

The Surety of the Resurrection

“If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.”

—I Corinthians 15:13,14

TO ONE WHO HAS COMPLETE confidence in the promises of God, the hope of the resurrection should mean more this year than ever before. Only those who are thus blessed by the vision of faith are able to pierce the dark clouds of the present and see beyond the perplexing problems of today to the

life-giving blessings of God's tomorrow. Faith in God's promises that he will raise the dead is strengthened by the fact that in the past he has done this very thing. With assurance we can say with the apostle, “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.”—I Cor. 15:20

There was high hope among the disciples of Jesus when he was with them in the flesh, teaching and performing miracles, that at long last God's promises respecting the Messiah were about to be fulfilled. They were Jews, and he was their

Messiah, of whom great things had been promised. Daily he demonstrated that divine authority and power were operating through him for the ultimate accomplishment of all God's good purposes concerning the children of men. He who healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, cast out demons, and raised the dead, could surely deliver their nation from the Roman yoke. The disciples were certain that Israel's Messiah, together with their help, would shortly establish the long-promised kingdom of God on earth.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, however, the Messiah was taken from his disciples and crucified. Their fond hopes and inspiring dreams must have been dashed to the ground. Their Master, Teacher, and Lord was dead. Mixed emotions of bewilderment, disappointment and sorrow must have plagued those ardent followers of the Master during the days of awful darkness between the time Jesus hung upon the cross and the morning that the angel standing guard at his tomb announced, "He is not here: for he is risen." (Matt. 28:6) Quickly that heart-gladdening news spread from one to another of the disciples. There was great joy and revival of hope on their part.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY

In his first letter to the brethren at Corinth, the Apostle Paul lists the evidences by which the fact of Jesus' resurrection had been established. He said that the risen Lord "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. 15:5-8

As the apostle indicates, there were still many living in his day who had been personally acquainted with Jesus while in the flesh, and who had seen him after he had been raised from the dead. The testimony of these faithful witnesses was all sufficient to convince new believers of the great miracle that God had wrought in raising the Master from the dead. Apparently, however, there were some in the Early Church who doubted that anyone else besides Jesus could be resurrected, for the apostle inquires, “How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?”—vs. 12

The Jewish sect of the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, and possibly some from this group had come among the early Christians. They, perhaps, partially accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but were not willing to believe all that he taught nor all that the prophets had foretold concerning him, including his resurrection. In combating this false viewpoint, Paul goes on to show how it would take away the whole foundation upon which Christian faith and hope are based. It would mean, he reasons, that even Jesus himself, their leader and Messiah, was dead, not alive. This, in turn would mean that all who had borne testimony of his resurrection were false witnesses.—vss. 13-15

If Christ is not risen, Paul further reminds us, it means that we are serving a lost cause, and that our persecutions as his followers are meaningless. (vs. 17) The members of the Early Church risked their lives in being followers of Christ, but why

thus “stand . . . in jeopardy every hour” if Jesus is still dead, and there is no resurrection hope for any of the dead? Why are we then “baptized for the dead,” Paul asks, if the world, for whose eventual benefit we are now laying down our lives, are not to be helped thereby? (vss. 29,30) Consecrated followers of Jesus are baptized into the likeness of Jesus’ death in the hope of sharing in the likeness of his resurrection, but there could be no likeness to a resurrection that has never occurred.

Those who are fallen asleep in Christ have “perished” if there is no resurrection of the dead, Paul insists. (vs. 18) This would mean that God’s purpose in giving his Son to be man’s Redeemer had clearly failed, for do we not 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?” (John 3:16) How unmistakably Paul discerned, and how plainly every follower of Christ should discern, that their hope, as well as that of the world, depends upon the exercise of divine power in raising the dead. The apostle says that our assurance of God’s ability to do this is in the fact that Jesus became “the firstfruits of them that slept.”—I Cor. 15:20

SIMILARITY OF OUR TIME

When Jesus was taken from his disciples and crucified, they were bewildered and discouraged because they did not understand the divine program that was being worked out through him. Today, much of the world is bewildered by the development of events which threaten to destroy, or at a minimum greatly weaken, what has been viewed

as long-standing Christian institutions. The difficulty now, as then, is the general failure to understand what constitutes the present purpose of God in the earth.

Jesus was the Messiah, and the disciples believed this. Furthermore, they believed that he would establish a worldwide kingdom, and that they would share with him in the glory of that kingdom. They did not understand that he must first suffer and die as man's Redeemer. This they later learned, and then they rejoiced in the cross of Christ, and what his shed blood meant to them, and what it would later mean to all mankind.

Shortly after the apostles fell asleep in death, the church gradually developed the idea that the Messianic kingdom should be established here and now, without waiting for the return of Christ Jesus as the rightful king. This erroneous theory failed to take into account a very important phase of God's plan, namely, the suffering and death of the body members of the Christ—the little flock—which had to be completed before the glorious kingdom reign of Christ could begin.

Most of professed Christianity stumbled over the same truth concerning the followers of the Master, as the early disciples stumbled over with respect to the Master himself. To the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus explained that it was necessary first of all that Christ should suffer, and then enter into his glory. (Luke 24:13-32) They grasped the thought and rejoiced in its implications. They learned later that the sufferings of Christ were not completed at Calvary, because they also included those of his "body" members. Hence, the

glory of the kingdom must still wait until the “body of Christ” is complete. (I Cor. 12:12,27) Not long after the time of the apostles, this vital truth began to be lost sight of, and there followed, as a result, the abortive efforts of certain ambitious members of the church to establish the glory of the kingdom ahead of time.

Viewed from today’s vantage point, it is evident that these efforts have not accomplished the purposes laid out in the Bible pertaining to Christ’s kingdom. The traditional Christian denominations have lost much of their power and influence, and the nations they once built up and sustained have been fragmented and weakened severely. Because of this, many now wonder if Christianity has failed. Certainly, the faith of sincere church-goers in the ability of Christianity to save the world out of its present difficulties and perplexities is failing. Just as it was the wrong expectations of the disciples concerning Jesus that failed when he was crucified, so it is the false expectations of many Christians today that are failing. Just as the hopes of the disciples were wrong because they did not take into consideration the necessity of the suffering and death of Jesus, the hopes of many today are incorrect because they fail to discern the necessity of the suffering and death of the body members of “the Christ.”

Today the world is filled with darkness and foreboding, but God is still able to perform miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was but the beginning of a program of miracles which, when complete, will have brought peace, health, happiness and everlasting life to all mankind, including those who are now

dead. This is the heart-cheering assurance which, because of the reality of Jesus' resurrection, should permeate the heart of each of his footstep followers, despite the troubles which are increasing everywhere throughout the world. Jesus was, indeed, raised from the dead, and became "the firstfruits of them that slept."—I Cor. 15:20; John 5:28; Acts 17:31

DEATH IN ADAM, LIFE IN CHRIST

Jesus died as the redeemer of Adam and his race. That is why the apostle explains that as "in Adam all die, even so [all] in Christ shall . . . be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22) The weak in faith may claim that this is a very fine theory, but that it has not worked out as described by Paul in this verse. If God could use his power to raise Jesus from the dead nearly twenty centuries ago, why has there been no demonstration of that power on behalf of those for whom Christ died? If all in Christ are to be made alive, why does death continue unabated in the earth?

These are reasonable questions, and Paul answers them. After telling us that life for the Adamic race is provided through Christ, he then adds: "But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." (vs. 23) When Paul tells us that Jesus, in his resurrection, became the "firstfruits" of them that slept, he evidently refers to Jesus alone. However, when he explains the order of the resurrection and uses the expression "Christ the firstfruits," he is referring not only to Jesus, but to his "body" members also, his faithful consecrated footstep followers.

A careful study of I Corinthians, chapter 12, and Galatians 3:27-29, reveals that “the Christ” is not one member, but many, and that Jesus is the Head over these “many members” which constitute his “body.” All of these participate in the “first resurrection.” (Rev. 20:6) In James 1:18 they are referred to as a kind of “firstfruits of his creatures.” In Romans 6:5 they are promised that if they are planted together in the likeness of Jesus’ death, they shall also be in the “likeness of his resurrection.” Therefore, the resurrection of “Christ the firstfruits” is not complete until all the “body” members of Christ are raised from the dead and united with him.

FIRSTFRUITS, AN OFFERING TO GOD

The “firstfruits” terminology is based upon God’s dealing with Israel during Old Testament times. It was a requirement of his Law that the “firstfruits” of the harvest should be used as an offering to the Lord. (see Lev. 23:9-21) In this arrangement, there were not only the firstfruits in general, (vs. 17) but also what was called a “sheaf [first handful] of the firstfruits.” (vss. 10,11) In harmony with this we might think of Jesus as the “sheaf” or “first” of the firstfruits, and of his body members as the remaining firstfruits of the resurrection.

As the firstfruits in Israel’s harvest were presented to the Lord as an offering, so Jesus, the firstfruit of the resurrection, as well as his body members, who are also of the firstfruits, offer themselves in sacrifice to God. Jesus faithfully offered himself to God and was accepted as the Redeemer of the world. His followers are invited to suffer and die with him

sacrificially, with the promise that if faithful they will live and reign with him.

The offering to God in sacrifice of the body members of Christ has continued throughout all the centuries from the Day of Pentecost—fifty days after Jesus' resurrection—until now. Not until that work is complete, and all the firstfruits are raised from the dead and united with Jesus, can the resurrection of the remainder of mankind begin.

“AFTERWARD”

“Afterward they that are Christ's at his coming”—that is, after the resurrection of “Christ the firstfruits” is complete, then follows the resurrection of mankind in general. (I Cor. 15:23) The clarity of this thought is somewhat obscured by the use of the word “coming” to translate the Greek word *parousia*. This word should always be translated “presence,” and here the reference is not to the moment of Christ's arrival at his Second Advent, but to the entire time of his Second Presence, including the period of his kingdom reign.

That this is the proper thought is clearly shown in subsequent verses, which read, “For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” (vss. 25,26) Those “that are Christ's” at, or during, his presence are not the same as those already mentioned as the firstfruits. Rather, they are those who will, after the firstfruits are complete, upon the basis of accepting Jesus as their Redeemer and becoming obedient to the Messianic kingdom laws, receive everlasting life through him. All such “in Christ shall . . . be made alive.”—vs. 22

The distinction between the body members of Christ, the “firstfruits,” and those who are given life by him during his kingdom reign, is further emphasized by the apostle’s explanation of the manner in which the dead are raised. “Some man will say,” continues Paul, “How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?” (vs. 35) It is in answer to this question that we are given definitely to understand that in the resurrection some—the “firstfruits”—will receive spiritual, or heavenly, bodies, and others—the remainder of mankind—will receive human, or earthly, bodies.

TWO GLORIES AND TWO ADAMS

In the resurrection, Paul explains, “There are . . . celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial.” Then he proceeds to tell us something about the variety of glory which exists in this arrangement, saying that the “glory of the celestial [heavenly] is one, and the glory of the terrestrial [earthly] is another. . . . So also is the resurrection of the dead.” (vss. 40,42) The “glory of the terrestrial” is referred to by David in the Psalms, where he tells about the original creation of man and explains that God “crowned him with glory and honour.”—Ps. 8:5

The “glory of the celestial,” which is the hope of the footstep followers of Christ, is referred to by Paul in other places as the “hope of the glory of God” and as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Rom. 5:2; Col. 1:27) He also tells us that it is a glory which was foreshadowed by the brightness of Moses’ countenance as he came down from the mountain to administer the Law given at Mt. Sinai. In the last verse of this chapter, Paul explains that

we are being prepared for and transformed into this glory by the influence of the Holy Spirit of God, mirrored or reflected to us through the Word of God.—I Cor. 3:7-18

The matter of the two glories is further clarified by Paul's reference to the two Adams—namely, the “first man” and the “Lord from heaven.” The first Adam was earthly, the apostle explains, but the last Adam is a spiritual being, having been exalted to celestial glory at the time of his resurrection from the dead as the first of the firstfruits. The remainder of the firstfruits are to be made like him. Paul explains that as we have “borne the image of the earthy”—that is, by nature those who will constitute the body of Christ were human beings—“we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. . . . Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.”—I Cor. 15:45-50

GLORY OF THE CELESTIAL

As human beings we cannot comprehend the glory of the celestial. The Apostle John says, “It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:2) Paul caught a glimpse of the glorified Jesus at the time he was converted on the Damascus road, seeing him as “one born out of due time.” (I Cor. 15:8) The entire body of Christ, however, when “born” to celestial glory will see Jesus “as he is,” and “shall be like him.”

Paul sums up the lesson of Christ's body members' exaltation to heavenly glory in the first resurrection, describing it as “this corruptible” putting on

“incorruption,” and “this mortal” putting on “immortality.” It will not be until this resurrection and glorification of the firstfruits class is complete at the end of the present age of sacrifice, that mankind in general will have fulfilled to them the wondrous promises of restitution to their lost earthly glory. Assuring us of this, however, the apostle continues, “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

VICTORY OVER DEATH PROMISED

The promise Paul cited, “Death is swallowed up in victory,” is recorded in Isaiah 25:8. Verses 6-9 of this chapter are wonderfully descriptive of the Messianic kingdom blessings which will come to the world. Christ’s kingdom is here symbolized as a “mountain” in which God makes unto “all people a feast of fat things.” It is the same kingdom mentioned by Paul in which he says that Christ “must reign, until he hath put all enemies under his feet.”

In his prophecy, Isaiah tells us about the destruction of these enemies, saying that the Lord will “wipe away tears from off all faces,” “swallow up death in victory,” and take away the “rebuke of his people . . . from off all the earth.” This latter statement clearly locates the fulfillment of the promise as taking place upon the earth, and indicates beyond question that the promised swallowing up of death in victory is a reference to the destruction of death that takes place during the reign of Christ, as pointed out by Paul in I Corinthians 15:25,26.

Paul's further statement, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" is taken from Hosea 13:14. This, too, is a divine promise of life to mankind in general, made available through the redemptive work of Christ. It has not been fulfilled yet. Like the many other kingdom promises of the Old and New Testaments, its fulfillment must wait for the completion of the firstfruits class. Then, when all the "church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven," are changed from earthly to heavenly glory, from mortality to immortality, there will follow the Messianic kingdom work of destroying death and the grave.—Heb. 12:23

GOD PROVIDES THE VICTORY

No wonder the apostle closes this chapter on the triumphant note, "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." (I Cor. 15:57,58) Since Jesus returned to heaven, and the apostles fell asleep in death, it has often looked as though there would be no genuine victory in the earth for the cause of Christ. It has often seemed as though the Christian's labor in the Lord was in vain. This is not so, Paul says.

There is to be a glorious victory. First, it will be the victory of Christ's body members over death—the greatest victory of all, because they will be exalted to immortality with him. However, this will not be the end of the victory. "Afterward," during the period of Christ's kingdom, "all that are in the

graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth," and the "last enemy"—death—"shall be destroyed." —John 5:28,29; I Cor. 15:26

That there is to be a universal awakening of the dead is clearly indicated by many of the promises and prophecies. The Sodomites were destroyed because of their wickedness, but the prophet assures us that they will be restored to their "former estate." (Ezek. 16:55) Jesus, in fact, tells us that it will be "more tolerable" for Sodom in the day of judgment than for the Jews who rejected him at the time of his First Advent. (Matt. 11:24) However, it will be "tolerable" for the Jews also, for after the work of this age is complete, then "all Israel shall be saved." This salvation is promised even to those unbelieving Jews who were cast off from divine favor because of their rejection of Christ.—Rom. 11:26

NOT UNIVERSAL SALVATION

It is important to note that there is nothing in the foregoing promises to indicate that every person will be everlastingly saved from death. What the promises mean is simply that all are to have a full opportunity for salvation—one which but a few have had in this life. Jesus said that the Sodomites would not have been destroyed had they had the same opportunity that was given to the Jews. This means that the Sodomites did not have a full opportunity. He also said that the people of Tyre and Sidon would have repented long ago had he performed similar works there to those which he did in Chorazin and Bethsaida. Peter and Paul both inform us that it was in ignorance that the Jews rejected

Jesus, which shows that while they had a better opportunity than the Sodomites and those of Tyre and Sidon, yet even they did not have a full opportunity.—Matt. 11:21-24; Acts 3:17; I Cor. 2:8

In I Timothy 2:4 we are told that it is God's will that all shall be saved and come to an accurate "knowledge of the truth." This is a salvation that precedes knowledge, and evidently is a reference to mankind's awakening from the sleep of death in order that they might be enlightened. The eternal salvation of all those thus delivered from Adamic death will depend upon their acceptance of Jesus as their Redeemer, and heart obedience to the laws of his kingdom. Concerning this, Peter declares that "every soul, which will not hear [give attention to] that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people."—Acts 3:20-23

It is to this that Jesus refers when, in John 5:29, he tells us that those who have done evil, such as the Sodomites, Jews, and, to a greater or lesser extent, all of fallen mankind, shall come forth to a "resurrection of judgment." (*New American Standard Bible* and numerous other translations) The Greek word here used by Jesus, and mistranslated "damnation" in the *King James Version*, is *krisis*, which has the same meaning as our English word crisis—namely, a test or trial period. For example, when a patient afflicted by some disease passes the crisis it means that he has passed the crucial period of the illness, and will get well. If, during the all-critical crisis period, there is a turn for the worse, the patient usually dies.

In the Messianic kingdom, the dead will be awakened from the sleep of death in order to be

tested, and upon the basis of how they respond in that “crisis” it will be determined whether or not they will live forever or be cut off in the “second death.” (Rev. 21:8) It is for this reason that the kingdom period of Christ’s reign is also spoken of as the Day of Judgment, or as Paul states the matter, the “day” during which God “will judge the world in righteousness.” (Acts 17:31) It will be during that time that all mankind will be on trial, the basis of which will be the knowledge of the Truth which will then be made so plain that no one will need to err.—Isa. 11:9; 35:8; Hab. 2:14

There is no such clear knowledge available for the people today. The fact that a Christian may attempt to explain the Truth to another does not mean that such a one has been given a fair opportunity for salvation. God alone knows what may stand in the way of one’s acceptance of the Truth. During the centuries of the present age, the greatest of obstacles has been the improper methods used to tell forth the Gospel message, and the severe persecutions inflicted upon those who did not accept it. The influence of deceptive errors and false doctrines has also hindered man’s appreciation of the Scriptures. Moreover, heredity, surroundings, and environment have often stood in the way.

All these hindrances and many others exist even in lands where the name of Christ is preached. Furthermore, the great majority of the human family have never heard about Jesus, even in a distorted and vague manner. It is God’s will that all these shall be awakened from the sleep of death and come to a clear knowledge of the Truth. This full, perfect knowledge will be given to the people

at a time when Satan, the great Deceiver, will be bound—when no counter influences of any kind will be permitted to stand in the way of acceptance.

Under such favorable kingdom influences, the pure knowledge of the Lord will be so universal in the earth that it will not be necessary for anyone to say to his neighbor, “Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD.” (Jer. 31:34) Only then will mankind have the knowledge and ability to make a fully informed choice as to who they will serve and obey. If, after full knowledge and opportunity has been provided, any still choose to serve evil, they will be “cut off” in the second death. Thankfully, we believe, very few will be of this group. Rather, the vast majority will pass this “crisis” period successfully, having fully learned to appreciate and serve God and his righteous laws with their whole heart. Of these, the Scriptures testify: “The tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”—Rev. 21:3 ■