

The Resurrection: God's Promise of Life after Death

The Bible clearly teaches that the dead will be raised in a resurrection. But if their souls have already gone to heaven or hell at death, what's the point? Could it be that popular beliefs don't agree with the Bible?

If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). This question has intrigued the minds of men from ancient times to our day.

In the Bible God inspired the patriarch Job not only to pose this important question but to give us the answer. Responding to God, Job says: "All the days of [or from] my hard service I will wait, *till my change comes*. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands" (Job 14:14-15). Job affirmed that the dead *will* live again through a resurrection.

Other passages in the Old Testament also affirm the resurrection. Daniel 12:2, for example, prophesies of a time yet future when "*many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake ...*"

But the way to eternal life was not fully understood in those days. It remained for Christ to come and fully reveal the truth. Jesus states: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (John 11:25). It is through Christ that we can experience our own resurrection from the dead. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Let's delve further into this matter of the resurrection. What is the impact of this teaching? And what lies ahead in terms of who will be resurrected and when?

More than a glimmer of hope

The teaching of the good news of the resurrection—that man can escape the power of the grave—set Christianity apart from other first-century religions and philosophies. Among Jewish sects the concept of a resurrection was a subject of controversy. Some dogmatically denied the dead would rise, and others said they would (Acts 23:8).

The world in which Jesus lived, besides being Jewish, was heavily influenced by the culture of the two empires—Greek and Roman—that had successively dominated the region for several centuries. The Greek and Roman religions held little hope for the dead.

"The old Greek belief, and its Roman counterpart, held that once the body was dead the disembodied soul lived in a miserable twilight existence...Sadness, silence and hopelessness seemed to brood over the life after death...Death was to men of those days the ultimate disaster" (J.B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator's Testimony*, 1967, pp. 40-41).

The *New Bible Dictionary* affirms the dreary outlook of the day and tells us that the resurrection of Christ gave men more than a glimmer of hope. "The most startling characteristic of the first

Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world...Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith" (1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection").

A truth that launched the Church

The riveting truth of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah launched the New Testament Church. Preaching on the day of the Church's founding, as recorded in Acts 2, the apostle Peter thundered the good news:

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; *whom God raised up*, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (Acts 2:22-24).

The news of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth spread like a shock wave through the land. Jesus' disciples were galvanized into action and began to preach with zeal. What had been regarded as a band of renegade Jews soon grew into the thriving Church.

In its early days the Church grew by thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4). The young Church spread hope—hope of eternal life through the resurrection. The disciples taught under God's inspiration that all who accept Jesus as their personal Savior, repent, are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit will be resurrected (compare Acts 2:38; Romans 8:11).

The resurrection the disciples expected was not some sort of substandard half-life, such as the Greeks and Romans believed lay beyond the grave. The disciples were called to "take hold of the life that is *truly* life" (1 Timothy:6:19, NIV).

Jesus had told them before He was crucified, "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19). Jesus had also shared with His disciples His intention for all of mankind: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Though we may enter into the abundant life of which Christ spoke in this life, it reaches its full realization in the resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection gives meaning to life

The first-century world held many conflicting ideas about life after death. Pagan philosophies had clouded the understanding of most people.

Our situation is similar. In the Western world a significant number of people believe nothing lies beyond the grave. Atheism and agnosticism have left their marks. The world needs to hear and understand the original resurrection message of Christ and the apostles.

Many people, like those of the ancient world, are anxious about the matter of death. The truth of the resurrection proclaimed by God's Word can counter the anxiety and hopelessness inherent in any approach that excludes God.

Speaking of the return of Christ and the accompanying resurrection of the faithful, Paul encourages believers to "*comfort one another* with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The truth of the resurrection provides comfort for our natural anxiety about death.

The resurrection: historical fact

Why should we believe in a resurrection from the dead? We should take heart because the resurrection of Christ, in whose steps we follow, is a biblically and historically confirmed *fact*.

After being executed and entombed, Jesus' body disappeared, and even His enemies who wanted to refute His resurrection could not explain away the empty tomb. Jesus' resurrection was confirmed by many witnesses—including on one occasion 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6). Peter, speaking on behalf of all the apostles, triumphantly proclaimed, "We are His *witnesses* to these things"—to the fact that "the God of our fathers *raised up Jesus*" (Acts 5:30-32).

Years later Paul similarly said of Jesus that "God raised Him from the dead [and] *He was seen for many days* by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are *His witnesses* to the people" (Acts:13:30-31). The apostles and other members of the early Church *gave their lives* as willing martyrs for this truth—for they knew for certain that it was indeed the truth.

Every person in his own order

The fact that Jesus was resurrected as a forerunner of the future resurrection of His followers is understood by many Bible readers. What is not so clear to many is that the Bible describes *more than one* future resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes: "But now, Christ is risen from the dead, the *first-fruit* of those who have fallen asleep . . . For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ *all* will be made alive. *But each in his own order*; Christ the first-fruits, then those who belong to Christ at his appearing. And then the end, when he shall hand over his kingdom to God his Father" (verses 20-24, Montgomery New Testament).

The reference to firstfruits indicates that *other* fruits are to follow—Jesus here followed by those who are His at His return. Paul specifies that God has set an order in His plan by which He will bring up everyone—"all," as it says—in a resurrection. And in this order, not everyone will be resurrected *at the same time*.

Notice that Jesus is here called the firstfruits. Yet His followers are elsewhere called firstfruits themselves—and firstborn (James 1:18; Revelation 14:4; Hebrews 12:23). Thus Christ is the first of the firstfruits. The implication is that yet others will follow as later fruits—at "the end," as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15:24. And other scriptures confirm that, as we will see.

Those who believe that people go to heaven or hell at death have been troubled at the indications they see in Scripture that comparatively few will be saved. They frequently base this assumption on such passages as Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

In these verses Jesus explains what happens in "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4), in which God is not calling everyone to be converted *now*. We read in Revelation 12:9 that Satan "deceives the whole world." John writes, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19).

Mankind as a whole is deceived—*for the time being*. Jesus states, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). Jesus plainly indicates here that only certain ones will be in the resurrection to which He refers—those who are specifically called by God. The Bible teaches that in this particular age—the age preceding the return of Christ—God is calling only a small portion of mankind to enter and partake of His Kingdom.

"This is the first resurrection"

The coming resurrection of those who are called now in this age is further described in the 20th chapter of Revelation.

Let's notice how John describes that resurrection: "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. *They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.* (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) *This is the first resurrection.*

"Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4-6). Notice that some are resurrected at the beginning of the 1,000-year reign of Christ—at "the first resurrection." Those in this resurrection of the faithful will be raised immortal and incorruptible to reign with Him, never to die from then on.

But notice that the use of the term *first resurrection* shows that at least one more must follow!

Another resurrection follows

Indeed, as we can see, the same passage explains in a parenthetical note, "The *rest* of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended." Clearly there is another resurrection 1,000 years *after* the first, and in this resurrection *others* will have the opportunity to receive salvation. They will be called to understand God's truth and His plan during a period sometimes referred to as the "great white throne" judgment (verse 11).

This time of judgment is further described in verse 12: "And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books."

Those resurrected in this group have never completely understood the truth of God. Consider that *the majority of all people who have ever lived have never heard God's truth*. Rather than condemn such people to eternal suffering in a fiery hell, the God of the Bible is much more comforting and encouraging. He will extend the opportunity for eternal life *to everyone*—to relatively few in this age, but to billions of people in the coming second or general resurrection.

Judgment is much more than a final decision to reward or condemn. Judgment is a *process* that takes place over time before a final decision is rendered. Those brought to a temporary, physical life again in this resurrection (see Ezekiel 37:1-14) will, for the *first* time, have their minds opened to the truth of God's plan. They will have the opportunity to decide whether they will accept and follow God's instruction or not.

After coming to see the truth, they will be judged according to their response to their new understanding. Many will accept that truth, repent and receive God's gift of eternal life—joining those made immortal in the first resurrection.

Past generations will be resurrected together

Jesus Himself spoke of this second resurrection period when He said that even the sinners of the long-destroyed city of Sodom would have the opportunity to repent in a future judgment. As He sent His disciples out on a mission to preach the gospel (Matthew 10:9-14), He told them that some they would encounter would reject their message. Of these Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (verse 15).

That there is room for tolerance in that day toward Sodom and Gomorrah shows they will have opportunity to repent and enter God's Kingdom. This is because, when they formerly lived, they either never had opportunity to know God or His way or never fully understood what they heard. The time for their calling and judgment is *yet future*. This is not a *second* chance for salvation, as some might view it. Rather, this will be their *first* chance—their first opportunity to act on a clear understanding of God's truth.

In a similar example, Jesus said the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical "queen of the South" from Solomon's time "will rise up in the judgment" alongside those from Christ's generation (Matthew:12:41-42). The people from those generations had lived and died many centuries earlier, never having understood the true God or His plan to offer eternal life through His Son Jesus the Messiah.

Having great mercy toward all people, God will offer salvation to all who lived and died in all ages without ever really knowing Him. The Bible tells us that God does not play favorites Acts

10:34; Romans:2:11). He calls all at the time that is appropriate for them, and eventually all will be given the same wonderful opportunity to receive His gift of salvation.

Evidence of a third resurrection

Other scriptures indicate that a third group, the wicked who refuse to accept God and His way of life, will be resurrected just before final destruction in the lake of fire.

Jesus explained that some would deliberately and knowingly despise God's truth and spiritual understanding. These individuals, He said, will not be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew 12:31-32).

Yet "*all* who are in the graves will hear [Christ's] voice and come forth" (John 5:28-29). Even those who will not be forgiven are to be resurrected from the dead.

This group will consist of those who have deliberately rejected God's way of life even after they have been "once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Hebrews 6:4-6). These few are people who were once forgiven and converted but later chose to reject the Holy Spirit and priceless knowledge God gave to them.

Because they "trampled the Son of God under foot,...treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and...insulted the Spirit of grace," for them "no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews:10:26-29).

As we saw earlier, God has revealed that the ultimate fate of the incorrigibly wicked is to be burned up: "'For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the LORD of hosts, 'That will leave them neither root nor branch'" (Malachi 4:1).

This will be the end for those few who stubbornly have or will have refused to repent of their own self-willed rebellion in spite of all the opportunities made available to them by God. They will be destroyed in the lake of fire, dying in "the second death," from which there will be no resurrection (Revelation 20:13-14; 21:8).

We are even told that death itself and hades (the grave) will be destroyed in this fire (Revelation 20:14). That is because the judgment of God will then be complete. Those who are saved will never again have to fear death. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:26 will have then come to pass: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death."