

The Resurrection

—Firstfruits and Afterfruits—

*“Now is Christ
risen from the
dead, and become
the firstfruits of
them that slept.”*

—*I Corinthians 15:20*

AS WE CONTINUE TO SEE

humanity struggle in the grip of the Adamic curse of sin and death, we should find comfort from God’s holy Word of Truth. “For 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) Both the gift of the only begotten Son of God as man’s Redeemer, and his resurrection from death as confirmed in our opening text, are of vital importance in the great plan of the ages which the Creator is working out for the ultimate blessing of the human race.

The Bible assures us that God’s purposes will all be carried through to a successful conclusion. (Isa. 55:11) It was the Father’s plan that Jesus would give up his perfect human life to redeem Adam and his posterity. (Mark 10:45; Rom. 5:12,19; I Cor. 15:21,22) However, this was not enough to give renewed hope for life to humanity. Jesus would also have to be resurrected, for a dead Messiah would

be unable to complete the work of reconciling the world back to God.

INFALLIBLE PROOFS

The Bible informs us that Jesus, after his resurrection, showed himself to his apostles “by many infallible proofs” for forty days. (Acts 1:3) Paul later listed many of these, adding, “Last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.” (I Cor. 15:3-8) When Jesus showed himself to the other witnesses, he materialized in a body of flesh to enable them to see and commune with him, but a miracle of a distinctive character was performed in the case of Paul.

The Apostle John wrote, “It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he [Christ] shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:2) The entire church, including Paul, is promised a resurrection and exaltation to “glory and honour and immortality,” and association with Jesus, sharing his heavenly glory. (Rom. 2:7; 8:16,17) It is this that is involved in being “born of the Spirit.” (John 3:5,6) Upon spirit birth, it will be possible to see Jesus “as he is.” With respect to our human understanding, those who shall be of this class will be changed in the resurrection to a new nature, the divine nature.—Phil. 3:20,21; II Pet. 1:2-4

Paul explains, however, that he saw the resurrected Jesus as one “born out of due time.” In other words, Paul caught a glimpse of the divine Jesus even though he had not himself attained to Spirit birth. It was only a momentary view of the Master in his glory, and this was possible only by a miracle.

Even so, the brightness of that which he saw blinded Paul. It was a convincing testimony to him that Jesus had been raised from the dead, a testimony which, by supplementing that of the other “infallible” witnesses, served to substantiate this fundamental truth to all who had “ears to hear.”

Thus, with no uncertainty, Paul’s assurance has reached down through the centuries even to our day that “now is Christ risen from the dead.” This is a blessed truth, and belief in it is fundamental to being a Christian. Strange though it may seem, however, there have been some professed followers of Christ associated with the church who have not believed in the resurrection of the dead.

There were some of these in the church at Corinth, the group to which this wonderful chapter on the resurrection was written. (I Cor. 15:12) Paul indicates that these did not believe in the resurrection at all, and while possibly they had not applied their unbelief to Jesus, he shows that it would mean just this, for if in the plan of God, no provision is made for the resurrection of the dead, “then is Christ not risen.” Furthermore, the apostle adds, “if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.”—vss. 13,14

Jesus died to redeem man from death, but a dead Redeemer could not restore those for whom he died. If Christ was not resurrected from death, 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. (Gal. 3:8,16) If Christ was not raised, there can never be a worldwide kingdom of peace under his righteous

rulership. (Isa. 9:6,7; Rev. 11:15) How important indeed is the resurrection of Jesus in the out-working of God's purposes. This is a good example of how the entire plan of God stands together. We cannot reject a part of it without doing damage to the whole.

The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead is in itself a marvelous truth, but its fullness of meaning is emphasized by Paul in the statement that he has "become the firstfruits of them that slept." Simply stated, this means that because Jesus was raised from the dead, all others who are asleep in death will be awakened—both the church class and the world—"every man in his own order." —I Cor. 15:23

FRUITS OF THE HARVEST

When discussing the hope of a future judgment period "in righteousness," which necessitates an awakening of the dead, Paul declared that God "hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him [Christ] from the dead." (Acts 17:31) As we have noted, the apostle says that Jesus became the "firstfruits of them that slept" in the death condition. This term—firstfruits—is very significant and is one that Paul borrowed from the Old Testament.

In the use of this symbolism, we have a further important truth brought to our attention. In the divine arrangements with the nation of Israel, the firstfruits of every harvest were given to God as an offering to him. (Lev. 23:9-11) This prefigured Jesus, who as the "firstfruits," was also offered to the Heavenly Father. It was, in his case, the offering of

himself, and in connection with this offering it was the divine will that he should die as the Redeemer of both the church and the world. Jesus was, symbolically speaking, “planted” in death, and as a grain of wheat, he fell into the ground. During his earthly ministry he explained that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone and has no hope of producing fruitage. (John 12:24) Jesus, because of being planted in death, did not remain alone. He was raised from the dead and became the “firstfruits” of them that slept. Thus, there is to be a glorious harvest of all who are in their graves—the “afterfruits”—for in due time they will hear his voice and “shall come forth.”—John 5:28,29

In some Old Testament pictures reference is made to the “first of the firstfruits of thy land.” (Exod. 23:19) The Israelites saw the firstfruits as an indication and promise of a greater harvest still to come as the year progressed. Similarly, those who believe in the redemptive work of Jesus view him as the hope for the entire world of mankind to be restored to life, as God has promised through his Word. The foregoing Scripture also has a symbolic fulfillment. Jesus is the “first of the firstfruits,” for his true church is also spoken of as being of the firstfruits class. (James 1:18; Rev. 14:4) Like Jesus, these offer themselves to God, and are “planted together in the likeness” of Christ’s death. (Rom. 6:5) The entire firstfruits class is exalted to immortality in the “first resurrection,” having obtained the “glory of the celestial.”—Rev. 20:6; I Cor. 15:40

BRINGING FIRSTFRUITS

There is another lesson concerning firstfruits that we wish to consider. It is found in Leviticus 23:10, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.”—*New American Standard Bible*

This verse highlights Israel’s obligation to give God the firstfruits of the land of promise upon entering therein. Taking instruction from Paul’s statement that these things were an example for us, we look for the spiritual lesson in it. (I Cor. 10:11) As footstep followers of the Master, we dwell, in the spirit of our minds, in a land of promised rest, being assured, “We who have believed enter that rest.” (Heb. 4:3, *NASB*) Having entered this spiritual haven, what “firstfruits” do we have to offer our Heavenly Father?

First, we have been invited to offer ourselves, and have been guided in that work by the will of God. “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.” (James 1:18, *NASB*) Further light is shed on the firstfruits by Paul. “We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.”—Rom. 8:23, *NASB*

As alluded to in the foregoing verse, footstep followers of Christ enjoy a unique blessing. They are the first to bear the fruits of God’s Spirit. This fruitage is diverse in its manifestations. We are told, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Gal. 5:22,23, *NASB*) That such qualities of character can flourish abundantly in the present time of trial and difficulty is a glory to God. As Jesus stated, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” —John 15:8, *NASB*

Bearing the fruits of the Spirit also has other blessed effects. As we manifest more of such fruitage in our lives, it conveys a blessing to others in the narrow way of sacrifice as we enjoy Christian fellowship with them. They are encouraged and comforted by our spiritual fruit, and we by theirs. In addition, it is a blessing to all those with whom we come in contact each day. For this reason, we earnestly strive to let our “light so shine before men.” —Matt. 5:16

“God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.” (Heb. 6:10, *NASB*) Our fruit-bearing will not go unappreciated or unrewarded, but it will accrue the treasure of which Jesus spoke: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” —Matt. 6:19-21, *NASB*

If we are now sowing the firstfruits of the Spirit in difficult experiences, we shall joyously reap. The psalmist speaks poetically of this. “Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. He who goes

to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.” (Ps. 126:5,6, *NASB*) In the resurrection, we shall come again with shouts of joy, and bring our firstfruits to lay them before our Heavenly King.

DIVINE ORDER

As we have noted, the term “firstfruits” implies afterfruits, so the Apostle Paul makes it plain that Jesus and his church are not the only ones raised from the dead. “As all men die by virtue of their descent from Adam,” he writes, “so all such as are in union with Christ will be made to live again.” (I Cor. 15:22, *Williams New Testament*) However, there is a divine order to this. As would naturally be expected, the “firstfruits,” having proven faithful in laying down their lives in service to the Lord during the present Gospel Age, will receive “the first resurrection.” “On such the second death hath no power,” because they will be given the “divine nature.” (Rev. 20:4-6) After the first resurrection is complete, then the remainder of mankind, the afterfruits, will be raised from the dead. (I Cor. 15:23) Thus, their resurrection will be accomplished during the thousand year reign of the Christ class, Head and body members. “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

In the resurrection, Paul explains, some will be given “celestial,” or heavenly bodies, while others will have “terrestrial,” or human bodies. (vs. 40) It is the firstfruits class that is exalted to heavenly, or

celestial, glory in the resurrection. Of those in this class Paul writes, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."—I Cor. 15:44

The "first man is of the earth." Adam had a natural body, which was perfect until he sinned. "The second man is the Lord from heaven," whom Paul also says "was made a quickening [life-giving] spirit." (vss. 45-47) The hope of those who are desiring to faithfully follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus is to be exalted to heavenly glory and be associated with "the last Adam" as life-givers to all the remainder of mankind. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," writes Paul. (vs. 50) This refers to the firstfruits, who inherit the rulership of the kingdom, having a heavenly reward. All the subjects of the kingdom will be raised "flesh and blood," as human beings. This consummation of God's plan must wait until those of the firstfruits class have all been exalted to glory. Paul writes concerning the glorious conclusion of these things: "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; Isa. 25:8; Hos. 13:14

Those who are raised in Christ's thousand-year kingdom as human beings will be given that time to be "taught by God," and learn of his ways. (Isa. 54:13; John 6:45) The full thought of Paul's words in I Corinthians is that during that period all who do not compose the heavenly "firstfruits" of the resurrection will, nevertheless, have the opportunity to accept Christ and to obey the laws of his kingdom, and thus live forever on a restored, perfect earth.

For this to be so, it will be necessary for mankind to be awakened from the sleep of death. Paul writes that God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” (I Tim. 2:4) The fulfillment of this will begin with mankind’s awakening from the sleep of death which resulted from Adam’s transgression. Once brought back from death, they will be enlightened and taught all of God’s principles of righteousness. Those who become his during that time, through belief and heart obedience, will be restored to perfection of life and live forever.

VICTORY OVER DEATH

The “victory” over death for both the church and the world is possible only through Christ, and because he gave himself in death as a “ransom for all.” (I Tim. 2:5,6) This victory is manifested in the resurrection, and it is by the sacrifice of the perfect “man Christ Jesus” that the hope of future life for all who have died is made possible—just as it was by the disobedience of perfect man Adam that death was brought into the world.

How important it is that we continue steadfast in these simple truths of God’s plan, centered in Christ. “For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end.” “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”—Heb. 3:14; I Cor. 15:58

There are not many today who will give heed to this beautiful and simple message. However, this was true in Paul’s day also. It has always been true

and will continue that way until Satan is bound and can “deceive the nations no more.” (Rev. 20:3) Nevertheless, God’s designs are being accomplished. The most important part of this for the child of God is our own preparation to be associated with Jesus in the work of the kingdom by proving worthy to become part of the “firstfruits” class.

IN SUMMARY

The essence of this lesson is as expressed in our theme text, “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.” Others have been awakened from the sleep of death temporarily, but have died again subsequently, as in the case of Lazarus. (John 11:1-44) Concerning Jesus, however, Paul says, “Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.” The resurrected Lord himself testified also, “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive for evermore, Amen.”—Rom. 6:9; Rev. 1:18

The Scriptures assure us that soon the 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) With this is the assurance that peace and goodwill shall soon be established throughout the earth, and that sin, selfishness, sickness, and death are to be destroyed. The Bible further promises that all those 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 died as man’s Redeemer, and was raised from the dead by the mighty power of God.

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. Quoting once again the words of Paul, he states concerning God: “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31, *NASB*) Let us rejoice in these wonderful truths contained in the Word of God! ■