

Chapter One

Resurrection

Perhaps the most difficult part of undertaking a project like this is determining exactly where to start. Prophecy permeates Scripture. And, the subject of eschatology is far-reaching and diverse. So, where do we begin? I have decided to start where Christianity starts – at the resurrection of Christ.

The Christian faith stands or falls on one vital fact of history: Jesus either did or did not rise from the dead. If the story of the resurrection is true, then Jesus Christ is everything He claimed to be and therefore God incarnate. He has more authority to speak for and about God than any man who ever lived. But, if He did not come out of that tomb, then the rest of Christianity - regardless of how philosophically attractive it may sound - is a lie, a scam, a fairy tale devised by men who followed a leader who let them down. But, it was that one central event, the resurrection, which grabbed me and restored my faith. After examining the historic, textual and intrinsic evidence, it became impossible to conclude anything other than Christ's actual, physical, bodily resurrection.

According to the New Testament, Jesus spent three days and three nights in the tomb before He was raised by the power of God Almighty.¹ After the resurrection, Jesus walked, talked and ate with his disciples and ascended into Heaven. These facts are the bedrock of New Testament theology and are at the heart of the earliest Christian creeds. Yet, the idea of bodily resurrection was the subject of great debate within the first century Jewish community. In fact, the primary division between the Pharisees and Sadducees was this very topic.

On that day *some* Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus and questioned Him ... (Mat. 22:23)

As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple *guard* and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. (Acts 4:1-2)

But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul *began* crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees

acknowledge them all. (Acts 4:6-8)

Even as the Apostle Paul was penning his epistles, the religious leaders of the day argued that literal resurrection of a human was impossible. If Christ had indeed risen, it must have been a “spiritual” event and not a physical phenomenon. In various forms, that explanation of the apostles’ preaching continues to this very day.

Nevertheless, the concept of the resurrection of the dead finds prominence in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. In the book of Job - which scholars consider to be among the oldest Biblical manuscripts - we read --

"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes will see and not another." (Job 19:25-27a)

Job’s expectation was that his physical body would one day rise from the grave to meet God, the Redeemer. His was not a spiritual aspiration; he expected to look on God with the very same physical eyes that would be consumed along with his physical mind and his fleshly form.

Despite Old Testament proof to the contrary, such as Ezekiel’s “valley of dry bones” (Ezek. 37), the Sadducees contended that there was no physical resurrection. Nevertheless, Christ not only predicted His own death and subsequent resurrection (John 2:19), but the individual resurrection of every believer.

"This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." (John 6:39)

The resurrection of the saints was a widely held doctrine among Christ’s earliest followers. When Jesus came to the place where Lazarus was entombed, Martha met him -

Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:21-26)

And, it was concerning this very subject – the resurrection of Christ’s own Church - that Paul addressed part of his first letter to the Church at Corinth. Starting in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul declared again the gospel that he had preached to them in

person, which truth they received and stood by. It was this very gospel, he declared, which saved them, the proof of that salvation being that they would hold it in their memory and never recant.

Paul stated emphatically in verse 3 that the particular truths he imparted to them were the very same truths that he had been taught by Jesus personally. Christ had in fact died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. Christ was buried and rose again on the third day, fulfilling the prophecies concerning Him. Afterward, a crowd of witnesses actually saw Christ in the flesh: Peter, then the apostles as a group, and then over five hundred believers all at once, most of whom Paul knew to be still living as he was writing. Jesus was later seen by James and then all of the apostles. Lastly, said Paul, he encountered the risen Savior himself.

In evidence that these were not merely spiritual visitations or ghostly apparitions, but the actual flesh and blood body of Jesus, the very same flesh which died on the cross, we need only read John's account of Thomas's encounter with the Lord in John 20:24-29. Thomas was missing when Jesus appeared to His apostles the first time. Later, when they told Thomas they had seen the risen Lord, Thomas contended, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later they were together in a locked room. Thomas was also in attendance and Jesus appeared in their midst. Jesus beckoned Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."

While this is a wonderful account of our Lord graciously stooping down to subject Himself to Thomas's inspection, confirming and securing the faith of one of His chosen, the entire account unravels if the body that Jesus offered for scrutiny was not actually pierced flesh.

This reality was not lost on the Apostle Paul, who stated that the validity of the Christian faith rested on the question of the resurrection.

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all

men most to be pitied. (1Cor. 15:12-19)

Paul's argument is pointed and concise. If there is no such thing as a physical resurrection then Christ is still dead in the grave and Christianity is a lie. There is no remission of sin inasmuch as Christ's proof of His Messianic stature is undermined. And, those who died believing in Christ for their salvation are eternally condemned. Most importantly, said Paul, the Apostles would be false witnesses, making up tall tales. They would have lied about God. So, the only advantage Christianity could claim would be that it makes life here on Earth somehow better, but leaves us with no guarantee of future forgiveness or salvation. Then we would be, of all men, most miserable.

But, having stated the insufferable negative, Paul began to declare the truth of the glorious alternative. He reached back into the Old Testament and interpreted the Levitical regulation of the "firstfruits," which required that the firstborn of every ox and sheep, the first of every ripe fruit and fermented drink, and every firstborn of the sons of Israel would be given to God. Paul argued that those regulations were foreshadows; prefigures of Christ.

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming." (1Cor. 15:20-23)

With that single statement, Paul swept across the panorama of time from Adam, the first man to die, to Christ's promised return. In the interim, all who are born into Adam's sin continue to die. The decay of the body and eventual death of every individual who has ever inhabited this world is proof positive that Adam's sin courses through our blood and convicts us of his guilt. However, Christ took on human nature with the intention of erasing that guilt, paying the price to redeem His people, and guaranteeing their eternal destiny. The redeemed of Christ are then indwelt by the Holy Spirit, sealing their eternal inheritance, raising them from their spiritual death and blindness (Eph. 2:1), into a state "spiritual life."

But, that's only half of the story.

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:13-14)

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the "earnest of our inheritance." He is the down payment, deposited as a surety that "the purchased possession" will be utterly redeemed. The redemption that Christ achieved is so complete that it secured

not only our spiritual well being, it also includes the promise of a resurrected body, cleansed from sin and death.

But first Christ had to rise from the grave, a sacrifice well pleasing and acceptable to God. He was the “firstfruits of the resurrection.” But when Christ returns, all of His redeemed people will be “made alive” in the same manner as the resurrected Christ, to inhabit their very same bodies, becoming just like Him (1John 3:2). So, continuing his treatise, Paul took the time to put the eschaton, or “end time events,” in order -

Then [after Christ’s coming] *comes* the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. (1Cor. 15:24-26)

That was Paul’s basic outline of future events:

- First, Christ would die and be resurrected.
- Then those that are His will be resurrected at His coming.
- Then, Christ will overthrow every earthly kingdom and authority, setting up His reign on earth until every enemy of His is conquered.
- Finally, the reign of death over mankind will be terminated.

Continuing his train of thought, after a moment of exhortation, Paul predicted that some would argue that the resurrection he was preaching was actually a form of reincarnation where men would return to Earth in bodies other than the type they initially inhabited. He answered them with an example from agriculture, pointing out that seeds must be sown in the ground and die before they spring to life. He pointed out that we do not plant grain in the body it will grow to have; we simply plant the seed. Then God gives it a body as it pleases Him and to every kind of seed He gives the particular body appropriate for that type of grain. Then Paul pointed out that not all flesh is the same. One type is for men, another for beasts, another for fish and another for birds. Likewise, some bodies are celestial or heavenly and some are terrestrial or earthly. They are each individual and distinct. They are sown, or buried, after their own kind and they are raised after their own kind. But after a seed dies it becomes the plant or flower it was determined to be.

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable *body*, it is raised an imperishable *body*; 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual *body*. (1Cor. 15:42-44)

Paul drew a marked contrast between our spiritual bodies and natural, fleshly bodies. Human flesh is corrupt. It grows sick, gets weak and dies. Human flesh is dishonorable. It is sinful, polluted and incapable of performing acts of genuine righteousness. Flesh is weak. It is incapable of helping itself or halting its own demise.

Nevertheless, redeemed human beings will inherit resurrected bodies that are incorruptible, never again to be ravaged by age or disease. They will be glorious and suitable to inhabit Heaven and the new Earth. They will be powerful and able to withstand time and eternity without the slightest hint of weakness or decay. One is natural or fleshly and the other is spiritual or eternal. But they are both human and they are particular to each individual whom God raises up. Just as seed is sown in the ground and must die in order to spring to life in a new, glorious form, Christ's people will die and be buried, only to spring from the ground in their new, redeemed, eternal form.

So also it is written, "The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL." The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit. (1Cor. 15:45)

Continuing his resurrection theology, Paul again contrasted Adam and Christ, stating that Adam was made a natural living being, subject to death. But, Christ was made a "quickening spirit," capable of bringing eternal life to those under Adam's curse.

However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. (1Cor. 15:46-47)

Using Adam and Christ as figureheads, Paul elucidated God's divine order. The fleshly man, Adam, came first. The spiritual man, Christ, came after. The first man was of the earth, made from the dust of the ground. The second man was the Lord from Heaven.

As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. (1Cor. 15:48-49)

From that model, Paul drew a parallel in the order of our lives. First we are of the earth and afterward we are of Heaven. And, just as Adam was - sinful and subject to corruption and death - so are all people who are of the earth. But, as the Lord is - heavenly and eternal - so are all those who are spiritual. Finally, as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man. Nevertheless, we are still the same individual people. We have merely graduated from our initial state to our eternal state.

So, why was this so important? Why was Paul expounding this subject in such detail? He revealed his purpose in verse 50.

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1Cor. 15:50)

That is the whole point. This flesh, being corrupt and sinful, cannot stand in the presence of a Holy God. We have no hope of gaining entrance into the perfect purity of Heaven so long as we wear this earthly tent of human flesh. It must be purified. It must be re-created. It must be made perfect and acceptable in God's sight. That is what the resurrection of the dead is designed to do.

But, then things get interesting. Paul dropped a veritable bomb on his readers. He introduced a brand new concept that had not been revealed in the ancient Scripture. It was a "mystery" - a thing that was hidden or unknown until the moment Paul revealed it. In the Greek language it is the word "*musterion*" (μυστήριον). Vine's Expository Greek Dictionary defines it as –

"That which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit."ⁱⁱ

It is the revelation of a hitherto unknown truth, a mystery.

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. (1Cor. 15:51-54)

Having built the indisputable argument for the bodily resurrection of Christ and all His Church, Paul leapt without pausing into the mystery of instantaneous bodily resurrection among living people. Our first glimpse of the details tells us several specific things.

- Not everyone who will be changed and raised to his or her eternal state at Christ's coming will have to die and be buried to partake in this epic event. "We (Christ's redeemed people) will not all die, but we will all be changed." Everyone who belongs to Christ at His coming, dead or alive, will be changed in the exact same way.
- The change will be instantaneous. As quickly as light can glint off an eye, the change that is required for entrance into Heaven will take place.
- The dead in Christ will rise from their graves wearing their eternal bodies. In that same instant, those believers who are yet alive at Christ's coming

will share in the miraculous change. Corruptible flesh will be instantly perfected and incorruptible. Mortal humans, subject to death, will be instantly immortal, never dying again.

In that event, as corruptible people are instantaneously perfected, Paul saw Isaiah's promise beginning to be fulfilled. Isaiah wrote --

He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken. (Isa. 25:8)

The very power of Almighty God that drew Christ from the belly of the earth, quickened His mortal body, drew Him out of His grave clothes, sent Him undeterred through the stone that sealed His tomb and empowered Him to pierce the Heavens to stand undefiled and majestic at the altar of God is the same power that will draw men from the soil and raise them from the earth, fulfilling the promise of completed perfection which Job and the faithful throughout history have anticipated.

Now, even though this was Paul's first declaration of the mystery of instantaneous resurrection, it is important to note that this is not an isolated concept. It is a linchpin that permeates and defines Paul's concept of what Christianity is and how we ought to live as believers. When he considered the work and person of Christ, he referred to this event time and again, making it part and parcel of his total theology. For instance --

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (Phil. 3:20-21)

Other apostolic authors looked forward to this same event.

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1John 3:2-3)

While most churches, theologians, and teachers are willing to concede that Paul does state in Corinthians 15 that the resurrection of the saints is a definite and future event (it had not occurred in Paul's time and has yet to arrive in human history), they are likely to dispute the details surrounding this instant change from terrestrial life to incorruptible life "in the twinkling of an eye." Nevertheless, it is a biblically secure and certain future event. In the next chapter we will look at what happens to these people after they have been changed and begin to explore the events surrounding this cataclysmic moment.

What We Know So Far

- Jesus Christ was preached, in the earliest Christian announcements, as dead, buried and raised again – the heart of the gospel message.
- The resurrection of Christ was merely the first in a succession of resurrections. He is “the firstfruit.” His saints will rise at His return.
- The Apostle Paul and our Lord both announced a future bodily resurrection for the saints, at which time we will be changed from corruptible to incorruptible, from mortal to immortal.
- Not every saint will have to die in order to be changed. When Christ returns, the dead will be raised incorruptible and the living saints will be instantaneously transformed.

ⁱ For an overview of Jesus’ three days and three nights in the tomb, see the Passion Week Chart at www.salvationbygrace.org

ⁱⁱ Vine, W.E. An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, Inc. 1952) Pg. 97.