greeks and the Romans. In between they enjoyed a short period of independence too. However, we cannot pretend that the Bible passages quoted above were fulfilled by this period of their history. The end of Ezekiel’s message speaks of the nation:

1. repenting and being forgiven
2. acknowledging God and being again His special people
3. having a king they love and respect
4. never moving from their land again

Prophecy still to be fulfilled

It is clear that these things did not happen in the days between Ezekiel and the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor have they happened since. These words have certainly not yet all

come true. We have seen part of them come true over the past few decades. Even so, they could still come true again on an even more spectacular scale.

The Bible speaks of the Jewish nation yet being humbled. Through a time of unprecedented trouble and distress they will repent. The Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable came "alive" when he returned home to the father. (See Luke 15:20-24). It may be that the Jewish nation will only really "come alive" in God's eyes when they return to him. Even so, it is certain that we have seen these words come true, at least in part. We should not miss the importance of this limited fulfilment of God's word. Nor should we miss the significance of what it teaches us about God's power to bring back from the dead. It is living proof of resurrection.

Summary

The people of Israel were chosen to be God's nation

1. Through disobedience to Him, they "died" as a nation and were scattered throughout the world.
2. Through the Old Testament prophets God foretold their regathering to His land.
3. We have witnessed the "resurrection" of the nation of Israel in our lifetimes.

Through Israel God reassures us that resurrection is a fact...

The fact of resurrection

Jesus died. Of that there is no doubt. Many have suggested otherwise, but the facts are all against such suggestions. Cruel and efficient Roman soldiers were there. They would ensure that the body of the Lord was not handed over until he was certainly dead. Pontius Pilate, the governor, sent someone to check. We can be sure that no mistake was made.

Others have looked for alternatives to the resurrection. There are ideas about Jesus reviving in the tomb, the religious leaders stealing the body, or the disciples being deluded about the whole thing. They range from the ridiculous to the nearly plausible. They have been fully dealt with many times elsewhere.

The Bible, however, presents us with facts which we cannot escape. There is no other explanation that fits those facts than the resurrection. Men would not have given their lives for anything less. If they had been at all uncertain they would not have endured persecution, as they did. They would not have suffered martyrdom for anything to which they were not totally committed.

Nor are we considering just the eleven disciples. The apostle Paul wrote of Jesus being seen after his death and resurrection. On one occasion it was by more than 500 people at once. On others it was in personal meetings with individuals.

"...and that he was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that he was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the

present, but some have fallen asleep. After that he was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all he was seen by me also...” (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

When he wrote, over half of those people could still be contacted and questioned. The resurrection was well documented and well known. The lame attempts of the Jewish leaders to cover it up point to the same conclusion.

Three Days and Three Nights

Jesus died and was buried. Three days later he rose again. This was what the Old Testament Scriptures had prophesied. God had promised Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus understood this. He believed it and foretold it himself. For example he spoke of it in a kind of parable. He warned the Jews that if they should destroy “this temple” he would build it again in three days. “This temple” was Jesus’ own body. He was speaking of the Jews’ intention to kill him. He prophesied that he would rise from the dead after three days (see John 2:18-22). On another occasion Jesus compared himself with the Old Testament prophet Jonah. Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and remained in its inside for three days and nights. Then God rescued him from this “grave”.

Jesus said that he would be three days and three nights in the grave and would rise again through God’s power (see Matthew 12:38-41). On other occasions Jesus spoke plainly of his resurrection:

“For he will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. And they will scourge him and put him to death. And the third day he will rise again.” (Luke 18:32-33)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation stone of Christian teaching. Without it there is no hope:

“And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Corinthians 15:17)

The reason for this is not difficult to see.

A Vicious Circle

Man was trapped in a spiral of sin and death. There was no way in which he could save himself from death because he is a sinner. Sin leads inevitably to death. There is no one who does not sin. The Lord Jesus Christ was born the Son of God to save us from this situation. He was capable of sin as we all are. Because his mother, Mary, was human, he inherited our desires to sin. He shared our inclinations to go our own way.

God was his Father, however. Jesus would wish to do right and to please God. In him the conflict between right and wrong would be sharper. He would find it a harder struggle to be obedient. Yet Jesus was obedient, perfectly obedient. He did not sin. It was for this reason that Jesus was able to offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of

others. Sinners were already compromised. The offering of their lives to God was of no avail in helping them to overcome death; they had already earned it.

A Perfect Sacrifice

Jesus had not. As one who had not sinned, he had done nothing personally to earn death. Jesus offered himself to God and his sacrifice was acceptable. His resurrection was the proof that it was acceptable. If he had not been raised from the dead, he would not have known and nor would we.

This is the point of Paul's words in Corinthians. If Jesus had not been raised, we would not know God's forgiveness. The life that Jesus lived has been justified by the fact that God raised him to receive everlasting life. Without his resurrection, we would still be helpless in the sin-death spiral. Through Jesus' work, God is willing to count us as righteous if we display faith in him. In this connection, Paul writes:

"It shall be imputed to us who believe in him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification." (Romans 4:24-25)

The fact of resurrection is very important to us. If it had not happened there would be nothing beyond this present futile existence. As the apostle said:

"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." (1 Corinthians 15:19)

It is because the resurrection of Jesus was a real event, because it was a fact, because he is alive, that we have a marvellous hope:

"But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first - fruits of those who have fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:20)

Notice the hope in these words. Resurrection has been proved! It is possible. Jesus experienced it and therefore so can we. This is the argument here in Corinthians. Christ is called the first fruits. That means there are others to come.

Summary

1. Jesus believed in resurrection.
2. He was crucified. He died and was buried. On the third day he rose to life again. Many people saw the resurrected Jesus.
3. Our belief in Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection is the basis of the forgiveness of our sins and of our hope.

God has provided a hope of resurrection ...

The hope of resurrection

The Jews of Jesus' day shared the hope of resurrection. It was a cornerstone of their belief. Their great ancestor Abraham had good reason to believe in it, as we have seen. There had been others too:

The patriarch Job expressed his belief in it:

"Oh, that you would hide me in the grave, That you would conceal me until your wrath is past, That you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes." (Job 14:13-14)

King David shared this confidence:

"Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will rest in hope. For you will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption." (Psalm 16:9-10)

Notice how in this passage David speaks both of himself and of Jesus. Like all the Bible verses quoted these are really the words of God. David was moved to speak first of himself: "You will not leave my soul in Sheol" (the grave). Then he is moved to speak prophetically of Jesus whom he calls God's "Holy One". He would not experience corruption.

Raised to Die Again

Other Old Testament characters had actually witnessed the dead brought back to life. Such miracles took place by the hands of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, (See 1 Kings 17:17-24 & 2 Kings 4:18-37).

The Sadducees of Jesus' day were condemned by the Lord for their hypocrisy and inner wickedness. Only they refused to accept that God would raise the dead. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus was given the holy spirit power of God. On more than one occasion he used that power to raise the dead. The synagogue ruler, Jairus, saw his daughter brought back to life while she still lay on her sick bed.

A widow from the town of Nain had her son restored to her when Jesus halted the funeral procession carrying the young man to his burial.

Mary and Martha saw their brother come from his tomb in the rock four days after his death. On all of these occasions there were other witnesses present. The power of Jesus Christ to raise the dead was indisputable. This last incident deserves special attention. Poor Lazarus had died after a short illness. His sisters clearly felt regret that Jesus had not been on hand to prevent it. They had earlier sent a message to the Lord telling him of Lazarus' sickness, but Jesus had not come. The record explains it like this:

"Therefore the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick." When Jesus heard that, he said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for

the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days in the place where he was.” (John 11:3-6)

These words read very strangely to us! We may have expected that, if Jesus really loved this little family, he would have rushed to be with them. He would have gone immediately he learned of Lazarus’ illness.

God’s Love in Action

However, the love of God is far greater than the love of man. Sometimes it is beyond our understanding. There is many an occasion in the Old Testament where the love of God permitted men to suffer for a little while so that a far greater good might be done. Nowhere was the extent of God’s love more clearly depicted than when He allowed the suffering of Jesus on the cross. This may seem strange to us. It did not mean that God loved Jesus any less. It was because of God’s love for the world that He permitted the suffering of His son. Nor did the decision of Jesus to remain where he was mean that he loved Lazarus any less. To many it may seem a dreadful thing that Lazarus should have to die. Why could not his pain, and the grief of others, have been averted? The Lord saw it differently. There was a greater purpose already clear to him.

This is because God sees death differently too. For us death is a time of bereavement, of loneliness, of sadness. To God death is merely the sleep of those who love Him and who are part of His eternal purpose.

The apostle Paul explains how this can be:

“...even God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;” (Romans 4:17)

Paul is talking about Abraham again. God said of Abraham “I have made you a father of many nations”. Notice here the use of the past tense: “I have made you”. Yet Abraham had not become the father of even one nation at that stage!

God can speak like this because with Him all things are certain. Whatever He says. He will also do. Nothing can prevent it happening. Nothing can stand in the way of His will. Once He has promised, it is certain of fulfilment. He speaks of things which “are not”, (have not yet happened) as though they “are”, (or have already taken place).

This is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ taught. When those unbelieving Sadducees came with a trick question, he put them right and added:

“But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” (Matthew 22:31-32)

Here Jesus is making just the same point. The words he quotes from the Old Testament were spoken by God to Moses. They were spoken several hundred years

after the death of Abraham. Yet God does not say “I was the God of Abraham”. He says, “I am the God of Abraham”. God speaks of those things “which are not” (a dead Abraham) “as though they are” (for Abraham will rise from the dead and live again). This helps to explain why the sisters of Lazarus held such strong religious convictions. They believed firmly in a resurrection at the last day and pinned their hopes on that.

“Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”” (John 11:23-24)

A Promise in Action

Mary and Martha were not mistaken in their belief. Jesus, however, was to demonstrate his ability to raise others at the last day. He was to do this by raising Lazarus from the dead more immediately.

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live.” (John 11:25)

Jesus stood in front of the cave where Lazarus was buried and commanded that the stone be removed. Martha protested. After four days, corruption would have set in and the smell would be unsavoury. With the stone removed, however, Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb. Miraculously the dead man came out, still wrapped in the grave clothes that were bound around him:

“And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.”” (John 11:44)

These details compare interestingly with those given about the resurrection of Jesus. It is generally understood that corruption in a corpse begins after three days. This explains Martha’s concern when Jesus wanted to open the tomb of Lazarus. He had been dead four days. Jesus, however, was raised “on the third day”. Psalm 16, quoted earlier, contains the word of God spoken by David: “Nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption”. Jesus, God’s Holy One, did not corrupt in the tomb.

“...and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself.” (John 20:6-7)

Another comparison is that Peter went into the empty tomb after the resurrection of Jesus, Lazarus came from the tomb still bound by the graveclothes. This was to show that his life was still bounded by the grave. One day he would return to it. Though he had been raised from the dead, it was only to an extension of his mortal life. He was still, as each of us, a dying creature. Jesus’ resurrection was different. He left the graveclothes behind. He would not need them again. The handkerchief, or sweat-rag, was folded by itself. Jesus’ work as a servant was finished. His toil and sweat in offering himself as a sacrifice was over. Jesus ascended to his Father to receive the gift of eternal life, to be made immortal.

The effect of these momentous events on the apostles is not hard to imagine. Full of what they had personally witnessed, they set about fulfilling the commission Jesus had given them. They began to tell others about the resurrection.

The Jewish leaders were upset by the work of the apostles and tried hard to suppress it.

“Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” (Acts 4:1-2)

They were unable to stop the spread of this good news. Indeed, the harder they tried, the further afield it spread.

Raised to Die No More

Here are just three aspects of the apostles’ teaching about the resurrection:

1. The resurrection proved that Jesus is the Son of God. It set the seal on his teaching and on all that he had said. It justified his claims. God would certainly not have raised from the dead an impostor, one who made false claims. The resurrection shows that Jesus is indeed God’s Son.

“...Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead...” (Romans 1:3-4)

2. The resurrection is crucial to the forgiveness of our sins. We have already shown in the last chapter how that the resurrection is a part of our “justification”. This means the way in which God is prepared to esteem us as righteous if we truly believe in a resurrected Jesus. Our forgiveness depends on the wondrous life of Jesus, his willing death AND his glorious resurrection. In these things alone do we have the assurance of having our sins removed.

To the Jews, the apostle Peter said:

“To you first, God, having raised up his servant Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.” (Acts 3:26)

3. The resurrection is the pledge of Jesus’ second coming to rule the world. A dead Jesus could not come again. The fact that Jesus lives is God’s guarantee that he will come back. God will send Jesus to judge the world and to compel the obedience of the nations:

“because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

Instead of a chapter summary, it may be helpful here to summarise what we have learnt so far in this booklet:

- we see God's work of resurrection in the spring of each year,
- through the experience of Abraham and Sarah we have seen how God brings the dead back to life,
- in this century we have witnessed a nation brought back from the dead,
- men and women of the Bible believed in resurrection,
- the evidence is that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and is alive.

Resurrection is the work of God. No man or woman can raise the dead.

Resurrection is a miracle. The teaching of the apostles outlined in this chapter has shown us clearly that it is God's guarantee –

- that Jesus Christ was, and is, His Son,
- that our sins can be forgiven through him,
- that he will come back to rule the world for God.

Yet this is only a part of the hope that the resurrection of Jesus brings. With it there comes also the promise of resurrection for those who belong to Jesus. Next we need to think about the life of resurrection ...

The life of Resurrection

Jesus was the first to be raised and given everlasting life. Soon he will come back to raise others. This is the Bible's teaching. He is coming back, not only to rule the world, but to raise the dead too. Here is a little more of the passage referred to:

"But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ's at his coming." (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

There are at least two things to notice here, the first of which is the word "first-fruits". First-fruits is a term used in the Old Testament. It was a commandment in Israel that men had to bring their first-fruits to God. For example, the first sheaf of ripe corn was to be offered to Him in thankfulness for His blessings. It was the promise of a harvest to come.

A Harvest to Come

So it is with the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus, as we have seen, is proof that resurrection is the true hope of believers. He is the first-fruits, the harvest is to come.

Jesus himself said:

“Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of death.” (Revelation 1:17-18)

The second point to notice is that phrase “fallen asleep”. The Bible often speaks of believers who have died as being asleep. This is because, although they are really dead, God proposes to awaken them when Jesus comes again.

Here is another example:

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you should sorrow as others who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

Those who believe have no cause for so much grief as others who do not share this glorious hope of resurrection. Of course, those who die are sadly missed, but if they have died as servants of God, death is not the end. They simply “sleep” waiting for the day of resurrection.

Asleep in the Grave

At the present time they do not exist. Many, like Abraham who died thousands of years ago, have long since mouldered away to dust. Nothing remains of them. They have no consciousness at all. They have no mind, no thought, and no memories. They have completely perished in the dust of the ground as the Bible teaches. This may seem hard for us to comprehend. We must emphasize again, (because it has been so much misunderstood) that the Bible teaches against the idea of an immortal soul. According to the Bible there is no part of man which lives on at death, or which deserves to do so.

Yet, in God’s purpose, the dead may come back to life again. For those who are part of His eternal plan, God may count them as “alive”. It is simply that God is eternal. God is timeless. He lives as much in the future as in the present and the past. If someone is part of His future kingdom, therefore, then God may regard him or her as “alive”, because one day they will be.

Jesus pointed this out to the Sadducees in a passage referred to earlier. This is yet another example of what we read in Romans:

“...even God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;” (Romans 4:17)

Nothing can hinder the progress of God’s plan. His purpose is so sure that He can speak of it as already having happened. His intention to raise from the dead those He loved is certain. He can speak of it as past when, to us, it has not yet taken place.

The idea of the dead being asleep is a marvellous comfort. The truth of the matter is that this does not apply to all, however. Not everyone will rise from the dead. The Bible indicates that there are some people for whom resurrection does not apply:

“Man who is in honour, yet does not understand, is like the beasts that perish.” (Psalm 49:20)

“A man who wanders from the way of understanding will rest in the congregation of the dead.” (Proverbs 21:16)

“O LORD our God, other masters besides you have had dominion over us; but by you only we make mention of your name. They are dead, they will not live; they are deceased, they will not rise. Therefore you have punished and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish.” (Isaiah 26:13-14)

“Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea and a path through the mighty waters, who brings forth the chariot and horse, the army and the power (they shall lie down together, they shall not rise; they are extinguished, they are quenched like a wick)” (Isaiah 43:16-17)

“In their excitement I will prepare their feasts; I will make them drunk, that they may rejoice, and sleep a perpetual sleep and not awake, says the LORD. I will bring them down like lambs to the slaughter, ...” (Jeremiah 51:39-40)

It is clear from these passages that those without understanding will not be raised. Only those who have heard the gospel, and who know that they should obey Christ will be judged by him. Others will never rise from their graves.

The words of Paul in Corinthians may have led us to a different conclusion, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive”. This sounds, perhaps, as though all men die as Adam did, so all men will be raised as Jesus was. It is true that all men are “in Adam”, however, not all men are “in Christ”.

Bible Responsibility

“For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The apostle was writing to believers who well knew what he meant. All those to whom his words were addressed would rise. They had heard the word of Christ and were responsible. Theirs was the duty to act upon what they knew.

Others may not be responsible. Not all have heard the word of God or been in a position to respond to it. God is just and faithful. He will not hold them responsible to be judged who have not had the opportunity to serve Him.

God’s purpose in bringing men and women back to life is so that they may be judged. Resurrection is necessary for this. The judgement has not already taken place. Jesus has been given immortality, but no one else has received this gift.

Here are some passages that teach this:

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:2)

“For we shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ.” (Romans 14:10)

“For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The resurrection will take place when Jesus Christ comes back to the earth. Those who are still alive will meet those of every age raised to life. Then Jesus will judge them all. There should be no misunderstanding of these important truths. The Bible speaks plainly of them:

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (John 5:28-29)

Clinging to beliefs that are not supported by the word of God will not help us. However comforting it may seem to be for the present, it is a false hope. It may mean that we are missing out on the REAL hope that God offers through the Bible. It is the hope that, if we die, we can come back to life again as Jesus did and can enjoy his eternal life.

Resurrection means rising from the dead. It has nothing to do with the mysterious world of spirits. It is not re-incarnation - returning as something else. It is about coming back to life, the same recognisable person as before. It involves rising bodily from the grave to a further literal existence here in the earth. And Resurrection is what God promises. It is not in any way a fanciful idea. God who created from the dust is able to recreate from the dust. God who gave life to Adam can give life again. It is no problem with God to bring back from the dust of death those He desires should live again.

Life Eternal

Some people think that eternal life - living for ever - sounds very boring. That is because they have failed to understand what the Bible means by this promise. Eternal life is not just endless life, it is much more than that. It means sharing the life that God has. It means sharing His perfection in a moral as well as a physical way. It means having His spiritual qualities. His wisdom. Those who receive it will not grow tired or

old, they will know no pain or sorrow. More important, they will be beyond the frustrations of temptation and sin. This is something we should certainly want.

Such people will live and reign with Jesus Christ in his kingdom. They will enjoy his fellowship. They will be involved in satisfying work with him. Some will help him to rule and teach the nations of God's ways.

Here now is a summary of the main points of the Bible's teaching on the subject of resurrection:

1. Jesus Christ died. On the third day after his death, he rose again from the grave. Jesus is alive.
2. God has given Jesus Christ life and immortality, which he now shares with his Father in heaven.
3. God will send Jesus Christ back to the earth in person.
4. Jesus Christ will raise from the dead those who are "asleep", who have known the gospel.
5. Jesus will judge the living and the resurrected ones.
6. Jesus will give eternal life to those who are judged and counted worthy to receive it.
7. They will live forever and share the divine nature.
8. They will help Jesus to rule the cleansed and beautiful world, the kingdom of God on earth.

The all-important question now is whether we have a need of resurrection...

The Need for Resurrection

Life began with God. The first chapter of the Bible tells us all we need to know about the way in which life came about on the earth. God issued His command and light came into existence. He spoke and the angels carried out His will. As the days of Genesis unfold we learn of the creation of other things: lights in the heavens, sea, fish and fowl, animals and man. The creation of man is of especial interest to us here. Genesis 1:26 tells us of this:

"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26-27)

It is Genesis chapter two, however, that goes into the "how". It describes the way in which man was made:

"And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

The picture presented to us by these words is like that of a potter shaping a vessel. God "formed" man. Then when He was satisfied with its likeness. He breathed into it

and brought it to life. Suddenly its limp shape became vibrant with energy. The man was a living being.

A Rib from Adam

The woman was made differently. Uniquely she was formed from something already living. While Adam slept God took a part of him to create someone who would be fitting, or suitable, for him. They were part of the same substance; they belonged together.

As Genesis 1 has already explained, “male and female he created them”. Together they were in the likeness of God. Yet life did not belong to them. It was God’s. Their life was the gift of God. The Bible shows that there was a condition attached to the gift. Life could be removed, or lost. The breath that God had breathed into Adam’s nostrils could be withdrawn again.

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat the fruit of it you shall surely die.”” (Genesis 2:16-17)

It is clear from this that man and woman were not already immortal.

God’s words would have had no meaning if they had been beyond the power of death. Adam and Eve were on probation. Disobedience would result in loss of life. They would cease to exist as living beings.

Tragedy followed. They chose the path that led away from God. They disobeyed His command and proved the truth of His warning. God is a God of justice. His ways are right. It would not have been right to ignore Adam’s wilful disobedience or to pretend that nothing was amiss.

Wrongdoing requires punishment. God pronounced the death sentence:

“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

These words meant the reverse of the creation process. Now man’s breath would be withdrawn. Man would again become a lifeless form. The body would return to being the heap of dust with which God had started as described in Genesis chapter 2.

If we have any doubt at all about this conclusion, it is confirmed for us by another part of Scripture:

“Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish.” (Psalm 146:3-4)

A Problem of Time

Some have found difficulty with the words of God in Genesis, “in the day that you eat ...you shall surely die”, because Adam did not die that very day. Indeed he lived to be 930 years old. But the meaning of God’s warning is made clear by the events that followed. In the day that Adam disobeyed, he had chosen death. His fate was sealed. The word of God had come true that he would surely (certainly) die. From that day forward he was susceptible to sickness, pain and disease. His body was wearing out, corruptible. Death itself was only a matter of time. Adam and Eve were only too well aware of the great gulf that now existed between themselves and God. Though made in His likeness, they were now very unlike God. They were conscious of sin and the guilt that sin brings. They were aware of their wickedness. They knew shame and embarrassment.

God was similarly aware of their plight. He saw their need of help to save them from themselves and from the consequences of their sin. Ultimately the salvation He offered would involve the sacrifice of His own Son. More immediately, however, God provided coats of skin to cover their confusion.

Scripture is silent on which animal was killed to provide such a covering. Later events make it probable that it was a lamb. Whatever it was, its death would be telling for the sinners who watched it. Until this moment death had been only a threat, a theory. Now for the first time it was a reality. The helpless carcass of the animal was a stinging realisation of what their sin had caused. Its life was forfeit because of them. Their lives too in due time would be given up, the deserved result of their failure to serve God.

Earth to Earth, Dust to Dust

The stark reality of these early chapters of Genesis is disconcerting to some. They are chapters that present a real challenge to contemporary beliefs. They tell us that death really is death. It is a punishment. There is nothing that lives on. It is not the immediate opening up of some better paradise. The grim truth is that we are but dust. Here life ends. Death is that end.

This sad fact is not the teaching of just one or two isolated Bible passages.

The same theme runs right through the Scriptures. Here are some further verses that tell this same truth:

“I said in my heart, “Concerning the estate of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like beasts.” For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other.” (Ecclesiastes 3:18-19)

“This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead... For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing...” (Ecclesiastes 9:3,5)

“For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” (James 4:14)

These may seem unpleasant facts to face. Comforting words that have no basis in truth, however, are cold comfort indeed. It is far better to put aside the paper reeds of false confidence and kind words and to build on the rock. That Rock is a true and sure foundation for future hopes. It is the REAL comfort for the long term.

Until we can accept these awful truths about ourselves and about our nature we are not in any position to accept the glorious message that the Bible offers. We need help. We need God. We need RESURRECTION. God created man and woman and gave them life. They sinned against God by being disobedient. God passed the death sentence on them. Death is the end of life; the dead know nothing. Without God we perish. Only God can save us, by resurrection.

In His mercy God has guaranteed the future by giving us an experience of resurrection ...

The experience of resurrection

Let it be stated quite clearly, Jesus alone has obtained God’s gift of eternal life. No one else who has died has ever experienced the bliss of an immortal existence.

Yet there is a way in which the Bible invites us all to be 100% sure about resurrection. It offers us a ‘resurrection’ experience at first hand. It provides a kind of ‘foretaste’ of God’s purpose for us, if we are willing to accept it. To understand what this involves it is important once again that we accept the Genesis record as the true word of God. Man sinned and because of his sin he died. We also sin and because of our sins we die. Death is all that every one of us deserves. It cuts off our hope and separates us from God.

The Lost Son

This is well illustrated in the Lord’s parable of the Prodigal Son. This son behaved foolishly by leaving the father’s house, and wasting his goods. He sinned. Then he repented. He came back to his father confessing his guilt. Because of his humility his *father willingly received him back. The father’s words in the story are:*

“Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; ...” (Luke 15:22-24)

To the father in this parable, the son was ‘dead’. He had never died in the sense that we normally use the word. He had certainly never died and been buried. Yet in another way he was ‘dead’ because he was away from his father.

The father in the story is God and the renegade son is any one of us. We have all wasted the opportunities that God has given us. We have wasted some or all of our lives. In his eyes we are ‘dead’ while we remain in our foolish ways, while we are ‘away’ from Him. The Bible calls this being “dead in sins”.

The reason for this is not hard to see. As we have learnt from Genesis, sin leads to death. Sin for which no repentance is offered will lead to eternal death. In God's eyes, therefore, we are as good as dead even while we live. The only way out of our dilemma is to come to God in humility and seek forgiveness.

Forgiveness and Baptism

God is very willing to forgive. Like the prodigal son, however, we must first demonstrate our repentance. God has appointed baptism as the way in which we must do this. Baptism is a kind of death. It is a way of admitting that we deserve death. Our sins have earned it for us. In true baptism a person is momentarily 'buried' beneath the water. They 'die' to their old way of life and to their sins. Then God takes away their sin. He forgives them. They rise from the water just as Jesus rose from his grave. This is a kind of resurrection.

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection," (Romans 6:3-5)

Notice the phrase "baptized into Christ". When a true baptism takes place a person is said to be "in Christ". This is a phrase that has been mentioned before. It means that a person's sins are covered by Christ's righteousness. They live their lives in him.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..." (Ephesians 2:4-6)

Raised to New Life Now!

There is nothing mystical about this. The Bible is not talking about going to heaven to be with Christ. It is speaking of being 'raised' by God from the 'death' of our sinful lives to live in 'heavenly places' now. It is asking that we live the Christ-like life now so far as we can. After true baptism, the believer no longer belongs to his present society. He sets his mind on the life that Jesus lived and the life that Jesus now has. He looks forward to the eternal life that Christ will bring at his return:

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry..." (Colossians 3:1-5)

If we are willing to give up living for ourselves and live for Him, God will give us life in His kingdom. This was the teaching of Jesus too:

“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25)

This is the joyful news of the gospel. We can come alive in God’s sight. Through the confession and forgiveness of our sins in baptism we can experience this “resurrection”. It is a further evidence of God’s power and willingness to help us. He will raise us from the dead at the coming of Jesus if we should have fallen asleep before that takes place.

He has promised to give us a part in eternal life if we continue in this faith and hope.

Is this your faith? Is this your hope?

If it is not, or you feel uncertain about this message please write for further help and information. It will be a pleasure to try and assist you in understanding the Bible’s true teaching. In this way you will be able to-prepare for the coming of the Lord of Life.

JOHN S. ROBERTS

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