

The Resurrection Victory

***“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***

THROUGHOUT THE EARTH there is turmoil, trouble, and ultimately, death. True to the prophecies of the Bible concerning the present time, chaos and distress prevail among all nations. We are, indeed, in the midst of “a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.” (Dan. 12:1) Only those who

have complete confidence in the promises of God can enjoy peace of mind and heart amidst this confusion and contradiction in human experience.

The hope of a better day for mankind was made secure nearly two thousand years ago when Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of his Heavenly Father. Our faith pierces the dark clouds which hang so ominously over mankind, and beyond we can see the life-giving blessings of God’s tomorrow. We know that those now dying will be raised from the dead in that glorious day. We know this because

God has promised it, and he has demonstrated his ability to fulfill his promises by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Truly, we can say with Paul, “Now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.”—I Cor. 15:20, *New American Standard Bible*

There was high hope among Jesus’ disciples when he was with them in the flesh, teaching and performing miracles. They believed that at long last God’s promises respecting the Messiah were about to be fulfilled. They were Jews, and Jesus 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, and establish the long-promised kingdom of God on earth.

HOPES DASHED

However, suddenly and unexpectedly, the Messiah was taken from his disciples and crucified. How their fond hopes and inspiring dreams must have been dashed to the ground! Their Master, Lord and Messiah was dead. What mixed emotions of bewilderment, disappointment and sorrow must have beset the hearts of those ardent disciples during the days of darkness between the time the “Prince of life” hung dead on the cross and the morning that the angel standing guard at his tomb announced, “He is not here: for he is risen.”—Acts 3:15; 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 the part of most of them. However, Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared, and therefore did not believe their reports. Finally, though, he also was convinced that the power of God had intervened to restore their Master to them. (John 20:24-29) Later the Apostle Paul lists the evidences by which the fact of Jesus' resurrection had been established.

"He was seen of Cephas [Peter], 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 Paul 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 sufficient to convince new believers of the great miracle which God had wrought in raising the Master from the dead. Apparently, however, there were some in the Early Church who doubted that anyone could be resurrected, for Paul inquires, "How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?"—I Cor. 15:12

The Jewish sect of the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. (Matt. 22:23) Possibly some from among this group had come among the early Christians, partially accepting Jesus as the Messiah, but not willing to believe all that he taught, nor all

that the prophets had foretold concerning him. In combating this, Paul explains that taking the viewpoint that there is no resurrection destroys the whole foundation on which Christian faith and hope are based. If true, it would mean that even Jesus himself, their leader and Messiah, was still dead, not alive. This in turn would mean that all who had borne testimony of his resurrection would have been false witnesses.—I Cor. 15:13-16

If Christ has not risen, Paul further reminds us, then we are serving a lost cause, and our suffering as his followers is meaningless. The members of the Early Church risked their lives to be Christians, but “why stand we in jeopardy every hour,” if Jesus is still dead, and there is no resurrection hope for anyone? Why are we “baptized for the dead” world of mankind, if those for whose future benefit we are laying down our lives are to remain forever dead?—vss. 17-19,29-32

Paul insists that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then those who have “fallen asleep in Christ are perished.” (vs. 18) This would mean that God’s purpose in giving his Son to be man’s Redeemer has utterly failed. Jesus’ oft-repeated words would have no meaning, “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 clearly Paul discerned, and how unmistakably every Christian should recognize, that the hope of both the church and the world depends upon the exercise of divine power in raising the dead. Our assurance of God’s ability to do this is in the fact that Jesus himself was raised from the dead.

KINGDOM NOT IMMEDIATELY BEGUN

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. They believed that Jesus would establish a worldwide kingdom, and that they would share with him in the glory of that kingdom. They did not then understand that he must first suffer and die as man's Redeemer. This they learned later, 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 earth's appointed king. This erroneous theory failed to take into account a very important phase of God's plan, namely, the calling out, suffering and death of the body members of the anointed Christ class. This work had to be completed before the glorious kingdom reign of Messiah could begin.

Most of the professed Christian church stumbled over the same truth concerning the followers of Jesus as did the early disciples with respect to the Master himself. The two disciples on their way to Emmaus did not understand why it was necessary for him to suffer and die. Jesus explained to them that this was first necessary, and then Messiah would enter into his glory. (Luke 24:13-32) With their eyes now opened, they grasped this thought and rejoiced in its implications. They learned later the additional truth that the sufferings of Christ

were not completed at Calvary, but would also include those of his “body” members. (I Cor. 12:12,27) Hence the glory of Messiah’s kingdom must still wait. This vital truth, however, was eventually lost sight of, and resulted in the efforts of church leaders to establish the kingdom ahead of time.

EFFORTS UNSUCCESSFUL

Kingdom efforts established by fallen man have not brought the promised blessings of universal and lasting peace to the nations of the earth. Now the full extent of these unsuccessful endeavors is plainly evident. For centuries, God kept silent, and restrained himself from interfering with man’s selfish course. (Isa. 42:14; Ps. 50:21) Even now, his almighty power has not been manifested to the masses of mankind. Hence, with the present distress, trouble, and perplexity so clearly visible in the affairs of the nations, and among society in general, the outlook is indeed dark for those who do not know the real plan of God. However, the Christian world in 2019, as they have for nearly two millennia, will commemorate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. All who participate will thereby implicitly acknowledge their belief in this greatest miracle of all time.

There was no evidence to the world of God’s protection for Jesus during the days of his suffering and crucifixion. There has likewise been no evidence to the world of divine shelter for the true followers of Jesus since. In the case of Jesus, God’s power was manifested, not in preventing his death, but in raising him from the dead. God’s power in the case of the faithful followers of Jesus will likewise be manifested in their resurrection from the dead, and

in their exaltation to reign with Christ. Most assuredly, the Heavenly Father provided strength of spirit which enabled Jesus to endure the contradiction of sinners. This is true also of his followers. However, this is a favor from God of which the world is not aware, and which is beyond the understanding of those not fully dedicated to the divine cause.

FIRSTFRUITS OF THOSE ASLEEP IN DEATH

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. The blessings of this kingdom will also come to those who are now dead, for when Jesus was raised from the dead he became "the firstfruits of them that slept." (I Cor. 15:20) This is the heart-cheering assurance which the commemoration of Jesus' resurrection should give to every Christian this year despite the sorrows of the dying world with which he is surrounded.

Jesus died as the Redeemer of Adam and his race. Paul explains that all die "in Adam," but that all will be made alive "in Christ," that is, by coming into heart harmony with him. (I Cor. 15:22) The weak in faith may think of this as a reasonable theory, but one which has not worked out in reality. These may reason that if God could use his power to raise Jesus from the dead nearly two thousand years ago, why has there been no visible demonstration of that power since on behalf of those for whom Christ died, especially those who have faithfully followed in his footsteps.

The answer to this question is that God has a due time for the outworking of every feature of his

plan of salvation. After assuring us that the opportunity for the Adamic race to again have life is provided through Christ, the Apostle Paul adds: “But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming.” (vs. 23) When Paul explains that Christ in his resurrection became “the firstfruits of them that slept,” he evidently refers to Jesus alone. However, when he describes the order of the resurrection and uses the same expression, his reference clearly is not only to Jesus, but also to his faithful followers who, in the divine plan, are brought forth in the “first resurrection” to live and reign with Christ.—Rev. 20:4,6

AN OFFERING TO GOD

The “firstfruits” terminology is based upon God’s dealings with Israel during Old Testament times. It was a requirement of the Mosaic Law that the firstfruits of the harvest should be used as an offering to the Lord. In this arrangement there were not only the firstfruits in general, but also what was referred to as “the first of the firstfruits.” (Exod. 23:19) In harmony with this we might think of Jesus as being the “first” of the firstfruits, and all his faithful followers as the remaining firstfruits in God’s great “first resurrection” harvest.

Jesus offered himself in sacrifice to his Heavenly Father, and we are invited to follow in his sacrificial steps, offering ourselves to God. This is an important thought to keep in mind as we commemorate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We should remember that if we desire to participate in the “first resurrection” to live and reign with Christ we must lay down our earthly lives in sacrifice,

faithfully even unto death.—Rom. 8:16,17; 12:1; II Tim. 2:10-12; Rev. 2:10

The offering to God of the firstfruits class has continued throughout all the centuries from Jesus' First Advent until now. Until that work of sacrifice is complete, and all the firstfruits raised from the dead and united with Christ Jesus in the spiritual rulership of the Messianic kingdom, the resurrection of the remainder of mankind cannot begin.

“AFTERWARD”—ANOTHER RESURRECTION WORK

“Afterward they that are Christ's at his coming,” Paul wrote—that is, after “Christ the firstfruits” are resurrected—then follows the resurrection of mankind in general. (I Cor. 15:23) The clarity of this thought is somewhat obscured by the translator's use of the word “coming” to translate the Greek word *parousia*. This Greek word means “presence” and should always be translated accordingly. Here the reference is not to the moment of Christ's second coming, but to the period of his presence in the affairs of earth following his return.

This thought is clearly shown in succeeding verses, which read, “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 who are Christ's during his presence as kingdom ruler are not the same as those previously mentioned as the firstfruits. Rather, they are those who, after the firstfruits class is complete, accept Jesus as their Redeemer and become obedient to the laws of his kingdom. These also will receive life through Christ.

This “afterward” resurrection will begin with an awakening from the sleep of death of those who

have not qualified through faith and obedience in this life to share in the rulership work of the Messianic kingdom. Upon their awakening from death, they will have revealed to them the knowledge of God's provision of everlasting life on earth through Christ. If they believe and progress to heart obedience of the laws of the millennial kingdom, they will be restored to perfection of human life, and live forever. This work will require the entire kingdom period, and only when it is complete will it be true that the great "last enemy," death, has been destroyed.

That there is to be an awakening of all the dead is shown by many of the promises and prophecies of the Bible. The Sodomites were destroyed because of their wickedness, but the prophet assures us that they will be restored to their "former estate"—an earthly one. (Ezek. 16:55) Jesus 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. (Mark 6:11) However, it will be "tolerable" for the Jews also, for after the work of the present age is complete, then "all Israel shall be saved," and this salvation is promised even to those unbelieving Jews who rejected Christ.—Rom. 11:26,31

NOT IN VAIN

The Apostle Paul closes his lesson on the resurrection of the dead, saying, "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, 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 also often seemed as though the Christian's labor in the Lord was in vain, but not so, Paul assures.

Throughout the age every faithful follower of the Master has experienced "victory" as he continued to lay down his life in sacrifice. When he was weak, God gave him strength. (II Cor. 12:9) He has realized that the mighty power which raised Jesus from the dead has been enlisted on his behalf. He has been encouraged and strengthened in all his efforts to know and to do the Heavenly Father's will. (Eph. 1:17-20) He has not been able to overcome the weaknesses of his flesh as he would like to have done. However, he has been assured that prayer at the "throne of grace" to acknowledge his sins and to seek forgiveness, through the merit of Christ's blood, has resulted in the covering of his fleshly weaknesses. (Eph. 1:7; Heb. 4:16; I John 1:7-10) At the same time, he has resolved more earnestly not to "continue in sin," but to be "dead to" and "not serve" sin, and to yield himself as a servant of God, having his "fruit unto holiness." (Rom. 6:1-22) Thus through Christ his victory has been made complete, and he has been able to rejoice in the Lord.

Every faithful Christian, moreover, knows that when his life of sacrifice has been finished, and he has been faithful unto death, his victory through Christ will be completed by the exercise of divine power to raise him from the dead, so that, as Paul wrote, this mortal will "put on immortality." (I Cor. 15:53) When all the faithful ones of this age have

finished their earthly course, and have been exalted in the “first resurrection,” together they will be united with Christ, becoming his “bride” in glory at the “marriage of the Lamb.”—Rev. 19:7; 21:9

Then will follow the fulfillment of the wonderful promise of Revelation 22:17, which assures us of the time when “the Spirit and the bride” will speak to all mankind as they are brought forth from the sleep of death, and say to them, “Come, ... take the water of life freely.” What a glorious and victorious consummation of the divine plan of salvation that will be!

STEADFAST AND UNMOVABLE

As again this year we contemplate all that is involved in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, what an incentive it should be to steadfastness in the Lord and in the truth of his Word. How it should strengthen our resolve to be faithful to the terms of our covenant of sacrifice, and to be loyal to one another as together we walk along in the narrow way which leads to life. May the resurrection doctrine of God’s plan, the ransom which makes the resurrection possible, and all the other fundamental teachings associated with it, impress us more than ever with the importance of these precious and glorious truths of the Bible.

To the extent that we are “steadfast” in the Lord and in the truth we will abound in the work of the Lord. Steadfast Christians cannot be otherwise than abounding Christians. We should abound in our love for the Lord and for our brethren. We should abound in laying down our lives for the brethren, and we should abound in proclaiming the glad tidings of

the kingdom far and wide as we have and can make opportunities. Remembering the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead should mean all of these things to us. We do not properly commemorate Jesus' resurrection by a display of fine clothes, but by a greater determination to follow his example of sacrifice resolutely even unto death.

Paul wrote, as already noted, that our "labour is not in vain in the Lord," but it would be in vain if Christ had not been raised from the dead. Then our faith also would be vain, and our testimony concerning Jesus and his kingdom would be false. On the other hand, our labor might well seem in vain because of the meager response we receive to our efforts in making known the glad tidings, but this is not really true. One of the greatest and most important results of all our labors in the Lord is the work of grace that it accomplishes in our own hearts.

Laboring in the Lord should strengthen our faith and increase our love. As we make known the glad tidings to others, this glorious truth should become more effective in transforming our lives into the likeness of Christ. If our hearts and motives are pure this will be one of the outstanding results of our ministry. In view of this we can truly affirm that our labor is not in vain.

As individuals we may not see any special results of our ministry. Yet, the work of the Lord's people as a whole is reaching and developing those whom the Lord is calling, one here and one there, to be joint-heirs with Christ, and this is a very important work indeed. It is thus that the "bride" is made ready for her union with Christ, and for joint heirship with him in his kingdom. Just as Paul could say in

his day that the labor of the Lord's people was not in vain, so we can now also be assured of this. The power of Christ's resurrection continues with the Lord's people today, and will soon extend to all the willing and obedient of mankind. "Thanks be to God," who has made provision for all to gain the "victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" ■

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever."—Rev. 5:12,13, New American Standard Bible