

Death's Prisoners Released

***"Thou hast
ascended on high,
Thou hast led in
procession a body
of captives."***

***—Psalm 68:18,
Rotherham
Emphasized Bible***

APPEARING IN THE FEBRU-

ary issue of *The Dawn* was an article titled, "The Surety of the Resurrection." In this issue, we will address some additional scriptural details concerning this all-important Bible teaching. As millions

in the professed Christian world this month remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, we believe it is appropriate at this time to glean further lessons on this vital subject. It is our hope that our readers will not only continue to have faith in the resurrection, but also come to a better understanding of its many harmonious details found in the Word of God.

Millions will likely agree that, apart from his death on the cross, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the most momentous event in mankind's history. The Master's faithful followers at the time rejoiced to realize that he was no longer dead, although they needed the assurances they received by the "many infallible proofs" of his

resurrection in order to be fully convinced of the outstanding miracle which had taken place. (Acts 1:3) As Israelites, the disciples would know of the many miracles which had been performed in the past on behalf of God's chosen people. There was the crossing of the Red Sea, and forty years later of the River Jordan. There was the deliverance of Daniel from the mouths of the lions, and the protection of the three young Hebrews in the fiery furnace in which Nebuchadnezzar sought to destroy them. However, these miracles of the past, and those performed even by Jesus prior to his death, were eclipsed by the glory that was manifested in the resurrection of their Master.

A majority of the people in Jesus' day did not believe that he was raised from the dead, and those who did were not aware of the full significance of this event. This is still true. In professed Christian lands, churches are usually filled by throngs which are glad to participate in the services commemorating Jesus' resurrection. However, the greater part of these do not grasp the import of this mighty miracle performed nearly two thousand years ago. Even in the days of the apostles, there were those right within the church of Christ who did not believe that he had been raised from the dead.—I Cor. 15:12,13

Writing to the church at Corinth earlier in this same chapter, Paul said, "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he

was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.”—I Cor. 15:3-8

Then Paul points out to the Corinthian brethren how futile Christian faith and hope would be if Christ were not raised from the dead. He wrote, “If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.”—vss. 14-18

It is important to note the emphasis the Scriptures place on the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. Millions profess to believe that Jesus raised himself from the dead, but the Bible does not teach this. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.”—Acts 2:22-24

ISSUES FROM DEATH

David wrote, “He that is our God is the God of salvation; and unto GOD the Lord belong the issues from death.” (Ps. 68:20) *Rotherham* translates the last phrase of this text, “escapes from death.” Our Heavenly Father is the God of salvation because in his plan he has provided for escape from death by means of a resurrection from the dead. There could be no salvation for the human race if all were to remain in death. Thus we find that the great theme of salvation set forth in the Word of God is predicated on the assurance that those “in the graves” are to be awakened from the “sleep” of death, and given a full opportunity to attain perfect, everlasting life.—John 5:28; 11:11-14

This is peculiar to the great hope of salvation set forth in the Word of God. Of all the religions in the world, virtually none speaks of a resurrection of the dead except the religion of the Bible. The principal reason for this is that the Bible alone acknowledges and emphasizes the reality of death. Most all other religions insist that there is no death, because they believe in the teaching that man has a “soul” which is immortal, and hence he cannot truly die. Such a thought is found nowhere in the Scriptures. Quite naturally, if the dead are more alive than the living, there would be no place for the resurrection of the dead.

Paul presents the matter in its proper light when, as previously quoted, he explains that if there is no resurrection of the dead then our preaching and faith are both meaningless, for this would mean that those who have “fallen asleep in Christ are perished.” Paul saw in the resurrection

of Jesus an assurance that the entire plan of God, based upon his promises to restore the dead to life, would be carried out. Thus he wrote, "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so [all] in Christ shall . . . be made alive."—I Cor. 15:20-22

A thought akin to this is expressed by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:8. Quoting from the marginal translation, this text reads concerning Christ, "When he ascended up on high, he led a multitude of captives." This is a quotation from our opening scripture which, according to the *Rotherham* translation, states that Jesus led "in procession a body of captives." While the reference in these texts is particularly to Jesus' ascension and exaltation "on high," they are also vitally associated with his resurrection. It was when he was raised from the sleep of death that Jesus was highly exalted to the divine nature, far above every name that is named, and forty days later he ascended to his Father to be "at his own right hand."—Eph. 1:18-23

The first of these captives in death whom Jesus leads forth are his own body members. Jesus, together with these, is referred to by Paul as "Christ the firstfruits." (I Cor. 15:23) That Jesus' faithful footstep followers are included in the "firstfruits" is confirmed by James, who wrote, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." (James 1:18) Concerning those who faithfully follow the Lamb, we also read, "These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to

the Lamb.” (Rev. 14:4) The firstfruits class is very small in number compared with the multitudes of “afterfruits” which will be led forth from their captivity in death.—Rev. 7:4; 14:1,3

The Old Testament refers numerous times to the dead masses of mankind as being “prisoners,” or captives, in death, and their awakening as a release from captivity. (Isa. 49:9; 61:1) After mentioning the death state of the young, old, rich, poor, rulers, and even the wicked, Job adds, “There,” in death, “the prisoners rest together.”—Job 3:18

In Ezekiel 16:53, the resurrection is likened to the release of captives, or prisoners. We quote, “When I shall bring again their captivity, the captivity of Sodom and her daughters, and the captivity of Samaria and her daughters, then will I bring again the captivity of thy [Israel’s] captives in the midst of them.” The expression, “bring again their captivity,” as found in this verse and in others to be subsequently quoted, means to “turn back” their captivity.

We are assured that the Gentiles as well as the Israelites will participate in that glorious future release of the prisoners of death. In Jeremiah 48:47, the Lord says, “I will bring again the captivity of Moab in the latter days.” Of the Ammonites we read, “I will bring again the captivity of the children of Ammon, saith the LORD.” (chap. 49:6) The Elamites will also be released from their captivity. We read, “It shall come to pass in the latter days, that I will bring again the captivity of Elam, saith the LORD.” (vs. 39) These are but some of the vast multitudes who are to be “turned back”—led forth from their captivity in death.

In presenting the order of the resurrection, Paul said, "Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are [become] Christ's at [during] his coming [Greek, presence]." (I Cor. 15:22,23) Christ's presence here referred to is the period of his kingdom, and Paul assures us that he must reign until all enemies are put under his feet, and the great enemy Death is destroyed. (vss. 25,26) It will be during this period that the multitudes who have died in unbelief will be awakened, given a knowledge of the truth concerning Christ, and an opportunity to accept him and live forever as restored humans here on earth.

THE RESURRECTION

Paul said to Felix, a Roman governor, "This I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets: And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust." (Acts 24:14,15) While the word resurrection is not used in the Old Testament, it is assuring to realize how many times the hope of the resurrection by the "fathers" is set forth by the use of language such as found in the foregoing text.

We have already noted some of the Old Testament references to the release of those who are held captive in death. Moses referred to the resurrection as a returning from destruction. In a prayer to God quoted in the Psalms, he said, "Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men." (Ps. 90:3) Isaiah employed the same thought in a promise of the resurrection. He wrote,

“The ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isa. 35:10) This same promise is repeated almost word for word in Isaiah 51:11. Paul tells us emphatically that the ransom is “for all”—none are left out.—I Tim. 2:6

“The LORD killeth, and maketh alive,” prayed Hannah. “He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.” (I Sam. 2:1,6) This reveals her assurance, even in that ancient period of the judges, that there was to be a resurrection of the dead. Hannah believed that the Lord would not leave the people in *sheol*—the grave. There is also that comforting promise to mothers who have lost their children in death. God said, “Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: . . . They shall come again from the land of the enemy [the great enemy—death]. And there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD, that thy children shall come again to their own border.”—Jer. 31:16,17

FROM SLEEP

David wrote concerning “the sleep of death.” (Ps. 13:3) Some of the Old Testament promises liken the resurrection to an awakening from sleep. The Lord promised Daniel, “Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.” (Dan. 12:2) The word “many” is not used here to imply that only some of those in death will be awakened, but rather to emphasize the great number, or multitude, of those who are dead and are to be awakened from “the sleep of death.” They are all asleep “in the dust of the earth,” the text reads. This expression

reminds us that those to be awakened from death are those upon whom the penalty fell, through father Adam—"Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Gen. 3:19) It is in keeping with Paul's words, "In Adam all die."—I Cor. 15:22

The Prophet Isaiah wrote, "Thy dead men shall live, . . . Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead." Here, again, the dead are said to be in the dust of the earth, sleeping there until the time when, by divine power through Christ, "the earth shall cast out the dead."—Isa. 26:19

THE JUST AND UNJUST

In his speech to Felix, Paul mentioned the resurrection of "the just and unjust" as being set forth "in the law and in the prophets." (Acts 24:14,15) The resurrection of both the just and the unjust is mentioned in God's promise to Daniel. We again quote: "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some [the just] to everlasting life, and some [the unjust] to shame and everlasting [or age lasting] contempt." The next verse points out further details concerning the resurrection of the just—"They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." (Dan. 12:2,3) Jesus corroborates this when he says that the righteous, or just, shall "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.—Matt. 13:43

Jesus also referred to the resurrection of the just and the unjust, speaking of these two classes as those who have done "good" and others who have

done “evil.” After saying that all in the “tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth,” he states that those who have done good will receive “a resurrection of life,” and they that have done evil will come to “a resurrection of judgment.”—John 5:28,29, *New American Standard Bible*

The distinction here is between those who receive their full reward immediately upon being awakened from the sleep of death, and those who come forth to judgment. The former includes the faithful of all ages, and the latter the unfaithful. The faithful receive life. For the overcoming footstep followers of Jesus during the present Gospel Age, it will be immortal life on the divine plane. (Rom. 2:7; II Pet. 1:4) For the faithful Ancient Worthies of past ages, it will be perfect human life here on the earth. Their reward of life is earthly because they lived prior to the special “call” of the present age. However, they will be given important responsibilities as “princes in all the earth” during the Messianic kingdom. (Ps. 45:16) The Scriptures also identify a “great multitude,” those less faithful than Christ’s “bride” who sits “on the throne” with him. These less faithful ones will also come forth to life, and will live on the spirit plane as servants “before the throne” in the spiritual phase of the kingdom.—Rev. 7:9,13-17

All others will come forth to a resurrection of judgment or, as the Greek text states it, to a *krisis*. Our English word “crisis” conveys a similar thought. It means that the awakened prisoners of death will be confronted with a crisis, in that if they wish to continue living and to be restored to human perfection they will have to accept the provisions of divine

grace through Christ, and obey the laws of his kingdom.

It will be a turning point for them. They will be fully enlightened concerning the issues involved. If they then choose to turn to the Lord and serve him with their whole heart, they will be “judged” worthy of everlasting life on the earth. On the other hand, if they turn away from Christ and prove to be incorrigible and willfully wicked, they will die in what the Bible describes as “the second death,” from which there will be no awakening.—Rev. 20:14,15; 21:8; Acts 3:23

WITH WHAT BODY?

The Apostle Paul raised an important question concerning the resurrection, and answered it. We quote: “Some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. . . . There are . . . celestial [heavenly] bodies, and bodies terrestrial [earthly]: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. . . . So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: . . . It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body [in the resurrection], and there is a spiritual body.”—I Cor. 15:35-44

Certain important points should be noted in Paul’s reasoning. One is that in the resurrection the body

that has died is not the one which is resurrected. (vss. 36,37) Another is that some in the resurrection will have celestial, or heavenly bodies, and that others will have terrestrial, or earthly bodies. (vss. 40-44) The Lord is the one who determines this. He “giveth it” a body as it pleases him, according to the “seed” planted.—vs. 38

The “it” is the “seed,” the “bare grain” that is sown in death. This is the mind, personality, or character of the individual. When an infant is born, while it has a brain, it has not yet developed a personality or character. These are developed by the impressions received upon the brain during life, through the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. What the mind does with these impressions, how it reacts to them and governs the behavior of the individual, is what determines the sort of person the infant eventually becomes upon maturity.

Followers of the Master were essentially no different in outlook and behavior than mankind in general until, by God’s providence, they were brought into contact with his Word of truth. Through that Word they received the invitation to devote their lives to his service and to run “toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:14) Forthwith, these began to meditate on the heavenly promises of God’s Word. Their minds began to be “renewed” as they endeavored to know and to do the Father’s will. (Rom. 12:1-3) Through the influences of the heavenly promises, these set their “affection”—their mind and character—“on things above, not on things on the earth.”—Col. 3:1,2

Thus these disciples of Christ are prepared for a heavenly body, which God will give to them in the resurrection. This heavenly body will be their “own” in the sense that it will be the sort of body which will suit best the individual spiritual personality which they have developed. Prior to death this spiritual personality, called also by Paul a “new creature,” depends upon a “corrupt” body in which to operate, but in the resurrection this “corruptible must put on incorruption,” which, for the faithful followers of the Lamb, will be immortality.—I Cor. 15:53; II Cor. 5:14-17

Paul’s letter to the brethren at Corinth is addressed to those who were “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.” (I Cor. 1:1,2) For this reason he stresses more particularly the resurrection of those who will attain immortality. It is this that he describes as THE resurrection of THE dead, as indicated in the Greek text. (chap. 15:42) However, Paul reminds us that in the resurrection there will also be those who will receive “natural,” or “terrestrial” bodies. The Ancient Worthies will be the first of this class, and their terrestrial bodies and accompanying characters will be perfect from the start. They did not come under the influence of spiritual promises, but they set their affections upon the hope of a restored paradise on earth, and by faith desired for themselves to live in perfection in that paradise. Perfect human bodies will therefore be appropriate for them.

The unbelieving, unjust world of mankind certainly have not developed a mind and character to suit them for a spiritual body. When released from their captivity in death, God will give them a new

body, capable of perfection. However, their desires, ambitions, and aims—their character—will be that which they have “sown” in this life. Thankfully, those—and we believe it will be the vast majority—who appreciate the blessings of that new day in which they are awakened from the sleep of death, and grasp those opportunities of belief and obedience, will be assisted up the ladder of progress, developing along the way a righteous character, toward human perfection. The Prophet Isaiah likens this process to traveling over “The way of holiness.”—Isa. 35:8

DIVINE POWER SUFFICIENT

Some may wonder how an individual’s thoughts can be restored when the brain in which they are developed is destroyed in death. This is possible only through the almighty power of the Creator. The psalmist wrote concerning him, “He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names.” (Ps. 147:4) Man, with all his scientific knowledge and instruments, cannot do this, but God can. God, who knows the number and names of all the heavenly bodies in the whole vast universe, will have no difficulty remembering every thought impulse of every human brain and character that has ever existed. He will reproduce them in the freed prisoners of death to which he will give appropriate new bodies. How wonderfully this will fulfill the statement concerning him, “He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their griefs.”—vs. 3, marginal translation

Paul clearly sets forth the time sequence of the resurrection as it relates to those who receive celestial

bodies and those who receive terrestrial bodies. He says: "When this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"—I Cor. 15:54,55

The apostle here refers to the Old Testament promise, "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces." (Isa. 25:8) He explains that the fulfillment of this wonderful promise must wait until those who are seeking the prize of immortality have all attained—when "this mortal shall have put on immortality." Then will come the time for the releasing of all the remaining prisoners of death, and their restoration to human perfection, with the ability to obey God's law perfectly and live forever.

This is the great objective of the reign of Christ over the earth. "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (I Cor. 15:25,26) Thus will be fulfilled the promise of Revelation 21:4—"God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." Let us rejoice that Christ has been raised from the dead, and that it is he who will lead a "multitude of captives" forth from death, even all who have died. This is the hope of every true follower of the Master, and it is our hope for the whole world of mankind. ■