

# Reflections on the Resurrection of the Dead

***“This I confess to  
you, that according  
to the Way, which  
they call a sect, I  
worship the God of  
our fathers,  
believing  
everything laid  
down by the Law  
and written in the  
Prophets, having a  
hope in God, ...  
that there will be a  
resurrection of  
both the just and  
the unjust.”***

***—Acts 24:14,15,  
English Standard  
Version***

clarity on the subject.

**THE RESURRECTION OF**  
the dead, as taught in the Scriptures, is a powerful vision of immense significance to the Christian, and to all mankind. What does it entail? Who is it for? What guarantee do we have that it will happen? The answers to all these questions are found in the Bible. Though the resurrection doctrine is central to the Christian faith, many have only a vague conception of what it is. Misunderstanding abounds regarding the resurrection, yet the Bible speaks with

## **PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE RESURRECTION**

“Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” (Acts 23:6, *ESV*) Thus Paul called out loudly in defending himself before the council of the Sanhedrin. They were seeking to ruin him, to stop his ministry and end his influence. Some may view his declaration with cynicism, that it was merely a ploy to cause division between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who together comprised the Sanhedrin. It was with great sincerity and passion, however, that Paul brought up the issue of the resurrection, though as a result, “dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.” (vss. 7,8, *ESV*) Regardless of the division between these two Jewish sects, Paul’s statement was clearly intended to focus on the resurrection as a central doctrine of our faith.

The profound implications of the doctrine of the resurrection are laid down by Paul with great logic and force. “Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He

raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.”—I Cor. 15:12-17, *New American Standard Bible*

Thus Paul reasoned, without Jesus’ resurrection, our Christian faith would be empty. It is his resurrection that opened the way for eternal life to all mankind. Jesus was “delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” (Rom. 4:25) Without the means of obtaining justification, we would have no basis for being at one with our Creator, and we would have no hope for eternal life. The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead is fundamental to Christianity. No human ideology nor good works can form the basis of our return to God’s favor. “No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” —I Cor. 3:11, *ESV*

## **THE RESURRECTION DOCTRINE**

The doctrine of the resurrection encompasses the raising from the dead of every human being that has ever lived, with the intent of restoring them to the image and likeness of God. Those who attain such God-likeness of character will inherit life eternal. It is a universal desire of humanity to live forever—never to die. Solomon wisely noted that God “has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” (Eccles. 3:11, *New International Version*) God placed the desire for eternal life in

man's heart, and to that end billions of dollars are spent each year on healthcare, vitamin and nutritional supplements, health spas, and life extension programs. These are all beneficial to one degree or another, but none have yielded more than a brief, albeit healthier, extension of life. Some people have even opted for being cryogenically frozen when they die in the hope that medical and scientific advances will someday provide a means of reanimating them. The thought of ceasing to exist is fraught with anxiety.

Jesus' sermon on the mount proposed a healthy approach to our anxieties. "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" (Matt. 6:25-27, *ESV*) Anxious fretting and worry about temporal matters is futile, Jesus says. It adds nothing positive to our life.

"Therefore," Jesus continues, "do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear?" Though not part of Jesus' words, we might be inclined to add, "How long will we live?" Rather, the Lord further states, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (vss. 31-34, *ESV*) Acknowledging that each

day has enough difficulties of its own, the Master's admonition is exceedingly wise that we not "borrow troubles" from tomorrow.

God has provided access to eternal life through the atoning work of his Son. Moreover, he has "fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man [Christ Jesus] whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:31, *ESV*) Jesus affirmed this in his prayer offered the night before his crucifixion. "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." (John 17:1,2, *ESV*) Jesus was given "authority over all flesh" with the intent to give all the opportunity for eternal life.

The resurrection includes the restoration of an individual's conscious identity, or sense of self, and the providing of a body as God chooses. (I Cor. 15:38, *ESV*) For the vast majority of the human family, this will bring them back to the habitat of earth in fleshly bodies, although the ravages of sin, disease, and old age will no longer be present. This is in harmony with what Peter declared shortly after Pentecost, when he spoke of the coming "times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." (Acts 3:21) *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary* defines the root word from which "restitution" is translated as: "to reconstitute (in health, home or organization)." *Thayer's Greek Definitions* further delineates the root word as meaning: "to restore to its former state." Mankind

will be reconstituted—restored—through God’s arrangement whereby he will roll back the curse of death, return the earth to Edenic conditions, and lovingly bring mankind into his eternal kingdom, through the righteous rule of his Son, Christ Jesus.

While it is God’s purpose that the vast majority of humanity will be raised to lives of fleshly perfection on a restored planet, an elect “little flock” will attain to a glorious spiritual resurrection and a heavenly home. (Luke 12:32) Jesus spoke of the heavenly home saying, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”—John 14:2,3, *ESV*

Paul spoke of this with great longing: “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ... One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:10-14, *ESV*) The “upward call” is to a heavenly home, for those who are “faithful unto death” in seeking for “glory, honor, and immortality.”—Rev. 2:10; Rom. 2:7

For those few who live devoted Christian lives in the service of the Lord, the resurrection will provide them with glorious spirit bodies. “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound,

and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”—I Cor. 15:51-53, *ESV*

## **THE TIME OF RESURRECTION**

One of the most common misconceptions pertaining to the resurrection is that it occurs immediately upon each one’s death. We often hear at a funeral that the deceased is now in heaven looking down upon us. This is the widespread concept of the resurrection, but it is not what the Scriptures teach. We learn much regarding the timing of the resurrection from the account of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. (John 11:1-44) Lazarus had become quite ill. A messenger was sent by his family to alert Jesus to the gravity of the situation. In order that he might teach a powerful lesson, Jesus did not act immediately. Lazarus’ disease continued to progress, and he died. Four more days passed until the Lord arrived to comfort Lazarus’ family. His sister Martha met Jesus when he arrived, and their conversation was recorded for us.

“Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to him, Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ,

the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”—  
vss. 21-27, *ESV*

Martha's words are very pertinent as to when the resurrection occurs. Upon being told that Lazarus would rise again she said, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” She did not say that her brother was in heaven, nor that he had already been resurrected. She affirmed the belief that the resurrection occurs “on the last day.” Jesus, earlier in his ministry, had clearly identified the “last day” as the time when he would return to raise the dead and resurrect them. (John 6:39,40,44,54) Consider some other scriptures regarding this point.

The Apostle Paul addresses the timing of the resurrection, noting that it occurs when Jesus would come again. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” (I Thess. 4:13-16, *ESV*) Here Paul clearly refers to the dead as being in a condition likened to sleep, and that their awakening and resurrection occur at the time when Christ would come again.

Further to this point is Paul's reaction to those who opposed his teachings. Some, actively contradicting



him, promoted strange new ideas. His response to their challenge is clear. To Timothy he sent this wise advice, “Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.” (II Tim. 2:16-18) The great swerving from “the truth” was the error of saying that the resurrection had already taken place. Clearly the resurrection occurs in conjunction with Christ’s return, and not before.

## **RAISING THE DEAD VERSUS RESURRECTION**

There is a distinction to be made between “raising” the dead and the “resurrection.” For example, the incidents of Elijah raising the widow of Zarephath’s son, Jesus’ raising the daughter of Jairus and also the widow of Nain’s son, as well as Lazarus, are often given as examples of the resurrection. While they may picture the resurrection, it is more scripturally accurate to refer to these events as raisings, or awakenings, from the dead. In the original Greek text of the New Testament two distinct words are translated into our English words “resurrection” and “raising.”

“Resurrection” is the English word used for the Greek *anastasis* and means “a standing up again.” By contrast, “raised” is the English translation for the Greek *egeiro*, meaning “to waken or rouse.” It is critical to note that the widow of Zarephath’s son, the daughter of Jairus, the widow of Nain’s son, and Lazarus all eventually died again. “Raising” the

dead means to rouse from the sleep of death. It may, or may not, be permanent depending on the timing of the awakening. To state the matter simply, raising the dead is merely the first step in their resurrection.

To this point we note the implications of Jesus' lesson to the Sadducees regarding the resurrection. "Those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection." (Luke 20:35,36, *ESV*) Two points in our Lord's words are particularly striking. First, one must be "worthy" to attain to the resurrection. That is quite distinct from the general awakening that all in their graves will experience—worthy or not. (John 5:25-29) Second, those who attain to the resurrection—that is, a full standing up again from the fall in Adam by willing obedience to God's righteous laws—will gain eternal life. These, Jesus says, "cannot die anymore." Thus, resurrection in its fullest sense is seen to be everlasting, while a mere raising from the dead may be only temporary.

This being the case, the first true and full resurrection from the dead was when Jesus was raised on the third day after his crucifixion. The Scriptures plainly state this. "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you. ... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is

the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” (I Cor. 15:1-4; Col. 1:18, *ESV*) Lastly, we note John the Revelator’s greeting from “Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.”—Rev. 1:5, *ESV*

## **WHO WILL BE RESURRECTED?**

Jesus stated that the Father had committed all judgment to him. We are greatly encouraged to know that he who will judge mankind is the same one who gave his life for them. Jesus declared, “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” (John 5:26-29, *ESV*) Paul spoke in harmony with Jesus’ words when defending himself before Felix, “This I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”—Acts 24:14,15, *ESV*

Paul stated clearly, “As by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (I Cor. 15:21,22, *ESV*) All die “in Adam”

—due to inherited sin, none escape the penalty of death. All will also be made alive “in Christ,” or “in union with Christ,” according to *Williams New Testament*. This glorious opportunity for “all” mankind is guaranteed by the fact that Jesus gave himself as a “ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” —I Tim. 2:6

The “due time” for the benefit of Jesus’ ransom sacrifice to be received is shown in the succeeding verses of I Corinthians 15 as having two parts. “Each in his own order,” Paul says. “Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming [Greek: *parousia*, meaning ‘presence’] those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (vss. 23-26, *ESV*) The “firstfruits” are Christ’s church, his symbolic body of “many members.” (I Cor. 12:12; James 1:18) Those who are second, in order of time, to share in the resurrection are the remainder of mankind, whom he will call from their graves, after the “firstfruits” class is completed.

Some dispute the all-encompassing quality of Jesus’ atonement. Two Scriptures are cited in proof of its limited scope. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” “By the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Matt. 20:28; Rom. 5:19, *ESV*) The argument made is that Jesus died for “many,” but not “all,” the distinction often being that he died for the righteous

and not sinners, who are sometimes referred to scornfully as the “unwashed masses.” We reject both the argument and the shameful attitude of heart associated with it.

The term “many” is the crucial word upon which this argument hinges. It is identified with the Greek expression *hoi polloi*, which means “the masses of society”—that is, the people, the many. It does not denote any specific or limited number, but is open-ended. Most importantly, however, the context in Romans chapter 5 clearly shows that Jesus died for all because all were sinners, and thus the benefit of the ransom will be to all. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.” (Rom. 5:8,18) Peter adds, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”—I Pet. 3:18

## **POWERFUL PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION**

Lest we doubt that the resurrection will occur, we turn to the words of the Master. Jesus taught with great power and authority. Recalling again the scene of his confrontation with the Sadducees, we are awed by the simplicity and stunning truth of his doctrine. As noted earlier, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. Jesus’ response silenced them immediately. Quoting from the Matthew account of the same encounter, we read: “As for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of

Jacob? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.” (Matt. 22:31-33, *ESV*) The words Jesus said that the Jews had read, and had properly claimed concerning their God, were that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These words, in fact, had been spoken many centuries earlier by God to Moses at the burning bush. Moses was so awestruck by the fact that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was now speaking to him, he “hid his face.”—Exod. 3:3-6

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had long been dead by the time of Moses’ encounter, and even longer by the time of Jesus’ day. Yet the Jews, including the Sadducees, still rightly claimed that their God was the same as that of their forefathers. Jesus thus clinched the matter: “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” On this undeniable basis, these patriarchs will be raised from the grave and resurrected to life eternal, no longer “dead,” but “living” once again under God’s favor.

## **A FINAL THOUGHT**

We love the working definition of eternal life that Jesus gave. “This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3, *ESV*) The infinite mind of our God, Father, and Creator will open to us the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, of love and light, in the endless ages of glory soon to come. (Eph. 2:7) At the present time, Paul testified, “We see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”—I Cor. 13:12 ■