

## The Resurrection of the Body

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THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY IS PERHAPS THE MOST NEGLECTED OF THE central doctrines of our faith.

That the resurrection of the body is at the very heart of the Christian faith should be quite evident. The Christian faith centres in the death and resurrection of Christ: the heart of its proclamation is thus the death and resurrection of that body. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul declares therefore that those who deny the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead overthrow the entire scheme of redemption.

The 'Apostles Creed', which is one of the first attempts at a systematic summary of the Christian faith, concludes with confession of faith in 'the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting'. Clearly the Apostolic and post-Apostolic church believed that the resurrection of the body formed a vital part of the Christian gospel. Can we doubt that it is just as vital today?

But if this doctrine is a vital element of the Christian message it is just as clearly a neglected element. Look at your hymn books: can you think of a hymn which praises God for the promise of bodily resurrection? I will grant you that there are many hymns which celebrate the resurrection of Christ, but how many celebrate the promise of the resurrection of Christian believers? Again, among the many thousands of books which expound various aspects of the Christian faith — the sovereignty of God, the person and work of Christ, the doctrine of justification, of sanctification, of assurance, of the church etc., etc. — of all these many thousands of books how many do you know of which are devoted to the subject of the resurrection of the body? Or let me bring the question right down to the personal level; has the doctrine of bodily resurrection been a significant constituent in your own thinking and hope concerning eternal life? So then, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is presently suffering from neglect, a neglect which is reflected by the present indifference, even among Bible believing people, over the mode of disposal of the bodies of the dead.

But more serious than this neglect and indifference is the contemporary undermining of this doctrine, even among Evangelical writers. We shall see more of this below.

In the face of such neglect, indifference, and even opposition, it is appropriate that we should take a moment to look again at this important doctrine of our faith. In this study

we will focus our attention chiefly on 1 Corinthians 15. Our plan is to look firstly at the nature of the Corinthian heresy — or perhaps more accurately *this* Corinthian heresy. We shall then note what Paul has to say in opposition to these heretics, firstly as to the Biblical significance of death, and secondly on the necessity of bodily resurrection.

## The Corinthian Heresy

Paul does not give us a detailed account of the teaching of those whom he is opposing, he simply tells us that they said that there was to be no resurrection of the dead. From verses 35 and following of 1 Corinthians 15 it seems likely that this group within the Corinthian church treated the doctrine of bodily resurrection as an absurdity (note the similarity of the question and answer to that recorded in Matt. 22:23-33). Further than this we can only make some intelligent guesses as to the exact nature of the Corinthian heresy.

Corinth was one of the major centres of Greek culture at this time. Another such centre of Greek learning was the city of Athens. In Acts 17 we read of the response to Paul's preaching in Athens. At first the Athenians were eager to hear more, for they thought that Paul was teaching a new philosophy. But when they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of the dead many mocked him and had no further time for his teaching (Acts 17:32). To the Greek the doctrine of the resurrection of the body was an absurdity.

Greek religious philosophy commonly distinguished between two worlds, the world of the spirit, of thought and ideas, and the world of matter, the universe around us including our physical bodies with all their senses and passions. According to this Greek view, the world of the spirit is the higher and more perfect world, the material world being inferior, less perfect, or even positively evil. Man's present problem — according to this view — is not that he is a sinner, separated from God by his sin and rebellion, but that his spirit is at present trapped within the prison house of the body. The body with its earthly passions drags the spirit down to the level of the earthly and prevents it from having communion with God, the Lord of spirits. Redemption — according to this view — consists not in the forgiveness of sins and union with God in Christ but in the release of the human spirit from its imprisonment within the physical body. Only when the spirit is freed from the lower world of the body and of the material universe, can there be any true spiritual fellowship between man and God. Those holding such views therefore looked forward to death and embraced it readily (even to the extent of taking their own lives) believing that in death the spirit would be freed from all imperfections. For such, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is a patent absurdity. It would mean the very opposite of 'redemption', it would mean a further imprisonment of the spirit in the lower and inferior world of matter.

Though we cannot be certain as to the exact nature of the Corinthian heresy, it is not unlikely that this heretical group were teaching similar Greek views to those outlined above.

Before we go on to look at Paul's response to this denial of bodily resurrection I would like to make one comment. It seems to me that our Evangelical piety is often all too similar to that of Greek religion. All too often we think of redemption in terms of the spirit's escape from the body into union with God. Moreover, we tend to think of eternity in wholly spiritualistic or ethereal terms — in particular, in terms of the spirit's escape from earth to heaven.

This popular misconception is not so much totally wrong as it is a dangerous half truth. It is quite true that, at death, though the body is buried in the earth, the spirit of the believer is immediately present with the Lord. It is for this reason that Paul can say, 'We know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. . . . We . . . would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord' (2 Cor. 5:6-8). This, then, is a proper expression of the immediate hope of the Christian at death. Nevertheless, it should be quite evident that Paul is not here describing the final state of the Christian. Redemption is not complete until the body of each Christian man and woman is raised from the dust. The Christian hope is therefore not for the abandonment of the body but for its regeneration.

Similarly, it is quite true that, *because of the fall*, this world is a world of sin and corruption, 'under the control of the evil one' (1 Jn. 5:19, see also Jn. 14:30, 2 Cor. 4:4, Gal. 1:4 etc.). This world is destined for judgment. But our hope is not for the abandonment of the created world but for its regeneration for, 'in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness' (2 Peter 3:13).

As we look at this controversy we must look to ourselves that we do not fall into the same 'spiritualistic' heresy as these Corinthians. We need to have distinctively Biblical views of death and of 'immortality.'

## **The Biblical Significance of Death**

The Biblical view of death is summed up by Paul in verses 21-22 of 1 Corinthians 15. It may be stated quite simply: death is the result of sin (see also Paul's own commentary on these two verses in Rom. 5:12ff.). We are subject to death because Adam and Eve disobeyed God; had they never fallen into sin Adam and Eve would not have died.

In Genesis 2:17 God tells Adam that he may eat from any tree of the garden except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. On the day that he eats from that tree he will certainly die. Subsequently, Adam and Eve do eat of the tree and are cast out of the garden of Eden, out from the presence of God. From that day onward they live under sentence of death (for this as a perfectly proper interpretation of, 'on the day that you . . . you will certainly die' see 1 Kings 2:36-46). In Genesis 3:17-19 we read that God says, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, "You must not eat of it," Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for

you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.’ Man no longer enjoys life in the earth and before God as he did at the first. The created world round about him no longer ministers to him the unmixed blessings of God; it is now also the mediator of God’s wrath, it ministers to him in death. The sentence has gone out against him and is executed day by day until at last his life in the earth is no more and his body is returned to the dust from which it was created. Death, physical death, is thus the consummate judgment of God upon sin, it is the destruction of all that God originally intended for man — life before him in the midst of a perfect creation.

Here then is the clear Biblical teaching concerning death; but there are few, even among Evangelical writers, who hold to this view. There is a popular heresy abroad today amongst Evangelicals that Adam’s sin did not cause his physical death but only spiritual death — the spiritual separation between man and God. Such a view is necessary to all those who believe in an evolutionary origin of the present world. Evolution requires that death be part of the creative process, present in the world from the beginning. But the clear Biblical teaching is that death and decay are the result of Adam’s sin: there was no death or decay in the world before the fall. If we are to appreciate the Biblical teaching concerning the resurrection of the body then we must have a Biblical view of death — bodily death and decay. If we are to have a Biblical view of death then we must return to a Biblical view of the world — of the manner of its creation and the nature of its original perfection.

We have seen above that death, physical death, is the consummate judgment of God upon sinful man. Physical death is thus the standing proof that we are sinful and corrupt men and women, those who by nature, by natural constitution, are under the wrath of God. Death is no release from life under the curse; it is rather the consummate visitation of God’s curse, the final outpouring of God’s wrath upon man.

What does death mean for those outside of Christ? Perhaps we have seen someone, perhaps even a close friend or relative, who has been suffering from some painful and terminal disease. Then we hear of their death, and before we know it we may think or even say, ‘What a merciful release.’ That we are all guilty of such thinking only shows how much we need to be careful to conform every thought of our minds to the revelation of God in Scripture. The death of the ungodly is no merciful release; they have not escaped from this lower world of pain and suffering into a higher world of heavenly bliss. On the contrary, the pain and suffering of this life is for them only a foretaste of the terrible and eternal sufferings of hell. Death then, is no release from a life of suffering but is the consummate outpouring of God’s wrath.

What does death mean for the Christian? Again, it would be wrong to view death simply as a welcome release, as if death were the Christian’s friend. Death is the enemy of the Christian (1 Cor. 15:26), it is a reminder to us of our sinful imperfection and of the fate which we deserve. Just as the Christian is not exempt from pain and suffering in this life so (unless the Lord return) he is not exempt from death. The Christian inhabits (though

he no longer belongs to) this fallen world and he is still subject to its curse. But for the Christian, the sufferings of this life and their consummation in death are no longer the foretaste of the sufferings of hell. On the contrary, for him death is the *last* enemy. He must die because of Adam's sin but he dies in Christ having the promise of resurrection life.

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