

Christ—the First Fruits of the Resurrection

***“Now Christ has
been raised from
the dead, the first
fruits of those who
are asleep.”***

***—I Corinthians
15:20, New
American
Standard Bible***

Preface: Many in the Christian world give special attention at this season of the year to the experiences and events associated with the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The pages of this year's March and April issues of "The Dawn" will likewise focus on this all-important theme. It is our hope that a review of some of the wonderful truths centered upon God's great gift of his "only begotten Son" will renew our faith in the divine purpose to soon bring to all mankind the promised blessings of his kingdom. May our consideration of these timely lessons stir us up to greater faithfulness in our daily walk with the Master.

ON SUNDAY MARCH 27, millions of people throughout the earth will celebrate the resurrection of Jesus

Christ from the dead. Many will participate in the religious ceremonies commemorating this important event with reverence and honor. Some will also use the occasion as an opportunity to gather together as families to enjoy the blessings of the day. The message contained in the thousands of sermons delivered on Easter Sunday will, no doubt, temporarily give a measure of hope to some. In general, however, the true significance of the resurrection of Christ from the dead will not be appreciated, principally because it is not understood.

The resurrection of God's "only begotten Son" bears a vital relationship to the great plan of the ages which the Creator is working out for the ultimate blessing of the condemned and dying race of mankind. (John 3:16) It is not a suggested plan, that may or may not come to fruition. God's plan will be carried through to a successful conclusion. With human plans it is different. Many are inclined to say: If proper laws can be enacted; if the people will do this or that; if the right individuals can be elected to governmental office; if the churches take a greater leadership role in human affairs; or, if this or that could be done, then the world would be a much better place in which to live.

There is much suffering in the world today, but this is not new. It has been true throughout all the ages since creation. Now, however, in addition to the usual afflictions associated with the reign of sin and death, the world is passing through a period described prophetically in the Scriptures as a "time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation." (Dan. 12:1) This distress is worldwide, and often people wonder whether there truly is a

God in heaven, and if so, why he does not seem to be doing something about his suffering human creation. The true answer to these questions points out the difference between God's plan for mankind and those of fallen human endeavor.

The Bible points out that ever since man transgressed divine law in the Garden of Eden, God has been doing something to extricate his human creatures from death, which was the result of man's transgression. God is not looking for man to inform him concerning what he should do about human suffering. God has his own plan which, from century to century, and from age to age, has continued to move forward toward completion. This plan calls for the elimination of all human suffering, including the destruction of "the last enemy . . . death." (I Cor. 15:26) The fulfillment of this plan is not limited to certain generations, but applies to Adam and Eve, and to all who have lived since that time. God loves those of his human creation who lived before the Flood just as much as he loves the people of today and, indeed, every intervening generation. When we read that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," the reference is to God's love for the entire human race.—John 3:16

EXPERIENCE WITH EVIL

God saw the need for all mankind to experience the terrible results of sin. His design was that the earth should be filled with his human creation. This was to be accomplished by means of procreation: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth," he

instructed Adam and Eve. (Gen. 1:28, *NASB*) God permitted our first parents to transgress his law. He knew that an experience with evil would be the best way to create within them a determined resolve to resist sin and to walk in the ways of righteousness.

God knew that this experience with evil would likewise benefit all his human creatures, so he has allowed sin and death to continue throughout the ages. He will permit this until a sufficient number have been born to properly fill the earth. Then he will intervene on behalf of suffering humanity. This arrangement does not suggest that God has been disinterested in his human creatures. He has continued to love mankind, and, through all the ages has been preparing for their deliverance from sin and death.

PROMISES OF GOD'S WORD

The outworking of God's plan is reflected in the many promises of his Word, beginning with Genesis and concluding with the Book of Revelation. When sentencing our first parents to death, God told Satan—symbolized by the serpent—that the seed of the woman would bruise his head, and that his seed would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman. (Gen. 3:15) This is very vague language. However, in the light of the subsequent unfolding of the plan of God, we find that these words spoken to the serpent are a reference to the final destruction of Satan, and evil, which will come about as a result of the sacrificial work of Christ.

In Revelation 20:1,2, the seed spoken of in Genesis is referred to as an “angel,” and is seen coming “down from heaven” and laying hold upon “that

old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan,” and binding him a thousand years. This thousand-year period is also spoken of as the reign of Christ. (Rev. 20:4,6) The blessings to mankind as a result of Christ’s thousand year reign are depicted later in this and the following chapter of Revelation. These blessings are so far-reaching that the dead are seen to be “delivered up” from “hell [Greek: *Hades*, which means the grave],” for the purpose of being brought back to favor and fellowship with God. (vss. 12-15; chap. 21:1-4) Once this glorious work begins, the people will no longer be asking why God does not do something about human suffering.

“SEED” PLEDGE TO ABRAHAM

Subsequent to the Flood, God made a wonderful promise to Abraham, which again revealed his intention to do something about human suffering. God said to Abraham that through his “seed” he would bless “all families of the earth.” (Gen. 12:3; 22:18) When Abraham demonstrated his faith and loyalty by his willingness to offer up his son Isaac in sacrifice, God confirmed his promise “by an oath.”—Heb. 6:13-18

In confirming the promise, God said to Abraham that his seed would “possess the gate of his enemies.” (Gen. 22:17) In ancient times, when cities were walled for protection against enemies, those who possessed or had power over the gates actually controlled the cities. God’s promise, therefore, implied that Abraham’s seed would be a conquering hero. Thus, the thought of sacrifice, as in the offering of his son Isaac, and the idea of rulership, were both associated with the Heavenly Father’s promise to

Abraham. Throughout the Old Testament, and on into the New Testament, God's promises continue to dwell on these two aspects of the divine plan of salvation.

A PEACEMAKER AND RULER

When Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, approached death, he bestowed blessings upon his sons—his natural “seed.” His blessing upon Judah was in the nature of a prophecy concerning the coming of that great ruler implied in the promise made to his grandfather. Jacob refers to this one as “Shiloh”—meaning tranquility or a peaceful one—and said that unto him would “the gathering [Hebrew: obedience] of the people be.” (Gen. 49:8-12) He also spoke of this one who would come out of Judah as a “lion.” The Hebrew people were in Egypt at that time, and in the Egyptian government a lion symbolized the right to rule. Consequently, we again have the thought of rulership associated with the promised seed.

In Isaiah 52:10, this coming ruler is referred to as the “holy arm” of Jehovah. The promise is that this “arm” will be revealed “in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” In the next chapter of Isaiah's prophecy, there is revealed the fact that this “arm of the LORD” must first be sacrificed, “brought as a lamb to the slaughter,” that his rulership must wait until his sacrificial work is completed.—Isa. 53:1,7

A prophecy of the birth of the “seed” of promise is recorded in Isaiah 9:6,7, where we read, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the

government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end. . . . The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

MOUNTAIN SYMBOLIC OF KINGDOM

When Israel became a kingdom, her kings ruled from literal Mount Zion in Jerusalem. This was a theocratic government in which the successive kings represented God, and were said to sit upon “the throne of the LORD.” (I Chron. 29:23) In the promises of a future kingdom spoken of by the prophets, God used the term “mount Zion” to symbolize the Messianic kingdom. At other times, the prophets of God spoke of it simply as the “mountain of the LORD.” (Joel 2:32; Obad. 17,21; Mic. 4:2,7; Zech. 8:3) Reassuring, indeed, are the many promises concerning “mount Zion” and the “mountain of the LORD.”

In one such prophecy, we read: “In this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have

waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—Isa. 25:6-9

The Prophet Daniel also forecast the establishment of this “mountain of the Lord.” In Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, in which the king of Babylon saw a humanlike image with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, and legs of iron, he gives us a preview of the reign and fall of four great Gentile powers, beginning with Babylon and ending with Rome. (Dan. 2:31-45) We recognize from Daniel’s interpretation of the dream that the head of the image represented the Babylonian Empire, and that the feet and toes of the image symbolize the divisions of the Roman Empire, the last of the four great Gentile powers. These “toes” were represented in the various states of Europe prior to World War I, which began in 1914.

In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a stone “cut out of the mountain without hands, which smote the image on its feet,” causing it to fall, break into pieces, and finally be blown away as “chaff.” Then the “stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth.” (vss. 34,35) Daniel interprets this to indicate that “in the days” of the rulers represented by the toes of the image “the God of heaven” would set up a kingdom. This “mountain,” or kingdom of the Lord, Daniel foretold, would not be given to other people, but would “stand for ever.”—vs. 44

Micah, another of God’s holy prophets, also records a prophecy in which the kingdom of the Lord is likened to a mountain. “In the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains,

and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it.”—Mic. 4:1-4

JESUS, THE PROMISED ONE

These and many other promises and prophecies gave the devout and believing Israelites a definite hope that God would one day send them a great Deliverer, one who would free them from foreign domination, and exalt them to a position of prominence among the nations. When Jesus came, some of the Israelites accepted him as the Messiah of promise. Andrew said to Peter, his brother, “We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ.”—John 1:40,41

All of Jesus’ true disciples had this understanding and belief. To them Jesus was the one whom God had sent to fulfill all the wonderful promises concerning a “seed,” “Shiloh,” the “holy arm” of Jehovah, the one called “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” They believed that he was to be the head

over God's ruling house in Jerusalem's Mount Zion, and the one who would set up a kingdom which would bless all nations with peace and security.

As Jesus proceeded with his ministry, his enthusiastic disciples became more and more convinced that he was indeed the promised Messiah. As he went about preaching concerning the kingdom, and illustrating its blessings by his miracles, they knew that the God of Israel must certainly be with this wonderful man. They believed that while he did not have an army, by the power of God so evident in his works, Israel under his leadership would be able to throw off the Roman yoke, become a free nation again, and under their Messiah extend the promised "mountain" of God's kingdom worldwide. Only a few days before he died, when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, he was hailed as king, the "Son of David," by a multitude of his enthusiastic supporters.—Matt. 21:7-11

CONSTERNATION AND BEWILDERMENT

Almost without warning, however, and contrary to the expectations of his disciples, Jesus was put to death by his enemies. What seemed even more bewildering to them was that he surrendered to his enemies, making no effort to release himself from the charges leveled against him. Naturally, while the disciples still maintained a flickering hope, they felt that a dead Messiah could not fulfill the promises made concerning him. How could Jesus now set up a kingdom, or be the Prince of Peace? How could he fulfill any of the things which had been foretold concerning him by God's prophets? Jesus was dead, and their expectations appeared dashed.

Their hopes, however, were soon revived. Even before the full impact of his death had reached into the disciples' consciousness, Jesus was raised from the dead. In the days and weeks following, he announced to them that "all power" had been given to him "in heaven and in earth." (Matt. 28:18) They did not at once comprehend fully all the implications of Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection. Through his various appearances to them, and finally the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples came to understand that Jesus would indeed establish the long-promised Messianic kingdom, and on a grander scale than they had ever before imagined. The Messiah was not only alive, but had been "highly exalted" to the divine nature, and was "set down at the right hand of the throne of God."—Phil. 2:8,9; Heb. 12:2

The disciples also learned that before the Messianic kingdom would be set up in the earth, a little company of faithful followers were to be selected from mankind, and prepared to live and reign with him when he returned at his Second Advent. This work has continued throughout the Gospel Age since Pentecost, but with the world in general knowing nothing about it. Those who have asked why God does not do something about human suffering have not realized that he has been preparing these associates of Christ to administer the laws of a government which will alleviate all human suffering, and even destroy death itself. (Rom. 8:16-23) Indeed, Jesus died on Calvary's cross to take the sinner's place in death, that all mankind might be given the opportunity to be restored to everlasting life upon the earth.—I Cor. 15:21,22

“IF CHRIST BE NOT RISEN”

There were some in Paul's day who did not believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. However, Paul wrote, “If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain [empty], and your faith is also vain [empty].” (I Cor. 15:14) Jesus died to redeem mankind from death, but a dead Redeemer could not restore those for whom he died. “If Christ be not risen,” then there is no “seed” of promise to bless all the families of the earth, and no one to fulfill all the wonderful Messianic promises given by the prophets. “If Christ be not risen,” there can never be a worldwide kingdom of peace and righteousness. How important indeed is the resurrection of Jesus in the outworking of God's plan of salvation.

Paul affirms, however, repeating the words of our opening text, “Now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.” (I Cor. 15:20, *NASB*) All the dead, Christians and non-Christians, are “asleep,” unconscious. Even Christians, those who are “fallen asleep in Christ,” have “perished” unless there is a resurrection of the dead. (vs. 18) Our assurance of the resurrection and of a future life for all who have died is, therefore, predicated on the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Christ became the “first fruits” of them that sleep, Paul stated. Together with him as part of the “first fruits” class are his faithful followers of the Gospel Age. (James 1:18; Rev. 14:4) These are brought forth from death in what the revelator describes as “the first resurrection.” (Rev. 20:4-6) The selection and training of these has required the entire Gospel Age. In addition, prior to the raising of the remainder of mankind, those ancient

servants of God, beginning with Abel, and on down to John the Baptist, will be brought forth from the sleep of death in what Paul describes as a “better resurrection.” (Heb. 11:1-40; Matt. 11:11) These will be the human representatives—“princes [rulers] in all the earth”—of the heavenly Christ class during the Messianic kingdom.—Ps. 45:16

Then will follow the general awakening of all the dead, “every man in his own order,” also made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. (I Cor. 15:23) What a blessed hope this is to hold out to the weary and fear-filled world of today. It is the hope that soon that glorious kingdom of promise is to manifest itself in “power and great glory” for the blessing of all the families of the earth. (Isa. 40:5; Matt. 24:30) It is the hope that peace and good will shall soon be established throughout the earth, and that sin, selfishness, sickness, and death are to be destroyed. It is the hope that all our loved ones who have died are to be awakened from the sleep of death, that they also might share in the blessings of the Messianic kingdom. All of these hopes, and more, are assured because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Most assuredly, the Bible promises that there is a coming new day of opportunity for all, which God has made certain by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Paul said that God “hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man [Christ] whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31) Let us rejoice in these wonderful truths contained in the Word of God! ■