

The Resurrection of the Body

“Spiritism has affected the teaching of the Christian Church more than is often realised. Most people in the Christian Church today do not seem to believe truly in the resurrection of the body. All they believe is that we shall continue to live in some other realm. That is not the Biblical teaching, which is that we shall live in the body on this renewed, renovated, regenerated earth.” D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 8:17-39*, p.89

A Most Neglected Doctrine

The resurrection of the body is arguably the most neglected of the central doctrines of our faith.

There is little argument that the resurrection of the body is central to the Christian faith. The Christian faith centres in the death and resurrection of Christ: at the heart Gospel proclamation is the death and resurrection of that particular body. It is precisely for this reason that, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul declares that those who deny the doctrine of bodily resurrection 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 an affirmation 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 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, justification by faith, sanctification, the nature and calling of the church ... etc. - of all of these many thousands of books, how many can you name which are devoted to the subject of the resurrection of the body? Or, to bring the question right down to a personal level, has the doctrine of bodily resurrection been a significant constituent in your own thinking and hope concerning eternal life?

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is presently suffering neglect. But even 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.

It is the purpose of this present study to counter such neglect, indifference and opposition by focusing attention on this vital doctrine of our faith. This study will focus primarily on 1 Corinthians 15. We shall look first at the nature of the Corinthian heresy (or perhaps, more accurately *this* Corinthian heresy). We shall then look at Paul’s argument as he opposes these false views, and in so doing we shall look at the Biblical significance of death and of the consequent necessity for bodily resurrection.

The Corinthian anti-resurrection Heresy

Paul does not give us a detailed account of the teaching of those whom he is opposing at Corinth, he simply tells us that they claimed that there was to be no resurrection of the dead. From verse 35 and onwards of 1 Corinthians 15 it seems likely that this group within the Christian church treated the doctrine of bodily resurrection as an absurdity (note the similarity of the question and its answer to that recorded in Matthew 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 was Athens. In Acts 17 we read of the response of 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. However, 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 spirit, of thought and of 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 is 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 currently 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 such a view, consists not in the forgiveness of sins and union with God through Christ, but in the release of the human spirit from its imprisonment within the 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 God and man. 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 the shadowy world of imperfections. For those holding to such views, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body was a patent absurdity. It would mean the very opposite of 'salvation', it would mean a re-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 a heretical group were teaching views similar to those outlined above.

We need to acknowledge that popular 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. We tend to think of eternity wholly in spiritualistic, ethereal terms, in terms of 'escape from earth to heaven.

This popular misconception is not so much wholly wrong as it is a dangerous half-truth. It is quite true that, at death, though the body is buried in the earth and returns to dust, the spirit of the believer is immediately in the presence of 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 is a proper expression of the immediate hope of the Christian at death. However, it should be quite evident that Paul is not here describing the *final* hope 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 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 John 5:19, see also John 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4 etc.). This world is destined for judgement. 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).

We need to look to ourselves to ensure that we do not fall into the same 'spiritualistic' heresy that affected the Corinthians. We need to have distinctively Biblical views of death and of immortality.

The Significance of Death According to Scripture

The Biblical view of death is summed up by Paul in verses 21 and 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 Romans 5:12-21). We are subject to death because Adam and Eve disobeyed God; had they never fallen into sin, they, and we, would not have been subject to death.

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 from that tree and are driven out of the garden of Eden, out from the presence of God. From that day on they live under sentence of death (that this may be a proper interpretation of, "on the day that you ... you will certainly die" is evident from 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 around him no longer ministers to him the unmixed blessings of God; it is now also the mediator of God's wrath, it ministers death to him. The sentence has gone against him and is executed day by day until at last his life on earth is no more and his body returns to the dust from which it was made. Death, physical death, is thus the consummate judgement of God upon sin; it is the destruction of all that God originally intended for man - life before him in a perfect creation.

This is the clear Biblical teaching concerning death. But there are many Evangelical writers who seem unhappy with this view of death. There is a popular heresy abroad among Evangelicals today that Adam's sin did not cause physical death but only spiritual death - separation from God. Such a view is necessary to 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. The Bible teaches that death and decay are the result of Adam's sin; neither had any place in the world before the fall. If we are to appreciate the Biblical teaching concerning the resurrection of the body, we must first have a Biblical view of death. A Biblical view of death is dependent also on a Biblical view of the world - of the manner of its creation and the nature of its original perfection.

Death, physical death, is the consummate judgement of God upon corrupt mankind. Physical death is therefore the standing proof that we are sinful and corrupt men and women; by nature, by natural constitution, we are under the wrath of God. Death is no release from life under curse, it is rather the consummate visitation of God's curse, the final outpouring of his judgement upon us.

What does death mean for those outside of Christ? Perhaps we have seen someone, perhaps even a close relative or friend, who has suffered a painful and terminal disease. We hear of their death and, before we know it we may think, or even say, "It was a merciful release." The fact that we are all guilty of such thinking only demonstrates just how much we need to be careful to conform every thought of our minds to the revelation of God in Scripture. The death of those who do not know Christ is no merciful release; they have not escaped from the lower world of pain and suffering into a higher world of heavenly bliss. On the contrary, the pain and sufferings of this life are for them only a foretaste of the far more terrible and eternal sufferings of hell. Death is no release from a life of suffering but is the consummation of the judgement of God.

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 (unless the Lord return) so also he is not exempt from death. Though the Christian may no longer belong to this fallen world, he still lives in it and remains subject to its curse. However, for the Christian, the sufferings of this life and their consummation in death are no longer a foretaste of the sufferings of hell. For the Christian, death is the *last* enemy. He must die because of Adam's sin but he dies in Christ, having the promise of resurrection life.

Death is not part of the natural process, not part of the way the world was created to be, it is the judgement of God upon sin. For those who are not Christians it is a foretaste of the eternal judgement of hell. For the Christian, death is the last enemy, his last taste of God's general judgement upon a fallen world. From that point on he knows only the blessings of life with the Lord.

Redemption made Complete in resurrection

What is redemption? Redemption involves the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7), but it includes far more: redemption also requires that the effects of sin be undone, it includes re-creation or regeneration. In

particular, the death and curse which resulted from Adam's sin must be overthrown if mankind are to be redeemed.

Death, the dissolution of the body, is the result of Adam's sin. Consequently, while the body lies in the dust, sin still has some dominion in the world; it has brought what God has created to dust. The body returned to the dust is a powerful symbol of God's judgement upon sin, the consummation of a life under curse. Only when the body is raised from the dust will sin's work be completely undone and our redemption made perfect. Only "when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality", shall our victory over sin be made complete (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

Paul sums up the way in which God has accomplished our redemption in 1 Cor. 15:15:21,22, "Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." The presupposition of Paul's argument is the unity of Christ and his people. Christ and his people are so identified that their sin is sin which he bears. In consequence, the Lord Jesus Christ endured the penalty of sin, becoming subject to death. Jesus' death, his physical death, the dissolution of his body, was a demonstration that he suffers the judgement which God has pronounced on sinful man. His burial, a central part of the Christian confession, was the return of his body to the dust, in accordance with God's judgement declared on sinful man in Genesis 3.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, raised by the power of God. God's wrath against our sin is satisfied. Our sin is forgiven and death, the power of sin, is overthrown. We confess that Christ rose *bodily* from the dead; it was not merely that his spirit returned to the Father while his body remained in the dust. If this had been the case then sin would still have some dominion over him, it would have held the second Adam in the dust of death. If Christ were to be victorious over sin and all its powers it was vital that he should rise bodily from the grave. This is why Paul argues so strongly that, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith ... you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:14,17). There is no redemption without the overthrowing of sin's consequences; no redemption without the resurrection of the body.

The unity of Christ and his people has application as much to Christ's resurrection as it does to his death. Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection and its consequences as follows: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). The firstfruits, as the name suggests, were the first of the ripened fruit of tree or field, a token of the harvest to come. The resurrection of Christ is a token and guarantee of the future resurrection life of all of God's people. At the return of Christ, our bodies will be raised and made like Christ's glorious body (Phil. 3:20,21); then, and only then, will our redemption be complete. Redemption is not complete, sin is not completely vanquished, until our bodies which sin had brought to dust are raised in incorruption.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is central to the Biblical concept of redemption. Adam's sin brought the judgement of God upon the whole universe. The curse of God rests not only upon mankind, making *us* subject to death, but upon the whole of creation, making it subject to decay and vanity (Gen. 3 and Rom. 8:20). If the redemptive work of God in Christ includes the undoing of the results of sin, then it must involve not only the resurrection of our bodies but also the regeneration of the entire creation. The resurrection of the body is part of the doctrine of the new creation. Sin brought death and decay into the world, redemption means resurrection life both for our bodies and for this sin-torn world (see Rom. 8:19-23 and the quotation from Martyn Lloyd-Jones at the beginning of this article).

In summary: the sin of man results in death, the dissolution of the body; the redemption of man involves the resurrection of the body. If the body remains in the ground then the effects of sin continue. Redemption is not complete with the return of the spirit to God at death, but only when the body is raised in incorruption to inhabit the new creation. This redemption is accomplished in Christ's death and resurrection. Sin brought God's creation to the dust, and Christ to the grave, but the bodily resurrection of Christ is the ground and assurance (earnest) of the new creation.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is not a piece of speculative or abstract dogma but is a profoundly practical truth. At the end of a lengthy treatment of this doctrine, Paul closes with a word of exhortation, "Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give

yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). The "therefore" makes it evident that the basis for this exhortation to patient and consistent godliness is the doctrine of bodily resurrection. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body, as part of the doctrine of the new creation, assures us that there is a rich inheritance in store for God's people - they will have a share in the Kingdom of God. This in turn assures us that our present labour for the Lord will bear fruit and will be richly rewarded (1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 4:16-18). We are therefore encouraged to spend ourselves in labour for the Lord, for though all the work of fallen man is but a vanity which ends in the dust of death, we have the hope of resurrection life and know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord.

History

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