

6th Edition



# Resurrection HOPE

**John T Classic**

... FISCHE,  
... THIS LIFE IN HIS 54<sup>TH</sup> YEAR  
... WEDNESDAY ... AUGUST 5636.

A-Ω

# Resurrection HOPE

*“Don’t be amazed,” said Jesus!*

*His astounding promise isn’t a new idea. It’s a forgotten truth.*

*Don’t you want to live forever? We cannot ignore the future! Either we die and remain as dust forever, or we die only to awaken, sometime in the future, to literally stand up again and finally see God. The resurrection is not myth. It is not folklore. It is indeed the best news we could ever hear! Can we afford to casually dismiss it?*

**By John T Classic**

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica. Use of either trademark requires the permission of Biblica.

Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved

Resurrection Hope

Author: John T Classic; Appendix: Ernie Klassek

Copyright © John T Classic, 2010-22

ISBN 978-0-646-53966-9

<https://www.message7.org/book-resurrection.html>

Published by MessageWeek Ministries  
PO Box 777, Northam, WA, 6401, Australia  
Telephone +61 417 177 683  
producer@message7.org

First Edition 2010

Sixth Edition 2022

German translation by Ernie Klassek and Horst Selent

Spanish translation by Oscar Cevantes and Marcos Gonzales

English editor, Sherri Langton

This book is not to be sold. It is given free of charge. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.



**A** special thanks to my family and numerous friends whose insight and support have been invaluable during the writing of *Resurrection Hope*.

Appreciation to my wife Rebecca for her support and patience. A special thanks to my father Ernie for the many conversations we've shared during the years of writing and editing this book - with special attribution for his thoroughness in proofreading and translation in German. Thanks also to Oscar Cervantes and Marcos Gonzalez for their dedicated work on the Spanish translation.

We take no credit for what is given to us, but are rather humbly reminded of the following:

*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:10-11 NIV).*

*"A man can receive only what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27 NIV).*

How can we ever thank our LORD enough. Created in his image and likeness for an awesome destiny, it is only through Jesus that we have hope, meaning, purpose and identity!

Take time to consider the promises that await. Listen carefully to the narrative. Hold onto Jesus' words. Enjoy the journey. Consider the testimonies, and rest in hope assured.

# Contents

Chapter 1	The Terrifying Truth . . . . .	Page 1
Chapter 2	Confronted and Surprised . . . . .	Page 4
Chapter 3	A Generation Earlier . . . . .	Page 14
Chapter 4	The Resurrection of Lazarus. . . . .	Page 19
Chapter 5	Jesus' Ordeal. . . . .	Page 31
Chapter 6	The Resurrected Jesus . . . . .	Page 48
Chapter 7	The First Resurrection . . . . .	Page 58
Chapter 8	The Second Resurrection . . . . .	Page 70
Chapter 9	The Journey to Hell . . . . .	Page 92
Chapter 10	Abraham Believed . . . . .	Page 101
Chapter 11	God Raises the Dead . . . . .	Page 109
Chapter 12	The State of the Dead . . . . .	Page 115
Chapter 13	Out of Body Experiences. . . . .	Page 121
Chapter 14	Hope Beyond All Hope. . . . .	Page 134
Chapter 15	By the Way . . . . .	Page 139
Chapter 16	Where is Larry? . . . . .	Page 144
Chapter 17	The Gladness of God . . . . .	Page 150
Chapter 18	All Because of Jesus . . . . .	Page 163
Appendix	A Glimpse. . . . .	Page 169

# 1

## The Terrifying Truth

**B**loodied, bruised, beaten, nailed and speared. It was hard to believe that Jesus, the Son of God, the Word (Logos) was dead. After all, he was the Messiah – the promised, long-awaited Anointed Saviour! Ancient prophecies told of his rulership, might and power. During his ministry, he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead and forgave their sins, and if you knew those ancient scriptures, then only God can lay claim to that! And now the lifeless body of the Son of God hung, bloodied, pierced and expired.

The brutality of Roman rule seemed to triumph once again. The King of the Jews was dead. Those who had hoped for a different outcome now cowered in a mixture of fear, contempt and brewing darkness.

The turn of events, unpredictable at best, was not what any of Jesus' disciples anticipated. Earlier in the ordeal, when the soldiers came with clubs, swords and lanterns to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, they fell over when Jesus asked them who they were looking for. "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.

The power of "I am," conveyed in Jesus' response caused even battle-hardened warriors to collapse in helplessness. But, then, Jesus let them arrest him. That's when one of Jesus' closest disciples Peter, seeing events seemingly "go so wrong" clumsily wielded his sword, failing to decapitate the high priest's servant. (The lesson here is that the best of human intentions often get it so woefully wrong!)

Now, hours later, Jesus was dead. Darkness and terror lay in the hearts of the living, most of all his followers. It just wasn't meant to happen that way! Or was it?

The gospel narratives clearly show that on several occasions Jesus predicted his death to be followed by his resurrection three days and three nights later. But it didn't really register even to his closest disciples. Jesus' detractors, however, the Jewish religious rulers did

## Resurrection Hope

---

remember his prophetic assurances, and so added security was enforced around the tomb, ensuring no undesired outcome.

The belief in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, is at the heart of the Christian message and hope. There is no other central teaching, no other matching doctrine, and no other foundational truth. Fact-checking reveals that Jesus died on a Wednesday afternoon, was buried before sunset prior to the high day of Unleavened Bread, and rose from the dead sometime after sunset that following Saturday night. When Mary arrived at the tomb early on Sunday morning, Jesus was already risen and gone.

The angelic messenger questioned her, *“Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He’s not here. He is risen!”*

Today, we stand on the testimonies of those first century eye witnesses. We see their despair, and feel their darkness. And then, just as Jesus predicted, we too exult in their exceedingly great joy at seeing their Lord and Saviour again. Such joy and gladness continues to echo across the millennia in the endearing and enduring faith of those who would follow.

Many years later, one of Jesus’ closest disciples again saw the now glorified Son of God in a powerful and terrifying vision. Jesus said to John, *“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore...”*

The compelling truth that Jesus, the Logos, the Son of God, died and rose again, simply means that this narrative seriously needs our attention. It’s otherwise foolish to relegate these eye-witness accounts and their compelling evidence as fables to be discarded to the realm of fantasy. As verifiable, factual recording of events by those closest to him, Jesus’ resurrection then however must be the most terrifying truth we could ever encounter, because it suddenly condemns our society’s atheistic suppositions as deceptively and dangerously wrong, just as it also opens up the realms of possibility, joy and hope.

Without “resurrection” there is no hope; human life is otherwise just a random accident, neither good nor bad, with no meaning, purpose or

## Resurrection Hope

---

identity. But, if the Logos who spoke everything into existence, then entered our reality of time, matter and space to demonstrate complete redemption and forgiveness by his own sacrifice, and he is in fact who he says he is, then we have a responsibility to ask: "What does it mean for me, and everyone else who has ever lived?"

Are we willing to explore the compelling reasons to believe and hope in the power and promise of glorious resurrection life?

It's a question we want you to genuinely ponder as we explore the evidence for Resurrection HOPE!



## 2

### Confronted and Surprised!

**I**t was hard to believe that Larry had died. It was so unexpected. Larry looked well and happy when we amicably chatted a few weeks earlier. He had just expanded his business venture, and I ever so vividly remember discussing it with him. So here we were at his funeral.

No one could have imagined that within a few weeks of our conversation Larry would have all his family and friends around him, and he'd never know it. Perhaps the only redeeming aspect of any funeral is that it's often one of the few occasions when family and friends and often the local community manage to get together.

Some funerals are sad, low-key events where mourners obscure their teary eyes behind sunglasses. Not so with Larry's farewell. People were shaking hands and hugging, others chatting almost as if they were in a celebratory mood. The officiating pastor spoke about celebrating life, as well as how much Larry would be missed. His younger brother told some comical childhood recollections, conveying how he was loved, and all the eulogies reflected on what a remarkable man Larry was.

Larry attended church in his boyhood years with his parents and younger brother. During his teens, with weekend sports and other distractions, Larry gradually drifted away from church life. It's not that he didn't know about Jesus and the hope offered us; it's that he probably never really allowed this grace to transform him beyond his puerile pursuits. In other words, he never came to personally knowing God or His son Jesus. Thus church life and its associated liturgy became less relevant as compared to the everyday distraction of business, sports and travel.

As Larry's family and friends made their way out of the cemetery, the funeral director released a cluster of white helium-filled balloons. They floated away and out of sight. The few remaining balloons were given to some of the youngest children, who seemed reluctant to let them go.

Despite this positive farewell, Larry was gone. No more joviality. No more business plans. No more barbecues – well, not with Larry anyway. As we left the cemetery, we left Larry behind, buried among those aging granite tomb stones, rusting iron fences and weather beaten epitaphs.

If we never give our mortality a thought during the busyness of life, we certainly can't avoid acknowledging it at a funeral. And it raises questions. Is there is any consciousness beyond this life? What might we expect? Are we completely dead? Does some part of us live on? Do we, for example, experience the pearly gates, or are we quickly escorted to "the other place"?

The cemetery is not the sort of place we'd normally want to visit. It's often referred to as the "dead centre" of town, and our associations with it are often sad ones. For at every epitaph lie the memories and experiences of people just like you and me – people who once lived and laughed and loved, but now no more. Is that it for them, and eventually for us? It's the sort of question for which we all crave a definitive answer.

Although the Holy Bible, Christianity's constitutional document, has much to say on the resurrection of all people, it isn't nowadays the first thing that usually comes to mind when a loved one dies. Talk to people on the street about the subject, and you might be surprised at how different individual beliefs are. Some, for example, imagine their deceased relatives to be blissfully in heaven. Various religions have varying ideas of an afterlife. Others simply shrug and say they believe in something else beyond this life, but cannot say what that is. Atheists and evolutionists believe that our few years of what we call life are all there is. A few, however, still believe in a literal and bodily resurrection back to life.

Search through a library full of theological books looking for specific information that deals with the "resurrection of all people" and you may be disappointed. This subject is often treated somewhat vaguely, if not indifferently, in religious texts and in theological circles.

Certainly, there are a variety of online articles on the resurrection; a quick internet search of the words *hope, resurrection* yields millions of

references. While a variety of scholarly treatises also exist on the resurrection subject, they are not usually written for the every-day person. Christian bookstores have numerous publications on heaven and the experiences of those who allegedly have been there and returned to tell of their experiences, yet the absence of any books on the resurrection is, of itself, alarmingly conspicuous – as we will see. Hence it is our prayer that this book, *Resurrection Hope*, will speak into the certainty you are looking for – and which Jesus is offering you.

Because mainstream Christianity has absorbed extra-Biblical beliefs about the “afterlife”, the idea of a literal and bodily resurrection isn’t generally thought of as a core, mainstream belief. Yet it also seems that there is some ambiguity as to what *resurrection* actually means. This book is a sincere and honest attempt to clearly articulate those resurrection themes as found in the Holy Bible as they relate to the biggest questions we can ask about life and death.

The Bible is the “book of all books”. It is the most printed and published book of all time and has probably influenced Western civilisation more than we’d like to admit. So it makes an intuitive and rational sensibility to use it as our source for this discussion.

Let’s begin with a question. What does the Bible have to say about life and death and the things that may or may not exist beyond our experience today? We might wonder how the ancients viewed death, and that raises more questions. Does their understanding and commentary help us? In fact, what did Jesus, the most notable and influential person in history, say about it? How did the early first-century church view death? What about the Bible-based beliefs of our grandparents and great grandparents, often etched into their tombstone epitaphs? Furthermore, is there anything beyond our human experience, that we might expect when we think about life, death and meaning?

These are important questions because the answers to them essentially fashion how we live our lives today. If we knew with certainty what lies beyond this life, then we would probably live somewhat differently. That is precisely the motivation behind this book!

But there's a problem. Many Western countries openly profess an increasingly secular political correctness, and this thinking further advances the allusion of a "post-Christian era". Our present journey, however, should not be at the expense of the values and enriching heritage cherished by our forebears. They may, indeed, have something to teach us.

Over the years you may have occasionally discussed the subject of death with close friends. You may have heard different opinions on it, exploring a variety of beliefs as to what may, or may not, lie beyond this life. Perhaps you have attended various funeral services, where you heard a preacher share words of hope, a message generally celebrating life, or some variation of "going to heaven". (Ostensibly, many funerals today have little or no "religious sentiment".) Perhaps you've pondered the tombstone epitaphs in really old cemeteries that reflect "resurrection" belief. If you've attended church services, you've probably heard sermons that have centred on the resurrection "life" in Jesus Christ. Most people, however, give scant thought to perhaps the biggest question of all: does my life have meaning beyond our last breath?

*(Note: While it's not the intention of this book to discuss the merits of atheism versus faith, note that we strongly and intelligently contend that there is a personally knowable Creator God revealed in Jesus Christ. To suggest that humans evolved into existence by progressive, random ascendance is simply ludicrous. The single cell, for example, has been discovered to be more complex in design than the sum total of all the communications in New York City! We are fearfully and wonderfully made<sup>1</sup>. This book does, however, discuss faith versus atheism in Chapter 14).*

Still, from time to time, we can't help but become confronted by our own mortality. Who am I? Is life just a moment of consciousness between two oblivions?

---

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 139:14 I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvellous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.

There are different Christian organisations today that provide remarkable services to those in need. For example, some excel in articulating God's grace through providing food ministries for the impoverished. Others are yet involved in aged care, school chaplaincy, gospel broadcast, prison ministries, youth activities, pro-life advocacy, medical missions, and so on. All these services and more reflect the eyes, ears, and hands of the living God working among us – as his Spirit motivates the faithful believer in Jesus into the service of others.

And yet some ministries seem conspicuously deficient. At a time in our lives that could be described as our “greatest moment of need” as in attending a funeral service, sometimes we intuitively know that what we're told during that final service is less than truthful. For example, it's hard to imagine the drunk and disorderly teen killed in a car accident, now speeding a shiny, new set of wheels around in heaven! We're often left feeling more confused than consoled, messed about by a mixture of competing sub-Christian ideas about life and death that attempt to placate our grief. Our sense of loss cries out for certainty and integrity. For this we rely on the biblical narrative.

A glass of fresh water satisfies the thirsty; fresh bread satisfies the hungry. But to say that Larry is either in heaven or in hell, simply falls short of what the Bible actually tells us. For the most part, we're left feeling deeply dissatisfied, if not confused.

The celebration of life at a funeral service should delineate certain hope, purpose, and facilitate an authentic divine authority for what “happens next”. Sometimes, however, the core message we're left with is not much more than a feel-good piece of folklore based on popular tradition.

We hope, as you read *Resurrection Hope*, that your view of life and death can be more meaningful than dreadful, heartwarming than sad, and surpassingly hope-filled than ever before.

Furthermore, we trust your journey through these pages, from Larry to Jesus, to be profoundly refreshing and inspiring.

Our research into the resurrection themes, as found in the Bible, began some years ago when we started internet media streaming short gospel films on the subject. More than just pioneering the gospel message with emerging technology, we felt a need to revisit the good news of the central resurrection message found throughout the Bible.

Over time, we found the subject of the resurrection intriguing because most people's expectations of what lies beyond this life differed with a variety of conflicting views. Thus, as the years went by, we produced numerous short films on the resurrection, some of which were filmed on-location in cemeteries and others in-studio. Each short film exploring different aspects of the hope that exists beyond this life.

The short resurrection films were remarkably successful in that they seemed to cater for an area of our lives that for many seemed lacking in definitive answers.

When friends asked what we had been doing lately in our film work, there was a natural moment of hesitation to admit that we had been filming on-location in cemeteries! Far from being morbid, the experience of setting up camera equipment and tripod, arranging lighting, and microphones, and then presenting a script amidst the landscape of aging tombstones and intriguing epitaphs is surprisingly more engaging than we might imagine. This was because we were surrounded by respectful memories and mementos of people who have preceded us. So what we're discussing in these pages is a conversation focussing on the future of all people who have ever lived, both the good and bad, young and old, regardless of gender, race or religion.

I remember an Australian History teacher in college as he helped our class glean information from old, Australian pioneer cemeteries. The results of those studies were confronting. For example, the small historic cemetery at Greendale, near Bacchus Marsh in Victoria, revealed an abnormally high infant mortality rate in those early pioneering days. A third of those buried were under three years old! It's not the sort of "statistic" that can leave one unaffected.

The notion that further helped initiate the writing of this book began in earnest when I personally experienced an intensified and palpable sense

of grief while reflecting on the epitaphs dedicated to those infants as inscribed on those tombstones, or as reflected in the deaths registry. Many were in unmarked graves. Consider the sad loss those pioneer families experienced. Their pain still speaks to us today because their loss is really our loss too. Those children could have been the next generation of doctors, lawyers, engineers, musicians, parents – peers of our own great-grandparents. The infant mortality rate was unmistakably high and comparable to most other areas in Australia at that time.

Today we are distanced from those times by over a hundred and fifty years, and yet the loss still feels personal. Is there any hope that one day all these children will rise to live again, this time to reach their full potential? Is there any reason to believe in a higher purpose to life?

One epitaph, typical of that era, that expressed deep loss reads as follows:

*Thy voice is now silent, That true heart lies cold  
Whose smiles of welcome oft met me of old  
I miss thee, I mourn thee, in silence unseen  
But I'll dwell on the memory of the days that have been.*

Another, with lettering etched into white marble, simply says, *Asleep in Jesus*. Many western pioneer cemeteries are notable because they feature epitaphs that are conspicuously Christian.

I will never forget the first funeral I attended at around twelve years of age. My parents insisted that, together with my brother and sisters, we attend a funeral of a family acquaintance, despite such occasions at that time often excluding children. During the graveside service when the coffin was lowered into the ground, a grieving, middle-aged lady dressed in black, suddenly jumped onto and clasped the descending coffin. She shrieked bitterly. "Don't put her down there! Don't put her down there!"

An awkward scuffle ensued as relatives and attendants tried to pry this distraught, grief stricken woman from the descending coffin. The remainder of that funeral service was sullied by her spontaneous

outpouring of grief. As a boy, I was left with more questions than answers, as well as a distinctly nasty feeling about death.

Thankfully, growing up in the Church of God (Sabbatarian) community, the teaching of the resurrection of all people was quite clear and often well-articulated, at least as I understood it. Thus, I ultimately grew up with a prevailing sense of hope rather than of ultimate dread.

My awareness of resurrection hope was also heightened when my grandmother died. My father organised a bronze plaque for her final resting place at the Mersey Valley Memorial Park on the picturesque North West Coast of Tasmania. He chose the simple epitaph: “Irma Klassek 1905-1987 Until The Resurrection”<sup>2</sup>. Those few comforting words tell of a belief that her decease is only for a limited time – that is, until a day of resurrection.

Many years later, when revisiting her grave site and standing alone in silent contemplation, I found I couldn’t hold back the tears. I loved my grandmother. My sorrow wasn’t only because I missed her so dearly, but because the sense of the power of a future resurrection seemed to make death appear like an awful trick in time. I believed in the resurrection, and yet through my tears I wondered at how such grief could linger over the years. I eagerly looked forward to that glorious day when I will see and embrace her again, and yet standing there in silence on that manicured cemetery lawn, there were only hope, memories, and moistened eyes.

In the course of our film work, we produced a number of short films that also discussed the resurrection of Jesus. We asked those “difficult questions” and revisited those ancient but relevant scriptures that speak with an uncanny certainty of a future resurrection experience. We explored the resurrection of all people, the good and the bad.

Some years ago a remarkable news feature appeared in popular media. Karla Faye Tucker, having been convicted of a horrible axe murder in the USA years earlier, was converted to Christianity while in prison. She

---

<sup>2</sup> 26/05/1987 Mersey Valley Memorial Park, Irma Klassek 81Y  
Location L8 Row Y Plot 13



caught the media's attention as she faced her widely-debated execution. Lawyers had unsuccessfully petitioned US President George Bush for a pardon, the merits of which were based on her conversion and changed life while on death row for some fifteen years. Just days away from her execution, Karla commented to a journalist that her imminent death didn't worry her, as she was "now going to be with Jesus".

Her words reflected a deep and powerful hope underscoring her calm. Her comments, however, really needed qualifying if they were to be true to Scripture. Isn't death, according to Jesus like a deep sleep, where there is no consciousness, no thoughts, nothing – except the call of His voice at a future resurrection?

In a European culture where "purgatory" played a significant part in people's ideas about the afterlife, you may have heard of those elderly widows donating from their poverty to the church in the belief that they were alleviating their spouses' suffering in purgatory. Purgatory was taught to be an intermediate place of suffering and cleansing prior to entering heaven. Every time an offering was made, the spouse was imagined to have been lifted just that little bit more from his (or her) suffering. Many today express indignation at how those poor widows were exploited by medieval and theological expedience. Furthermore, artwork such as Dante's and Bruegel's paintings of tortured poor souls suffering at the hands of a vengeful God doesn't help the pious imagination.

There are a lot of "ideas" out there as to what happens after death. A noted theologian recently discussed "soul sleep", a conscious disembodied state we might expect to experience between death and heaven. Another cited the soul being freed from the prison of our physical bodies at death. Reports of "out of body" experiences pepper the internet. Eastern ideas of the after-life have also impacted our thinking. The confusion between differing beliefs is made all the more complicated in that we're not exclusively referring to unfamiliar or foreign religions; we're talking about the Christian faith, arguably based on the Word of God, the Bible.

So, we may well ask, what do the Scriptures really tell us? What is fact and what is fiction? Can we be sure of an absolute truth? Where is Larry?

The purpose of this book is to explore the fascinating subject of the resurrection from a biblical perspective – a truth that also echoes from the epitaphs of our forebears. What might we find? We hope you'll be reassured, maybe confronted, even surprised.

### 3

## A Generation Earlier

If you look carefully you'll discover that the resurrection, as an expression of hope, can be found on the epitaphs at only the oldest of Australian cemeteries.

Let's travel to the capital city of Hobart in Tasmania, Australia. This picturesque and historic city snuggles beneath the towering heights of Mount Wellington and is located on the Derwent River. The city still reflects the architecture of a bygone era. There's a street in suburban Sandy Bay where, without modern cars, visitors could be forgiven for thinking that they had stepped back in time to the 1800's. The building facades, verandahs, lead-light windows and narrow streets reflect a distinct colonial British past. Drive an hour or so southeast, and you come to Port Arthur, a colonial penal settlement where most of the buildings still in use today were built by convict labour.

Complementing all this historicity are the old cemeteries. Many early settlers and convict family names are represented there on those still, moss-laden tombstones.

Those epitaphs should catch our attention: If you visit the oldest cemeteries, say of more than a hundred and fifty years ago, you'll still find specific references to the resurrection, like, 'Until the Resurrection', or 'I will awaken when He calls'. Epitaphs of more recent times no longer feature, it seems, such overt references to the resurrection.

Such observations are intriguing and worth further verifying. Thus, when travelling, I have often made it a point to visit many of those old cemeteries either in busy cities or in lonely rural plots.

It might initially sound somewhat morbid to confide to friends that you've been researching historical information from cemeteries as background material for a short film or an upcoming book. But for history students, the insights can only prove remarkable, and should present us with additional questions. What do we believe today, as opposed to what our great-grandparents believed? If there has been a

change in thinking, as most would agree, how and why has it happened? How does the average person today view life and death?

When walking around and filming in cemeteries in Australia, the United States and in New Zealand, it's easy to be touched by the genuine and loving epitaphs etched into those limestone or granite headstones. People do care, and their words are thoughtfully chosen to best remind them of their loved ones. Some epitaphs are short, others are poetic, and yet others simply express loss. But seldom anymore will you find direct references to the resurrection!

Some really old tombstones are often so weather-worn that deciphering the lettering can be quite difficult, but in the context of our discussion, it is exciting to still make out the word "Resurrection".

The historic town of York, founded in 1831, is the oldest inland settlement in Western Australia. Some of the earliest tombstones have been preserved in a local park, and many of those also tell of a high infant mortality rate for that era. Significant among those tombstones are the epitaphs. Most, if not all, reflect a distinct Christian belief, and several of them refer to a future resurrection:

*Father in thy gracious keeping,  
Leave we now thy servant sleeping.* (1888)

*We shall sleep but not for ever,  
There will be a glorious dawn.  
We shall meet to part 'no never',  
On the Resurrection morn.* (1884)

Our Western societies have experienced a significant but steady change in the past one hundred years. We've migrated from our original Judaic-Christian beliefs to a culture that is essentially secular. Once the architecture of churches dotted the Australian landscape; today those buildings are dwarfed by sporting venues, shopping centres, and city skyscrapers. We certainly can't ignore the demographic movements and migrations of peoples that have brought new cultures and ways of thinking. Science has opened up new vistas of understanding, and social values have been liberalised over time. Church attendance is generally

decreasing, and statistically fewer youth today believe in God. Christian iconography isn't in demand as it used to be, and seems to have been overtaken in more recent times by Buddha statues now available practically at every shopping centre.

We can wonder how the teachings of the Holy Bible, though still in perfunctory use in our law courts, have become increasingly irrelevant in our society's values. Why have Christian studies become marginalised or non-existent in our public schools? And we might also muse as to why our beliefs about death have changed. These relevant and important issues affecting us all are worth exploring.

I suppose we should first begin with an honest look at those foundational scriptures, and try to learn what the ancients (even our grandparents) believed, experienced, and were commended for. If we're observant, we might overhear insightful conversations and pick up on the controversies that affected previous generations. What did those great people of the Bible believe and think? What did our grandparents and great grandparents believe? We might also discover what the voice from outside of time, matter and space, namely the creator God specifically says about life and death. Our venture together may help us rediscover the unfading relevance of a lost truth: the hope of resurrection.

It's quite a difficult question to ask: What happens when you die – apart from being the centre of attention at your own funeral? It's not the sort of subject we like or want to talk about. In fact, we're more likely to dismiss it or joke about it: "Did you hear about the man who, after enjoying a few drinks, decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery..." For some, it's easier to dismissively "laugh it off" than seriously seek definitive and meaningful answers about death.

Why is this? Because death reminds us of our own mortality. Its foreboding nature flattens us with grief. We're talking about our loved ones, our parents and grandparents. And for those who are tragically unfortunate to lose a child, the pain is so much more intense. Just look at all those living room family photos. There are always pictures of loved ones who have "gone before us", reminders of the connectedness we

once shared. But now they're gone, and as days become years, we too become a part of that inevitable passing scenery.

I suppose there are times when we're grateful for the busyness of life that sufficiently distracts us so we don't have to dwell on the dastardly unknown. That is, of course, until we attend a funeral service where we are then confronted with the reality that foreshadows the time when we too will breathe our last.

In the past, Australian tradition did not include a final viewing, but in recent years that is now changing. A viewing of the deceased, in many countries, is accepted as a natural part of the grieving process. The deceased are prepared to "look their best" attired perhaps in one of their quintessential outfits. In the quiet, subdued light of a chapel or crematorium, mourners have the opportunity to see their beloved one last time.

Have you peered at the still face of your friend or loved one as they rest in that adorned wooden coffin? What thoughts did you entertain at that moment? How different did they look? Did you "flash-back" to when they were alive, when together you shared the good times? How did you then feel as the funeral attendant finally sealed the coffin lid with those ornate, brass thumb screws? Did your own mortality cross your mind? It should have!

The dilemma that we're often faced with is what to say by way of comfort to someone grieving the loss of a loved one. Is a sobbing hug enough? Or an awkward pat on the back? It's certainly no time for jocularities. Can you genuinely look into someone's watery, reddened eyes, and assure them of a certain hope? Are you assured that they will see their loved ones again? And if you make such an assertion, what did you base it on? What about those who lived somewhat godless, reprobate lives? What encouragement can you give to a grieving, pious mother when referring to her deceased son who was killed in a police gunfight?

For many it is a grey area. Because our views, beliefs and therefore our epitaphs have significantly changed over the past one hundred or so

years, can we still know with absolute certainty what, if anything, lies beyond this life?

## 4

### The Resurrection of Lazarus

**T**he oldest, most revered holy book in the world is, without compare, the Holy Bible. It's been described as "God's love letter", as the sum of God's revelation to humanity, as "salvation history", as being distinctly Divinely inspired and providing the foundational tenets for western law. The Bible is also quintessential poetry, song, law, prophecy, history, and wisdom. These remarkable Scriptures, traversing thousands of years and countless generations of peoples and civilisations, culminate and centre on Jesus Christ.

Jesus is recorded in Scripture as the Son of God, the Creator who spoke the universe into existence and sustains it by the power of his word. The years on our calendar are counted from his believed birth date. The seven days of our week originate from his creation work. Marriage also has its signature in God's creative purpose. In many different ways numerous Scriptures repeatedly testify that Jesus is LORD. In the flesh. Among us. The One who has the power over life and death. The Son of God who is coming back again.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus not only healed the sick, fed the hungry, and performed countless other miracles, but also on three occasions raised the dead. The accounts of those resurrections are so compelling, and the controversies that later surrounded the very idea of resurrection so rivetting, that it's worth beginning with the testimonies of exactly what happened.

Let's go back some two thousand years. When questioned by the religious authorities of the day, the only sign that Jesus gave as to his true identity was in the sign of his own death and resurrection: three days and three nights in the grave.

Jesus had just healed a man who had been ill for thirty eight years. When Jesus healed, his supreme act of grace was always accompanied by forgiveness. It was a Sabbath, and a healing on such a day was the perfect signature and complement as to who the Son of God is: the harbinger of rest, reconciliation and release. Yet because it was the



Sabbath and the healed man was spotted carrying his mat, the jealous religious authorities persecuted Jesus. According to Jewish oral traditions, both Jesus and the healed man had violated their law.

The Jews had created a burdensome legal fence around the gift of Sabbath rest. Instead of it being a day of rest and relief, over generations the Jewish ruling elite had created extraneous laws around the Sabbath that in practice actually prevented people from enjoying the rest God had given them. Carrying a mat was considered illegal; healing a man an even worse act!

It was against this climate that Jesus is recorded in John 5 as teaching about life, death, judgment, and honour.

*Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do; for whatever he does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he himself does; and he will show him greater works than these, that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him.*

*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.*

*Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of Man.*

*Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:19-29).*

This passage is interesting because Jesus, having first discussed his relationship with the Father, then twice iterated that “the hour is coming” when all the dead (those who are in the grave) will hear Jesus’ voice and come back to life. What’s more, Jesus said, “Don’t marvel” or, “Do not be amazed.”

The above scripture reference of Jesus’ exact words has attracted its detractors. However, when we try to impartially follow the testimonies of Jesus healing and raising the dead, we really have to stop and carefully consider what is at stake here. Did those events really take place? Can we corroborate those various eyewitness reports? Would these eyewitness testimonies hold up in a court of law?

We can’t help but marvel at what Jesus says and does in the Bible. In so many instances, Jesus heals the blind, restores a withered hand, a paralytic walks again, a sick woman and Peter’s mother-in-law are healed as are many lepers. He also casts out numerous demons. But we also have the remarkable and astounding record of Jesus raising three people from the dead – events that are harder to “explain away”.

The first occasion where Jesus raised a certified dead person back to life was in the case of a widow’s only son, as recorded in Luke chapter 7. Jesus and his disciples, with a large crowd following, met a funeral procession accompanied by most of the townspeople at the town of Nain. Jesus’ heart went out to the widow, for she not only lost her husband, but now also her only son. In first century society, women were severely disadvantaged if they lost the men in their life – either through war or natural causes. What Jesus said to the widow may initially appear to somewhat pointless at a time like this: “Don’t cry.”

What do you mean, “Don’t cry”? Isn’t an outpouring of grief as manifested in tears a natural part of the grieving and ultimately healing process?

What follows is amazing. Jesus went up to the coffin, and told the deceased young man to get up. The rest is history:

*The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country (Luke 7:15-17).*

In another account, as recorded by Luke the physician (also an astute historian), Jesus raised a ruler's daughter back to life.

*While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," he said. "Don't bother the teacher any more." Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child's father and mother.*

*Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. "Stop wailing," Jesus said. "She is not dead but asleep." They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened (Luke 8:49-56).*

In both incidents, the people who had witnessed the resurrections were in no doubt as to the astonishing nature of what they saw. A skeptic, however, could also just as easily suggest that in both cases nothing more had occurred than a simple resuscitation. How can we be absolutely sure that deceased people were really dead and not in a comatose state?

Perhaps the most remarkable resurrection of them all was of Jesus' friend Lazarus. You see, in the two other cases, one could easily argue that these weren't necessarily resurrections at all, but rather resuscitations. The case of Lazarus, however, is indisputably different; he had been dead in the grave for four days!

According to Jesus, both those who have done good and those who have done evil are in the grave. What is the grave? There's nothing

mysterious about that. Just visit a cemetery. The widow of Nain was on the way to such a cemetery to bury her son.

The three people Jesus raised back to life would have been buried in a grave without his intervention. The grave is synonymous with the biblical term “corruption”. Beyond three or four days after death, decay sets in. That leads us to another critical point.

Jesus predicted not only his own death, but also his resurrection that would occur three days and three nights later. It seems that when Jesus told his disciples about this on numerous occasions, anything he said simply “went over their heads”. It was all too much to understand given their perception of how things might happen. How could the Messiah die? Wasn’t he the one that would bring the “kingdom of God” and in their words, “restore the kingdom to Israel”? Death of the Messiah, let alone his resurrection, just wasn’t part of the disciples’ anticipated understanding of how the story might unfold.

So much of what Jesus said and did surprised his followers. His claim of being exactly “three days and three nights” in the grave is essential to proving the fact of resurrection.

This we begin to see when we carefully consider the implications of Lazarus’ death and resurrection. This event is worth revisiting in detail, because the more we consider what happened, the more profoundly amazing it is.

Among Jesus’ friends were two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. They apparently shared a house together. We gain a feel from Scripture that Jesus enjoyed a good friendship with them because we read sufficient detail of their activities together. Let’s follow the events as recorded by Jesus’ closest friend and disciple, a former fisherman, named John.

*Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus*

*was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick" (John 11:1-3).*

Mary and Martha not only were familiar with Jesus but also were coming to terms with the Divinity he claimed. They had witnessed Jesus extend healing and forgiveness many times before. Their brother Lazarus must have been significantly ill in order for them to send for Jesus. But Jesus was some time and distance away when he received their message.

*When Jesus heard that, he said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."*

*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days in the place where he was (John 11:4-6).*

It's important to the story to remember that John, the eyewitness of these events, also explicitly explains in his testimony that Jesus is the Son of God. That's the premise John starts from. We learn from Scripture that Jesus is the voice of creation, the Creator of everything, and furthermore he loves us – the centrepiece of his handiwork. He knows what he will do, and in what manner he will make those events come to pass. John tells us that the manner and purpose by which Jesus spoke and worked was given by his heavenly Father. It is interesting to follow Jesus' thoughts in this particular case. In this context it's also clear that there was a lot of love between Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus.

(A personal response to a family member or close friend becoming ill would be to drop everything and hurry to their bedside. This is precisely what happened when I received an urgent phone call saying that my "father had passed on." I immediately stopped what I was doing and drove the 120km to the city hospital, only to find my father sitting up in bed and, in a rather cheery mood, eating sandwiches! I was more than thankful for the outcome as I had imagined the worst).

When your friends or family are in trouble, it is no inconvenience to interrupt what you're doing and attend to their needs – as we might have expected Jesus to have done. But as we discover, Jesus' workings and methods are different; he stayed on for two more days, presumably teaching, healing, fellowshiping, praying, eating and sleeping – the usual things the Messiah did every day. But was this normal for Jesus? Why did Jesus wait a few days before responding? Let's read on.

*Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."*

*The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone you, and are you going there again?"*

*Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."*

*These things he said, and after that he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."*

*Then his disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well."*

*However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that he was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him" (John 11:7-15).*

The disciples didn't question Jesus tarrying two days; it's clear, however that they saw the risks. Although Jesus was popular among the crowds of his day for all the good work he was doing, he won no favours from the Jewish religious authorities who saw him as a grave threat to their religious positions.

What is remarkable in this passage is that Jesus referred to Lazarus as "sleeping", just as he also referred to the synagogue ruler's daughter as "sleeping". Initially, the disciples misunderstood, believing in the benefits of a good night's rest. So Jesus made it even plainer: "Lazarus is dead." According to Jesus – and this nuance is worth noting – death is

akin to “sleep”. It is perhaps the best analogy we have. The disciples suddenly understood that Lazarus had died, and Jesus quite plainly told them that he “was going to wake him up.”

*Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” So when Jesus came, he found that he had already been in the tomb four days (John 11:16-17).*

Now we’re beginning to understand why Jesus waited. Some people have “died” only to awaken as they were being jostled along in a coffin. There are records of incidents where the believed corpse actually regained consciousness during the funeral procession. Today, of course, we would like to believe that we have very accurate and scientific methods to ascertain whether one is dead or not. But back some two thousand years ago, it could have been easy for the skeptic to say, “Oh, yes, he must have been unconscious” or “The day was very cold, and he must have since revived”.

No, Jesus wasn’t about to perform a resuscitation. We’re talking about resurrection, and no one had any illusions as to what four days in the tomb meant: corruption, decay and odour.

*Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now 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 of 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 at the last day” (John 11:18-24).*

This is one of those intense and pivotal conversations between a faithful, grieving woman and the Lord. We’re privileged to have it recorded by John in its natural rawness. Martha had absolute faith in Jesus, and what she articulated was a clear and knowledgeable faith. Martha knew Jesus could do whatever he wanted, and as a true disciple and believer, she

had learned from Jesus for some time. Hence she could express a belief in the resurrection “at the last day”.

*Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever 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 to come into the world” (John 11:25-27).*

Martha respectfully knew with whom she was speaking, as she tried to fathom the depths of Jesus’ assurances. As far as Jesus was concerned, belief in him equated with eternal life; and what we learn is that although we may die, death is not our ultimate destiny!

*And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, “The Teacher has come and is calling for you.”*

*As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met him. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, “She is going to the tomb to weep there.”*

*Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

*Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see” (John 11:28-34).*

Though her grief was palpable, Mary, like Martha expressed a strong faith in Jesus. She had seen Jesus heal perhaps hundreds of people. But now, any hopes she had for Lazarus’ healing had long been dashed. It was now a time for mourning. Add to that the din of the local Jewish mourners, the manner and tempo that John records this, and the next



verse shows that our Lord, in the person of Jesus, is not immune to our experience.

*Jesus wept (John 11:35).*

You may have heard it said that Jesus wept over a lack of faith by those around him. Perhaps. But consider another view. Sometimes love is evidenced best through tears. I remember the tears when visiting my grandmother's grave site. I loved her dearly. This emotion was not because I didn't believe but because I missed my grandmother. I do believe, just as Martha did. Although Jesus wept because he loved Martha and Mary, he was also grieved by a general lack of faith by those around.

The same is true today. Jesus knows just how needful we are. He shares our grief, but not our lack of faith. He is touched by our infirmities, but not hindered or limited by them. He knows what death is, yet he also knows and commands the ultimate victory that exists for those who believe.

*Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" And some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:36-37)*

The Jews' scepticism is in itself interesting. They remembered when Jesus made a paste of spit and clay, applied it to a blind man's eyes, and then told him to go and wash. The man, blind from birth, could now see! This was an amazing healing, a gift of grace, and apparently witnessed by many. It was a healing that would have undoubtedly made a lasting impression. But note the disdain as well. The Jews thought that Jesus had finally met his match. Didn't Jesus tarry too long? Didn't he care enough? Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?

No wonder Jesus wept. He also knew the price he would personally pay with his own life so that Lazarus could have his.

*Then Jesus, again groaning in himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha,*

*the sister of him who was dead, said to him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days" (John 11:38-39).*

That's what the grave is. To us it is a "stench"; to Jesus it is no more problematic than "sleep"!

*Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying.*

*And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. And I know that you always hear me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that you sent me" (John 11:40-42).*

Jesus offered a short thanksgiving prayer – one that yet again showed his innate connectedness to the Father. It was the usual way Jesus approached those defining "opportunities" of each day, simply by thanking the Father in a precious few words.

*Now when he had said these things, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."*

*Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in him (John 11:43-45).*

Having been in the grave four days, Lazarus was undoubtedly dead. And now, he was alive! A certified dead man had walked out from the tomb!

Jesus likened death to sleep. For a believer in Christ, death has no more power over us than sleep. Death appears as no less than a temporary setback. Mary and Martha grieved for Lazarus – in much the same way we too grieve – but they didn't grieve as those who have no hope. The same is true of us. We have hope that one day, we too will hear the same loud voice calling our name.

The resurrection of Lazarus was a defining moment in Jesus' ministry, because we read elsewhere that the jealous Jewish ruling elite then plotted to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus. This is important, as it helps further illustrate just what a momentous event it was in the lives of these very ordinary people.

Many years later, Paul, an early church leader, evangelist, and prolific writer, shed more light on the subject in a letter to the believers in Thessalonica, Greece:

*But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:13-15).*

Paul often preached on the subject of hope, particularly the resurrection. For example, we read in Acts 24:15 in his defence speech to the governor Felix, Paul said he believed, *"that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust."* Paul also likened those who have died as simply being asleep. He reminded the faithful of Jesus' own death, and how Jesus' resurrection experience precedes ours. From what we understand in Scripture, the righteous who are "asleep" will awaken at the coming of the Lord. This, of course, is still yet to occur in the future.

What we have seen so far are foretaste resurrections. They give us a glimpse into the power and purpose of God. Without these examples, our understanding of what resurrection means would be so much more limited. There is awesome hope in what Jesus taught, revealed not only through those he healed, but also by those he raised back to life.

## 5 Jesus' Ordeal

**A**lthough Jesus predicted his death and resurrection on numerous occasions, it seems that even his closest disciples didn't understand what he *really* meant. Perhaps they felt Jesus was talking allegorically, or alluding to something else altogether. Admittedly, some of the things Jesus said, within their world view and frame of reference, could be regarded as "hard-to-understand". However, it is without question that on several occasions Jesus did clearly tell them. Today we have the benefit of hindsight. The gospel accounts – penned, we believe, several decades later, long after those events occurred – also show the benefit of the disciples' hindsight.

The only sign Jesus gave identifying and authenticating his Messiahship was to a sceptical audience when he said:

*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:40).*

To his own disciples, Jesus was specific as to what awaited him:

*And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned around and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:31-33).*

Mark also wrote his witness account some time after these events took place. Thanks to hindsight that time brings, events do become clearer and more understandable, and find their natural and true context. Mark recalled when Peter, who understood the seriousness of Jesus' words, took Jesus aside and personally rebuked him. We know Peter as perhaps the most outspoken of all the disciples, and this incident is certainly in keeping with his overall character.

Given the circumstances, imagine yourself as Peter saying, “Jesus, this is where you’re absolutely wrong. No more of this nonsense!” Peter seemed to believe, as did the rest of the disciples based on the questions they asked, that Jesus, as the Messiah, would overthrow the Romans in their day and return Israel to its former glory.

Jesus didn’t have any illusions as to where Peter’s intentions originated. The devil had tempted Jesus, offering him a fast track to kingship, saying in effect, “You don’t have to go through all this crucifixion stuff. You can have all the kingdoms of this world right now” (see Matthew 4:8-9). Peter, too, it seems, was also in the devil’s sights.

On another occasion Jesus gave additional insight as to why he came into the world: to die and be raised to life. John’s record, written many years after those events, reflects that understanding:

*So the Jews answered and said to him, “What sign do you show to us, since you do these things?”*

*Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”*

*Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”*

*But he was speaking of the temple of his body. Therefore, when he had risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said (John 2:18-22).*

Notice the cryptic, at best indirect, nature of Jesus’ response? Here, perhaps some thirty or so years later when John was finally committing his experiences to parchment, he seems to better understand Jesus’ parable.

Of course, Jesus frequently spoke in parables, using short stories to convey a greater meaning. Often what he said, by way of a story or riddle, could equally be misunderstood or, at the very least, carry some ambiguity. Jesus intentionally offered the listeners of his day a

challenge, and one I believe is meant to be considered in order to be understood. An old proverb seems to affirm this: *“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings”* (Proverbs 25:2).

The Jews, however, scoffed at their literal understanding of Jesus’ teachings, and that presented an even greater challenge to Jesus when he spoke of his death and resurrection. They were a proud people and equally proud of their temple (despite it being built by Herod). Everything, nonetheless, in their worship experience centred on the stage of the temple. No doubt the temple must have been a sight to behold, an imposing edifice adorned with gold inlay, with lambs regularly killed for burnt sacrifices, the activity of the money changers, and the comings and goings of peoples from all over the known world at various appointed times of the year.

It seems that to the callous and unbelieving heart in that day, Jesus wasn’t going to make his teachings too easy to understand. Rather, it appears that God wants those who listen to him to “think things through”, and by doing so, grow in depth of understanding. The enigmatic aspects of Jesus’ teaching were intended to take on their full significance with the benefit of thought and time. However, even for his disciples back then, Jesus’ meaning wasn’t all that clear.

The author of Hebrews, (whom many scholars believe was Paul) wrote his letter probably sometime prior to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. In this testimony are numerous references to the meaning of worship celebrations, including the Day of Atonement. We read with interest the details of the high priest’s role in the temple. These were presented to show how they relate to and foreshadow all that Jesus accomplished in his redeeming work on our behalf. If the temple had been destroyed when the author penned this letter, we’d probably see some evidence reflecting its destruction. Though an aside, it’s still nonetheless an important point to note.

While Jesus’ pivotal teaching of his death and resurrection was, for some, hard to understand in the Gospels, the basic principles of Christ as found in Hebrews 6 are not hard to understand. They help us understand our own life’s faith journey. The author encourages his

readers that they shouldn't have to again lay the very basic, elementary foundations of faith in Christ.

*Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-2).*

From this passage emerge the primary pillars of doctrine of the Christian faith ,which consist of the following:

1. Repentance
2. Faith
3. Baptism
4. Laying on of hands
5. The resurrection of the dead
6. Eternal judgement

Each one of these pillars is a sermon in itself, and all find their purpose and fulfilment in the work and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are foundational and essential to Christianity; none can be omitted. They form a chronological whole, and can mirror believers' personal journey and experience in Christ from calling to conversion through to resurrection in the "hope of Glory" that await beyond.

Without Jesus' resurrection, our future resurrection would not be possible. But there are a few necessary steps to go through before that glorious event. The first step in reconciliation with God is repentance – that is, changing from our own evil and self-centred ways to God's ways. It is then living in total obedience and submission to God's will in Jesus Christ.

The next step after repentance is faith. Faith is believing God. It is believing God when everything seems contrary. Faith is absolutely essential in our relationship with Jesus. In fact, it is impossible to please God without faith! An example of this was in the life of Abraham, one of

the great people of the Bible, who is known as the “father of the faithful”.

Then follows baptism by immersion in the name of Jesus<sup>3</sup>. Baptism is a Christian rite of passage, an ordinance expressing the death of the “former sinful man” and the raising to a new life as a completely new person in Christ. So to fulfill all righteousness, Jesus was baptised (Matthew 3:13), setting us an example to follow as well as foreshadowing his own death and resurrection.

If, during a baptism ceremony, the new believer were immersed under the water for more than a few moments, then without air, death would quickly follow. But, no, when raised out of certain death into a new, forgiven life, we witness a completely new person. In fact, Scripture indicates that we’re raised from the watery grave as a new creation!<sup>4</sup> The symbolism is powerful.

Even though Jesus lived a sinless life and didn’t need to be baptised on the same level as we do, he took on himself our sins and was prepared to pay the ultimate price with his life. He did this because of his love for us.

Following baptism, the laying on of hands in prayer facilitates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the new believer’s life. Literally, this means that the personal presence and power of God comes and dwells in us. We understand from Scripture that the newly baptized man or woman, from this point onward, becomes a new creation and lives the life of a saint until the physical life ends in natural death, awaiting in sleep the coming of Jesus.

All of this – repentance, faith, baptism, the laying on of hands – makes possible the bodily resurrection of believers who died. First, the righteous are raised to immortality, (and later the unrighteous to a time of judgment).

---

<sup>3</sup> see Acts 2:38-39, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5

<sup>4</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5:17



Judgment, the final pillar as listed in Hebrews, is now on the people of God. One day all the rest of humanity who are resurrected will stand before the “judgment seat of God”. That which we experience in this life – good and bad, happy and sad, great and small, as well as the daily decisions we make – will be accounted for in a time of judgment on God’s terms alone.

Those few verses in Hebrews, which explicitly refer to the resurrection, summarise so much. Together they are powerful anchor points that shouldn’t, as the author of Hebrews points out, have to be re-established in a believer’s life. Reading a few verses on we learn:

*And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:11-12).*

The Scriptures repeatedly affirm that awaiting us are some awesome promises, and integral to that journey is the resurrection. The term the “resurrection of the dead” applies to all people, as Jesus said, “*all who are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God and come out...*” Of course, the pioneer and author of the entire resurrection experience is Jesus Christ.

After Jesus rose from the tomb and returned to heaven, it didn’t take long for heresies and arguments to dispute the validity of the resurrection. That’s what Paul addressed in his letter to the believers at Corinth. The legacy of these controversies, as Paul dealt with them, has benefited our understanding some 2000 years later. Here Paul highlights the critical importance of Jesus’ resurrection:

*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, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ, whom he did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is*

*not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*

*But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:12-22).*

Everything we believe that has any value hinges entirely on the validity of Jesus' own resurrection. If his resurrection did not happen as predicted, then we're wasting our time, and our faith is in vain. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus opened the path for our own redemption and salvation – our own change from mortal to immortal, from perishable to imperishable. As Jesus was bodily resurrected, so too will we be resurrected. That's what the Scriptures tell us; that's what we contend. Resurrection through Christ is our only hope!

Because of the controversies that affected those first century Christians, we are privy to the arguments in defence of the resurrection promise as well as the statements of faith Paul consistently emphasised throughout his letters.

Consider, for example, the controversies between differing schools of Hebrew thought. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection but the Sadducees didn't. The Gospel accounts, as well as letters written by the apostles, feature those ongoing controversies regarding the validity of the resurrection. Thus we are privy to knowing what concerned the early Christians. At one time, Paul reminded the faithful at Corinth that the resurrected Jesus was seen by some 500 faithful people<sup>5</sup>.

We too can fall prey to doubt, conspiracies and controversies today. Because everything we believe as Christians hinges on the resurrection of Jesus, it is necessary to get a clear picture of what actually happened and in what order those events occurred.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:6

While many Christians traditionally celebrate the Good Friday to Easter Sunday scenario to accommodate Jesus' prophesied three days and three nights in the grave, let's make an eye-opening study to discover what really happened and the exact timing of those events.

While there is a variety of scholarly opinions surrounding the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we understand from the Scriptures that the annual Passover week featured two annual Sabbaths interspersed by a weekly Sabbath. Thus, the events of that time make remarkable sense. The following timeline is worth researching.

In AD 31 the Passover season began at sunset on the third day of the week, Tuesday.

On that Tuesday Jesus instructed his disciples to locate a man who would show them an upstairs room, saying, *"The Teacher says, 'Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'"* (Mark 14:14)

The disciples found the room exactly as Jesus had said. That evening, in the guest room with his twelve disciples, Jesus ate the Passover meal and then initiated a new covenant through what is known as the Lord's Supper. In the course of that meaningful evening meal together, he gave them unleavened bread to eat, which he explained symbolised his broken body for our healing. He then invited them to drink from a wine cup, signifying his shed blood for the remission of sins. We also learn that he washed their feet, setting us an example to follow.

It is interesting to note that even though, as Jesus said, he eagerly desired to eat the Passover with them, the supper he and his disciples shared that evening was twenty-four hours before the recognised annual Jewish Passover commemoration, when they would kill the traditional sacrificial Passover lambs.

We cannot help but note the significant symbolism in this: that same Wednesday afternoon when the Jews killed the traditional Passover lambs was precisely the same time when Jesus was killed! Since Jesus couldn't be eating the Passover at the same time he was being killed, he

shared its significance with his disciples a day early. In fact, with so many lambs being killed at that time of the year in Jerusalem, it is reasonable to believe that the slaughter may have taken days to accomplish.

Later that night, Jesus was arrested and tried several times in different, rapidly-convened courts. Pilate, the Roman governor, washed his hands of the whole affair. The Jews had demanded that Jesus be crucified. So at the time the traditional Passover lamb was killed on Wednesday afternoon was also the time when Jesus was killed.

This is what happened once the crucified Jesus was confirmed dead:

*After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby (John 19:38-42).*

Thursday was a Holy Day, an annual Sabbath, specifically, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, elsewhere known as the first day of the seven-day Passover Feast. We're now beginning to see the haste with which Jesus was buried, for the Jews did not want their dead to hang on the crucifixion stake/cross during a Sabbath period (the annual "high" Holy Days were regarded as annual "Sabbaths"; see Leviticus 23).

*Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away (John 19:31).*

Jesus died on Wednesday afternoon. It being a preparation day for the following Holy Day, he was hastily buried, so that Thursday, being the

annual First Day of Unleavened Bread with all its ceremony and temple worship on such an occasion, could proceed as per normal, not tainted by a dead body still hanging on a nearby crucifixion stake.

The next day was Friday. It was a normal workday, but it also was another “preparation day” that preceded the weekly seventh-day Sabbath rest. Saturday was when the Jews and early Christians rested from their secular affairs, did no servile work, and devoted that time to rest, prayer, Scripture reading, acts of charity, and fellowship.

Matthew introduces us to what is commonly understood to be the resurrection morning, early on Sunday.

*Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb (Matthew 28:1).*

Reading this passage in the original Greek in which it was penned sheds additional light on what happened.

For this we quote the Literal translation of the Bible:

*But late in the sabbaths, at the dawning into the first of the sabbaths, Mary the Magdalene and the other Mary came to gaze upon the grave (Matthew 28:1 LITV).*

New Testament Greek interestingly doesn't have the specific word *week*, so Matthew's witness for this account is important. We also know that from the Sabbath in the midst of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the Hebrews would count seven Sabbaths (namely, 50 days) to determine the next annual Holy Day of assembly and worship being the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost.

Matthew's reference “*into the first of the sabbaths*” is specific to the first Sabbath of the seven sabbaths (or weeks) that are counted to Pentecost, seven seven-day periods plus one day. (*Pentecost* comes from the term “50<sup>th</sup> day”). The Sabbath day is reckoned not as we count days from midnight to midnight, but from sunset to sunset.

By this reckoning, Jesus was killed on late Wednesday afternoon, and three days and three nights later brings us to late Saturday afternoon. Jesus' prophesied three days and three nights in the grave are clearly accounted for.

The women arrived at the tomb early on the Sunday morning with additional burial spices and ointments, only to discover an empty tomb. Jesus wasn't there; he had already risen. He hadn't, however, yet returned to the Father. This is extremely important to note. The women did not see the resurrection of Jesus. No one actually saw it.

Apparently the tomb had been under Roman guard. No stone, no guard, and no plot could, however, prevent Jesus from rising!

*On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember, while he was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.'*

*Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first."*

*Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard (Matthew 27:62-66).*

Matthew's recollection of the events that surrounded Jesus' death and resurrection is critical to our understanding.

*There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men (Matthew 28:2-4).*

When the two women arrived at the tomb early on Sunday morning, Jesus was not there. He had already been resurrected. It is interesting to

note that while no one witnessed the actual time of the resurrection, we do have some pretty good clues based on the Hebrew worship activities (which are rich in Christology) at that time of the year as to when the resurrection probably took place.

The annual “moadah” or “moedim,” (appointed times) or festivals that the ancient Israelites observed as worship occasions foreshadowed the saving work of Jesus in remarkable detail. This is especially true of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In fact, far from being solely ancient Israelite harvest festivals, those seven annual festivals find their sole and intended meaning in the saving work and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the exclusively Christo-centric nature of these ancient festivals is being recognised for their worth by increasingly more believers today.

The specific annual event we’re particularly interested in is that, in the middle of the seven-day Unleavened Bread/Passover feast, just after the weekly Sabbath sunset, the priest would traditionally go out into the field and cut the first harvest sheaf of barley from a designated plot. This first sheaf of the impending harvest was known as the “first-fruit”. Once prepared, the very next morning the priest would offer this wave sheaf in the temple.

Those annual God-appointed Sabbath festivals, known as the Feasts of the Lord in Leviticus 23:2, 44, accurately rehearse and mirror God’s appointed times in history that centre on Jesus Christ. It might be worth briefly looking at them here. The Passover lamb (symbolising Jesus as the Lamb of God) was killed at the exact same time when Jesus was killed.

Then, seven weeks later, the Holy Spirit came precisely on the day of Pentecost – not sooner, not later – and, interestingly, is also traditionally believed to be when God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Sinai.

The remaining annual festivals of Trumpets (heralding Christ’s return), Atonement (Christ the High Priest removing sin from our presence) and the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day (picturing Jesus sojourning

with us, his millennial rule on earth as well as the great Judgment) still await future fulfilment.

We can nonetheless learn, from the ritual of the wave sheaf offering, that as the first-fruit sheaf was cut at the traditional moment immediately after sunset following the Sabbath, this was possibly the moment when Jesus opened his eyes and was resurrected. This reckoning accounts for a full three days and three nights in the grave. Any lesser accounting falls short of Jesus' teaching. The wave sheaf was offered the following morning, and this specific activity enacted by the high priest foreshadowed Jesus ascending to the Father (right after he had spoken to Mary on what is known as the resurrection morning).

The importance of this scenario is that it affirms that Jesus really died, and didn't somehow survive the crucifixion. Any lesser time-frame could otherwise give rise to the argument that Jesus didn't really die. The facts speak for themselves. Jesus didn't in some manner survive and revive. Neither was it a case of resuscitation. According to the gospel witness accounts, Jesus was dead in the grave for a full three days and three nights following some horrific and torturous suffering that ended with a fatal spear thrust. An ancient prophecy noted that Jesus would be beaten beyond human recognition (Isaiah 52:14). In any lesser time-frame scenario, say three parts of three days, such as a Friday crucifixion to a Sunday morning resurrection, could give credence to alternative (and seemingly plausible) but spurious explanations.

It's also worth noting that Scripture predicted that none of Jesus' bones would be broken<sup>6</sup>. This is significant because it was Roman custom that if a person looked like surviving the rigours of crucifixion, (and we can only presume that a few may have somehow otherwise survived the ordeal), the soldiers would as a final act of torture break the legs of the victim. This would immediately cause additional blood loss, as well as disabling the victim's ability to support himself on the crucifixion stake.

Let's read what happened when the soldiers came to the crucified Jesus:

---

<sup>6</sup> John 19:36, Psalm 34:20



*Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, "Not one of his bones shall be broken" (John 19:31-36).*

There can be no doubt about how Jesus died. He bled to death.

The prophecies and timing of those events concerning Jesus, foreshadowed in the annual worship festivals and in the writings of the prophets, were accurate to the very last detail. And so in examining the scriptures and the evidences they produce, we see precisely the "three days and three nights" between Jesus' burial and resurrection.

On the morning after the resurrection, the women reported to the disciples what they had discovered, and the disciples also came and saw the empty tomb.

*Then the disciples went away again to their own homes. But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."*

*Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.*

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"*

*She, supposing him to be the gardener, said to him, "Sir, if You have carried him away, tell me where You have laid him, and I will take him away."*

*Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher).*

*Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'"*

*Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things to her (John 20:10-18).*

It is intriguing that Jesus chose to reveal his resurrected self first to Mary, who as a woman, according to Jewish tradition, could not be regarded as a reliable witness! Was Jesus risking undermining the validity and proof of his own resurrection? Absolutely not; the events in these testimonies were not "manufactured", but recorded in their raw and honest details.

The conversation between Jesus and Mary was remarkably touching, but what is also noteworthy was that Jesus indicated that he still hadn't ascended to his Father. Then, after Jesus had spoken with Mary, but before he appeared to his disciples, he ascended to heaven and then returned. In the manner and timing of the first-fruit wave sheaf offering presented in the tabernacle (and later also practised in the temple), the resurrected Jesus was presented before his Father, and as we learn from his words to Mary, our Father as well. The rituals and practises that the ancient Israelites had rehearsed for thousands of years as a part of their worship foreshadowed in remarkable detail the life and work of the Messiah Jesus<sup>7</sup>.

It seems, however, that the ancient Israelites did not clearly understand the fulness of the symbolism they were celebrating. Even those closest to

---

<sup>7</sup> Christians could presumably do well to revisit these annual festivals in light of their overwhelming Christology.

Jesus at that time didn't understand what was foreshadowed, despite Jesus having clearly told them that he was going to be killed and then raised three days later.

Even some closest to Jesus struggled to accept this confronting truth. When the disciples told Thomas they had seen the resurrected Jesus, he didn't accept their testimony. He had, in all probability, witnessed the iron nails hammered through Jesus' hands and feet, and as he may have also seen the spear thrust into his side. The memories of seeing the ensuing blood and water flow from an innocent man would have been mentally anguishing. Did he also hear Jesus' final, pained words, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" and, "*It is finished*"? As far as anyone was concerned, it was all over for Jesus! Thomas knew what the rigours of crucifixion meant: prolonged suffering that resulted in certain death.

For three years Thomas, together with his fellow disciples, had believed with all his heart that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He saw the miracles and heard the teaching; the healings and resurrections were indisputable. Now he had to deal with the deepest of personal despair and disillusionment. Add to that layers of horrific memories including scenes of betrayal, wild crowd mentality, kangaroo courts, lies, scourging, ending in the drawn-out rigours of Roman crucifixion. Thomas was in no mood for false positives. In one sense, it's entirely understandable.

We've all heard of "doubting Thomas". Let's not be too hard on him.

Because of his despair, and assertion that: "*Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe*" (John 20:25), we are privy to those additional details as John recorded it.

*And after eight days his disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"*

*Then he said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."*

*And Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:26-29).*

What a moment for Thomas! Imagine the look on his face, the shock in his voice, and his profound confession of, "*My Lord and my God!*" Thomas finally understood in whose presence he was standing! There was no doubt anymore; John's recollection and testimony about this moment really reflects a coming-of-age moment for all the disciples.

Years later, Peter further attested to what he had experienced:

*We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:39-41).*

Peter's memory of the resurrected Jesus was vivid and powerful, and it is here that he established the absolute necessity for these events to have certified witnesses.

For us, some two thousand years later, the facts of Jesus' experience, including his resurrection, are beyond dispute. The evidence of eyewitnesses is precise, the events clearly documented, and a definitive time-line with historical precedents helps set our faith in concrete.

## 6

### The Resurrected Jesus

Jesus had been crucified by one of the most torturous and horrific methods of suffering as designed and executed by the Romans. No local or stranger in Jerusalem would have been ignorant of what had happened: a righteous and just man sent to death.

The events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection were momentous, as described in the testimony of another one of Jesus' disciples, a former tax collector named Matthew:

*And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up his spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:50-54)*

Matthew's summation of the events that centred on Jesus reflect the shock of people in and around Jerusalem. Even a hardened Roman centurion and his fellow soldiers were moved to confess that Jesus was the Son of God! The earthquake was so severe that rocks split and tombs were opened. Imagine those righteous people suddenly coming back to life! No one had any doubt that these incredible events occurred because of Jesus.

Let's think a moment about those holy people who were brought back to life after Jesus was resurrected. Though we're not told all that much about them, their resurrection speaks of the unique power of Jesus' resurrection resonating throughout the Jerusalem area at that time. Apparently it affected the righteous who, like Jesus, had been asleep in death, but we're not told what happened to them after they went into Jerusalem. We can only imagine that their testimonies must have been

remarkably astounding – witnessing not only to the Jews but also to the occupying Romans.

Despite the excitement of the dead brought back to life, the heaviness and numbness must have been crippling for the disciples in the days following Jesus' crucifixion. Three days had passed. Even though Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection to his disciples numerous times before, it never seemed to register with them. How could it? The disciples had struggled to understand the role of the Messiah and just what he had in mind. In fact, the enemies of Jesus seemed to be more conversant with the prophecy regarding his resurrection "in three days" than did the disciples (Matthew 27:63-66).

Unlike those confused, grieving disciples, we have the benefit of the eye-witness accounts in the Gospels that help us understand the unique power of the resurrection. The most amazing thing is just how surprising it was. It wasn't what they expected.

*Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."*

*At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" [Notice that at this point Jesus doesn't refer to her by name].*

*Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."*

*Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).*

*Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

*Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:11-18).*

Mary initially didn't recognise Jesus. At first this might seem quite normal. She was expecting to attend to a corpse, and on seeing the empty tomb, her grief and bewilderment were further compounded. She simply thought the person talking to her was the gardener. Only when Jesus called her name did she recognise him.

Mary wasn't the only one who didn't initially recognise the resurrected Jesus. Luke records a similar intriguing account of two disciples who were travelling away from Jerusalem after the crucifixion. It's easy to see that they'd had enough of the upsetting events. The brutal public death of Jesus carried with it a level of pain and finality that was emotionally crippling.

*Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.*

*He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"*

*"What things?" he asked.*

*"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our*

*companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."*

*He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"*

*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.*

*They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:13-32)*

During that walk over some seven miles, the three of them had a remarkably in-depth conversation centring on the role of the Messiah. Then, as the day faded into evening, they decided to stop at an inn for the night and have dinner together. The questions that arise in our minds are, of course: *Why did it take until mealtime for them to finally recognise Jesus? Why was his identity somehow "hidden" from them while they walked and talked together? And then, Why did Jesus choose to disappear at the very moment of recognition?*

There is little doubt that Jesus wanted to engage these two disciples, and they would have listened intently as he expounded all the scriptures about the Messiah. "Would they have listened as their minds were opened?" we might ask. Surely they would have also noted his familiar facial expressions and gestures that are a natural part of human communication.

Jesus wasn't playing mind-games with those two disciples. Far from it. He was engaging them in order to help their understanding. The fact that he suddenly disappeared during mealtime would have been



enough to finally convince them of who he really was. What did they do? They turned around and hurried straight back to Jerusalem (Luke 24:33).

Furthermore, following these two incidents, another experience took place in which Jesus wasn't recognised, as recorded in John's account. Jesus, now for a third time, appeared to his disciples. Defeated when their hopes and dreams, as well as their ministry work, seemed to have ended abruptly, and with any remaining idealism seemingly snuffed out, the disciples didn't see any other options but to return to their former occupation of fishing. They were, after all, fishermen. Right then, catching fish seemed to offer more certainty than their experience with a now-deceased Rabbi. Little did they suspect what or who awaited them next!

*Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.*

*"I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you."*

*So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.*

*He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"*

*"No," they answered.*

*He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some."*

*When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"*

*As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.*

*Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."*

*Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.*

*Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."*

*None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.*

*Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead (John 21:1-14).*

Again, although the disciples followed the friendly man's instructions concerning the net, at that point they still didn't know it was Jesus standing on the beach. They had been with Jesus for over three years, during which time they had eaten with him, enjoyed deep fellowship, listened to his words, witnessed his miracles, and were familiar with the nuances of his "Son of Man" personality. They were close, and yet, after the resurrected Jesus appeared to them, they still didn't recognise him. They acted as if they were talking to a friendly stranger, yet someone with an almost inexplicable, gravitational aura.

John first recognised Jesus because of all the disciples, he was significantly the closest to Jesus. Yet you and I know that no matter how many years have passed, our capacity as humans to recognise each other, either unexpectedly or from the distant past, is quite easy and natural.

But not so with the resurrected Jesus. Somehow inexplicably "different" from the way he was before, Jesus wasn't recognised right away. We

could perhaps explain this difference by the horrendous injuries he had suffered days earlier. He was brutalised and beaten beyond recognition, according to the prophet Isaiah<sup>8</sup>. And Jesus still evidenced the hand and abdominal injuries that finally helped convince “doubting” Thomas.

Although he was the same person, the difference in the post-resurrection is worth noting. The disciples certainly hadn’t substituted another wise man as a Messianic figure and somehow attributed to him the identity of Jesus!

Would we have been any different than the disciples? We too could have failed to recognise the greatest treasure who stood before our very eyes.

We’ve reviewed the scriptures of Jesus’ resurrection and appearance to his followers. But what significance does that have for us today?

Jesus Christ is the Son of God and also the Word who spoke throughout the Old Testament/covenant, and who *“is the same yesterday, today and forever”* (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus’ divinity, reflecting most of His Father’s attributes, cannot be disputed. We read earlier that Peter knew Jesus was the Son of God – now all the more reinforced by his resurrection.

Jesus entered our world, and with the signature events of his death and resurrection, he also enters into covenant relationship with us. Jesus is the only way to eternal life. He is the only source of life. His words are life, and he is “the Life”. Jesus said, *“I am the way, the truth and the life.”* In another place, Jesus told of his indwelling in us, *“Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you”* (John 6:53), and, *“Abide in me and I in you,”* (John 15:4).

Unless our trajectory is in the nurture and reality of Christ, we’re nothing more than dead men. Scripture tells us that Christ is the only path to eternal life. There is no other way, there are no other options, no other religion, and no remotely matching science or ideology.

---

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 52:14

So the question remains for us today: Do we recognise the real Jesus in our midst – the indwelling Jesus by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit? Can we tell the impostor from the true? These questions are relevant, because again we're reminded of the disciples' difficulty with initially recognising the resurrected Jesus. Jesus was the same person, indeed, but his post-resurrection appearance and presence attested to some mighty and almost incomprehensible change.

In pondering the implications of all this, there's something of real comfort to realise. Notice that Jesus sought out his disciples. He came and met with them at their time of greatest bewilderment: at the tomb, on the road to Emmaus, and by the sea of Tiberias. Remember also Thomas' profound disbelief? Jesus no doubt had heard Thomas' vehement words uttered earlier rejecting the reports by his friends that their Lord was resurrected. So, Jesus just appeared in the room, and met with Thomas. Thomas, seeing the hole in Jesus' side and the wounds in his hands, finally saw what he never quite understood before!

*Thomas cried out aloud, "My Lord and my God!"*

*Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:28-29).*

It's not that the Jesus' disciples didn't "see"; Jesus clearly said that they did, but they needed to view the world through the lens of faith as aided by the Holy Spirit. This can be difficult to do. Speaking of the generation of his day, Jesus said:

*"For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Matthew 13:15-17).*

The disciples, despite their human misgivings and limitations, were not “blind” to the Messiah. Peter’s earlier confession clearly demonstrated his understanding that Jesus was the Messiah and truly the Son of God, and Jesus affirmed that this was revealed to him by the Father. So, why the delay in the disciples’ initial recognition of the resurrected Jesus?

The answer most likely lies in the reality that to be resurrected from mortal to immortal embodies such fundamental changes that we can barely comprehend it from our still mortal, physical perspective. Although the Bible teaches that Christians are a “new creation”, we also learn from Paul’s quotation that: *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”* (1 Corinthians 2:9) And here Paul adds in verse 10, *“...but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”*

We do know that, when God created the first humans, they were naked, and in one sense “unfinished”. Moreover, Scripture tells us that one day we will be *“clothed with immortality”* (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). The difference between our human form today and what God will clothe us with is barely imaginable! Our human minds, as fearfully and wonderfully as we’re made, are inherently limited, given that God exists outside of time, matter and space. Remember that Jesus often conveyed kingdom reality using simple parables that some understood but others didn’t.

Luke gives us some insight into the disciples’ limitations when Jesus said:

*“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.” But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it* (Luke 9:44-45).

The disciples failed to understand the words of Jesus. Apparently, to some degree, it was hidden from them. Perhaps they were afraid of further engaging Jesus on this subject! Their trepidation in approaching Jesus about his death gives us the sense that the Holy Spirit, working within them, somehow affirmed the savage reality of what was coming,

an intuition that they naturally shied from and couldn't at that time adequately accommodate. There's nothing beautiful, redeeming, or artistic about death. Death is an enemy.

Because of their limitations, Jesus on many occasions simply implored his followers to believe him. We're reminded here of the scripture that says:

*"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6) .*

This advice is even more important for us today! In an age of increasing secularism and equally decreasing faith, may we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart genuinely transformed in belief – belief in Jesus, in who he is, in what he accomplished, and in everything he said.

To the disciples, the resurrection of Jesus was of utmost importance. Their entire ministry and life credentials would hinge on this singular event. You can say that Jesus was a great teacher, a revolutionary, a wise man. But to say that he was brutally killed and then, three days later, was resurrected back to immortal life elevates the historical Jesus to the extraordinary. Believe in him!

7

## The First Resurrection

If you could spend an hour with Jesus, what would you talk about? What would you like to ask him? Where would you begin to collect your thoughts? Would you ask him about things concerning life, past and present? Or would you, rather like many, be simply lost for words? Perhaps we should rephrase that: What might Jesus want to talk to *you* about?

Perhaps Jesus would tell you that he understands your questions. After all, we are called into fellowship with Jesus Christ! It seems the more we study the purpose and the method of calling God has for every man, woman, and child, the more questions we have. I don't mean faithless questions, but questions nonetheless based on our coming to terms with faith. "I believe in the resurrection. But tell me, when I am resurrected to glory, will I recognise my wife, children and friends? To what extent will those relationships have any bearing on the life hereafter? Will we suddenly become aware of the full swathe of human history, or will we glean from personal conversations with those who lived, for example, in the days of Noah? What will a spiritual body look and feel like? Will "hidden things" suddenly become apparent? What will it be like to commune face to face with God, spontaneously, in real time?" From our mortal perspective the questions seem endless!

Perhaps Jesus addresses this notion when he said, "*In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you... In that day you will no longer ask me anything...*" (John 14:20, 16:23)

The four accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record various conversations the disciples, as well as the antagonists, had with Jesus. Those conversations record questions that were designed to trick Jesus; others were simply the wrong questions, and others were the result of faithful but nonetheless enquiring hearts. Jesus chose to answer some questions outright, yet he would respond to others more indirectly.

Because we're human, it's natural for us to ask such questions. While Jesus' teachings on life, death, and the resurrection ought to be sufficient, we are naturally curious to being privy to the finer details – details like when, where, how, and why we die then to be resurrected. Of course, a lot of those necessary details are given in Scripture, but there are aspects we'd really like further clarification – much, perhaps, like a novelist describes blow-by-blow account of the events, circumstances, and emotions experienced by the protagonists. We may even entertain the notion, "Had I been a disciple of Jesus like Peter, John, or James, would I have asked more questions? Or, would I have written a more in-depth eyewitness account than they did?" John seems to indicate in one place that there was indeed more to tell:

*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).*

John's summary in this eye-witness treatise is complete. The facts have been established, and there is no need for embellishment.

However, we still have Matthew's account of an interesting conversation between Jesus and the leaders of the Sadducees (a sect that did not believe in the resurrection). Here Jesus was offered a hypothetical scenario based on their laws and values:

*The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him, saying: "Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her."*

*Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what*



*was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matthew 22:23-32).*

We learn much from this conversation. The Sadducees' contention with the resurrection reappears in later confrontations with Paul, and as a result, we are given some remarkable insights into exactly what the early Christians believed. Notice how Jesus first told the Sadducees that they were mistaken and ignorant! That's quite a rebuke! In other words, Jesus told these religious men that, because of their ignorance in scriptural matters, they were asking the wrong questions. Imagine the learned clergy of a particular theological school parleying with Jesus and being told quite bluntly that they don't know the Scriptures. (This couldn't happen today, could it?)

When the Sadducees probed with this hypothetical question, Jesus replied with a factual statement: *"For in the resurrection..."* These words begin to form the concrete and authoritative evidence of this future event that we might be looking for. This time, the evidence isn't presented by the Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection), or by Martha's personal affirmation of faith, but by Jesus himself. This is the Son of God speaking carrying in his person and words the very image and authority of the Father! The future resurrection of all people is an absolute certainty. We have Jesus' own words for it, spoken on numerous occasions.

As we look at how Jesus engaged the Sadducees, we gain additional insights that I doubt they were expecting.

We must first understand that God instituted marriage for humans only – marriage is monogamous and exclusive between one man and one woman for the remainder of their natural lives. But the glory and promised paradise of eternity transcends even the very best of physical human experience on Earth. In eternity gender becomes irrelevant in the sense we understand relationships now. Interestingly Jesus indicated that we're to be *"like angels of God in heaven"*, of that "substance" – as we understand it, spirit.

Next, Jesus quoted an “I Am” statement, leaving his listeners with a quandary. “*I Am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*”, was a well known phrase to his listeners as found in the Torah. Speaking plainly, Jesus further said, “*God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.*”

Now, what can we make of that statement? Are not Abraham, Isaac and Jacob dead? From Hebrews chapter eleven we learn that Abraham and the other faithful people throughout the ages have not yet received the promises of eternity. In what can only refer to the resurrection of the righteous, the author of Hebrews writes:

*“God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect”* (Hebrews 11:40).

The story of Lazarus and the rich man can shed more light on Jesus’ statement in Matthew. The resurrection is featured in this story allegory telling of Lazarus dying and then appearing resurrected in Abraham’s bosom. The rich man cries out, “*Father Abraham*”. Abraham is part of this allegory. He is also pictured in a current conscious state, or is no longer dead but finally resurrected in glory! But are we reading too much into this parable by trying to place it in the past, present, or future – is it not an icon from beyond time? Let’s read it to get a feel of what is being conveyed:

*There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.*

*“Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’*

*But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is*

*comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'*

*"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'*

*Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'*

*But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead'" (Luke 16:19-31).*

The point of Jesus' story lies in that last verse. Note the significance that to the eastern mind of that era, the method of the story is secondary to its meaning. Our modern western way of seeing things, however, tends to get lost in the details of the story itself, and as such we risk overlooking the actual meaning and purpose embodied in this kind of storytelling.

Jesus' shocking truth is that even though someone were to rise from the dead, as astounding as it might appear, the evidence would still be insufficient to convict a sinful, unbelieving mind!

Surely, the resurrection of someone who was certified dead would be heralded as an astounding miracle, and we might assume act as a catalyst to convert even the most sceptical of people. Not so, according to Jesus. We have evidence of this when the religious leaders of his day wanted to kill the other Lazarus, (Mary and Martha's brother), because his resurrection to physical life had caused many to believe in Jesus (John 12:10-11).

Furthermore, in reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob<sup>9</sup>, it's interesting to note that Jesus affirmed the fact of the resurrection of the dead – not of

---

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 22:32

the living. The dead are “asleep”, not living in any other form. The living don’t need resurrecting. Jesus was dead; he was resurrected. Lazarus was dead, and he too was resurrected. There is no conscious experience in the grave, because otherwise the act of resurrection would be phoney. This is further reinforced by the comment in Ecclesiastes 9:10 that tells us: *“for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”*

Even more explicitly, David further affirmed this simple reality when he said of our relationship with God, *“No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”* (Psalm 6:5)

The messenger who spoke to Daniel attested to the same reality: *“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake...”* (Daniel 12:2) Those who are asleep, that is, those who are dead, sleep in the “dust of the earth”, until the time of awakening at their resurrection.

In fact, after the first humans sinned, God’s own testimony to Adam clearly articulated where Adam came from and where he was going at death: *“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return”* (Genesis 3:19).

There is no ambiguity in those few verses. The Scriptures continually affirm that we were made out of the earth, the chemical elements such as calcium, carbon, oxygen, and iron. When we die, we return to the ground, unconscious, totally dead, unconditionally asleep until a future time of awakening.

Many years after Jesus’ teachings on this, the apostle Paul wrote to the faithful believers in Thessalonika, Greece. He also referred to the deceased as having “fallen asleep”, or again, “those who sleep in Jesus”.

*But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will*

*descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).*

We learn throughout Scripture that the dead “have fallen asleep” in the dust of the earth. Paul wants any natural grief to be placated by the sure hope of Lord’s return, when those “*who sleep in Jesus... will rise first*”. First of what? The first of two resurrections as cited by Jesus. Scripture tells us that the righteous will be raised from death in the first resurrection, and the rest of humanity, characterised as “unrighteous” will be raised a thousand years later.

Like his contemporaries, Paul seems to have expected Jesus to return during his lifetime. We understand that he wrote his first letter to those in Thessalonika prior to the Gospel writers recording their accounts, which wasn’t until some twenty-five or thirty years after Jesus had ascended to heaven.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note exactly what Paul said: “*we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord...*” Incidentally, that sense of anticipation is still active among many of Jesus’ followers today. For example, a familiar phrase in songs, ministry and literature of the Church of God (Seventh Day) is “Cristo Viene” or “Christ is Coming”.

Furthermore, no scriptural evidence or hint otherwise suggests we have an “immortal soul”. The dead, according to Scripture, know nothing and hold no sense of anticipation, time or communion.

*For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing,... for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going (Ecclesiastes 4:5a, 10b).*

---

<sup>10</sup> [Matthew, Mark and John (and the other disciples) had spent the best part of twenty five years personally witnessing what they saw and experienced. They would have told the story centring on Jesus countless times. Finally, they penned their experiences onto parchments, which in turn traversed even further afield as believers read and passed them on].

In this age, much like those early Christians in the first century, it's not hard to wonder whether we will reach a ripe old age before Christ returns. The backdrop that nurtures the aspiration that Jesus might return in our lifetime shouldn't be treated lightly or scoffed at. If Christ did return within the next fifty or one hundred or so years, for example, those of us or our children who are alive at that time wouldn't really die a normal death. We would be "changed" from mortal to immortal, from flesh to spirit, at the same time seeing all those resurrected saints who, from over the ages, had died and are now also shining brighter than the sun.

What would it be like, for example, to see and share in fellowship with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Ruth or Jeremiah? What would it be like to ask them about their sojourn here on earth all those years ago? Equally valid is wondering how they would feel meeting someone who was born thousands of years after they had died. For example, should he be resurrected into our time-frame, how hard would it be for Noah, to comprehend all the technologies and methods of transport available in our modern world? Sure he managed to build a huge wooden ship, but wouldn't he be intrigued by the ships of today!

The subject and implications of the resurrection are definitely fascinating. Our curiosity and imagination isn't all that removed from what Jesus' own disciples may have thought at various times.

The disciples probably had lingering questions about Jesus' return when they eventually wrote their accounts onto parchments. It seems that Jesus anticipated this. Perhaps responding to the prayers of his followers, Jesus wanted to fill in some of those blanks by giving us one final testimony that forms the epic, last book of the Bible: Revelation. In this fascinating record, John, now an old man, is transported by the Spirit, in vision somewhere into the future – as he puts it, into the day of the Lord.

Referring to the saints, we learn what John saw:

*And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has*

*part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power... (Revelation 20:4-6)*

There can be no doubt that this is a glorious resurrection in which the righteous are raised to immortality, referred to as the “first resurrection”. Those who experience it are “blessed and holy”. “The second death” has no power over them.

The term “first resurrection” naturally infers another, or subsequent resurrection. What’s more, we are now confronted in the above verses by the term “the second death”. Remember, this passage is a revelation of Jesus Christ. It’s not meant to be hidden or obscure. In fact, the term “second death” is mentioned four times in Revelation, and in one instance, Jesus is quoted verbatim in his message to the Church in Smyrna:

*“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (Revelation 2:11).*

Taking that into consideration, the second death can only exist if there is a resurrection in which the outcome of the judgment is adverse, and those resurrected who completely refuse God then face the second and final death from which there is no further redemption or resurrection.

This is explained in the theme and setting of the great White Throne Judgment of God:

*And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:12-15).*

Those who have died – even those lost at sea – are all raised back to life and stand before God. The record of their lives is available, and judgment is given according to what they have done on Earth. The second death heralds finality for those who choose not to share in the grace of life.

The second resurrection is a troublesome subject for many theologians. Some scholars relegate Revelation to a particular writing genre. One author suggested that Revelation was simply “John’s multidimensional worship experience on a Sunday morning”! Another stated that of all the books in the Bible he preaches from, he specifically stays away from Revelation. Yet others, albeit a minority, stretch their imagination to spuriously suggest a third resurrection!

Perhaps the truth is we simply don’t know enough about the second resurrection to be able to comment on it more. We’re like many today who place the Book of Revelation into the “too hard basket”.

Despite the opinions of theologians and our lack of understanding, the opening verses of Revelation assert that this is the revelation of Jesus Christ. It further states:

*“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near”*  
(Revelation 1:3).

Jesus must have felt it sufficiently important to convey a glimpse of his reality and purpose as it concerns us and as it will unfold. The Book of Revelation neatly ties off a lot about the future resurrections we would otherwise have little idea about. John’s testimony of what he experienced gives us Jesus’ own and final message regarding events that include the resurrection that leads into the fullness of the kingdom of God. This is followed by a second resurrection which is described as a time of judgment.

The concept of resurrection has been one of significant historical controversy. Beginning in first century church life, in his defence for preaching the good news, we read where Paul asked King Agrippa, “*Why is it thought incredible with you that God raises the dead?*” (Acts 26:8)



In his defence to governor Felix, Paul adds, *“I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust”* (Acts 24:15).

The nature of the resurrection became of profound interest in the minds of everyday people when Jesus raised the centurion’s servant, the widow’s son, as well as Lazarus back to life. Then, Jesus himself was resurrected.

Jesus’ was the Resurrection of all resurrections. Only this then made possible the first resurrection!

Let’s briefly revisit that event. Early that Sunday morning, some 2000 years ago, an angel at the tomb where Jesus had been buried told the women who arrived there that he wasn’t there: *“He is risen.”*

Even Jesus’ own immediate followers at first struggled to comprehend what was foretold had actually happened! This is nowhere better illustrated than by one of Jesus’ own disciples, Thomas, who could not concede belief that Jesus was literally resurrected. Instead, he vehemently protested:

*“Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe”* (John 20:25).

Thomas’ doubting words reflect where the majority of people are today. It’s simply unbelievable! A few days later, when the disciples were together, Jesus appeared among them. The following testimony was transformation for Thomas:

*Then he said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing”* (John 20:27).

Wow, what a moment for Thomas! He looked at Jesus, thunderstruck, and from the depth of his being cried out: *“My Lord and my God!”*

Thomas finally knew, without doubt, in whose presence he was standing and to whom he was talking. There was no other explanation! Jesus was resurrected. He was visible, touchable, and very real in every sense of the word. Jesus then spoke into Thomas' previous unbelief:

*“Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).*

It seems that Jesus, already knowing the nature of the controversies that would follow, edified not only Thomas, but every disciple that would follow through the ensuing centuries: *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* That blessing includes you and me, living in an increasingly faithless generation.

Jesus' revelation in the last book of the Bible further affirms everything we've come to understand and live for. Jesus has given us a glimpse, a broad-brush stroke picture of the certainty of who the Son of God is, who we are, and what his purpose is. He did this by his experience of death and resurrection, and then again with further details and affirmation in the revelatory vision given to John.

In recently attending a country funeral service, the elder who officiated at the graveside service said that the future resurrection of our deceased friend was as certain as tomorrow morning's rising sun. It was refreshing to hear the gospel shared in today's world with all its hope-filled certainty.

Today, faithful believers hold dear to the hope of Jesus' coming. They look forward to the awakening call at the first resurrection. They also cherish the fidelity and hope that's held out for the rest of humanity in what we'll examine next: the second resurrection.

## 8

### The Second Resurrection

**W**hen visiting an Asian country, one of the most notable Christian evangelists of last century was asked by his dignitary host, (who, by the way wasn't a believer), what her future beyond this life might be. She wanted to know the Christian answer to her "status". That is, is there any reason for an unbelieving "gentile" to anticipate any hope beyond this life? The evangelist confessed that he really didn't know.

Was he just being polite and evasive, or did he genuinely not know the answer? Surely a theologian and preacher man of world renown ought to know! How would you have answered?

In researching this subject over a period of time, we conducted an online survey where we asked participants to select the most likely option based on commonly held views as to what happens when you die:

1. You go to heaven
2. You go to hell
3. You go to purgatory
4. You sleep in death until the resurrection
5. You become reincarnated
6. You meet 70 maidens
7. That's the end. Nothing.
8. I don't know, apart from the funeral

The results from this survey have been interesting, because most respondents checked the fourth option of "You sleep in death until the resurrection". Of course, the results may simply reflect the type of people visiting an overtly Christian website, and a wider survey of the general populace would undoubtedly be of additional value.

We're probably familiar what people in the communities around us actually believe about life and death. We may have discovered that in talking with family members, friends and work colleagues, a lot of

people really don't know what, if anything happens after death and are honest enough to admit it.

However, we would naturally expect that Christian leaders in general be completely up to speed on what fate awaits the ungodly, the heathen, or the ignorant. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

A few years ago, beautiful, nine-year-old twin sisters were tragically killed in a horrific freeway accident. Apparently the girls never had any church or religious involvement. In fact, it is probably safe to assume that they had never even heard of God. Following the funeral, a friend of the family asked the preacher who officiated at the funeral service, "Are the girls in heaven?"

His response was surprising. He tearfully admitted, "I really don't know whether they are with Jesus or not!"

Given the question in the light of his credentials (a well-known and charismatic preacher), his tearful admission is as stunning and as it is sad. Surely it need not be that difficult. Are the Scriptures really that ambiguous about what happens when someone so young dies, or dies without accepting Christ? What is particularly confounding is that this respected man, who regularly preaches to audiences numbering in the tens of thousands, couldn't at that moment articulate the timeless hope Jesus frequently spoke of – the resurrection of all people. Surely this was one of those God-given moments when grieving friends and relatives were more open than they might otherwise have been to an encouraging, Holy Spirit-weighted word from God. Unfortunately, and sadly, this opportunity was lost as the "evangelist", it would seem, simply had little or no idea.

Surely such apparent ignorance on this important subject does not reflect the views of the greater Christian community? Or is the Bible no longer regarded as the ultimate authority on these issues, even among believers? Have our churches, over time, accepted and inculcated a mix of sub-Christian – indeed pagan – ideals to the point where even the Word of God is regarded as less than reliable? That is a frightening supposition!

Is it true we can't really know the absolute truth of what lies beyond this life? Or has the awesome hope of the resurrection of all people somehow been eclipsed by a well-meaning but misguided theology that's developed from a mix of rationalism, tradition, and extra-biblical culture?

While it's easy to assume that Christian evangelism has competently saturated all corners of our societies with the good news of Jesus' resurrection and the subsequent resurrection of all people, we should sadly acknowledge a phenomenal ignorance among Christians of what the Scriptures say happens after death.

Thus the challenge remains for those who willingly hear God's call: are we courageous enough to carefully examine accepted tradition on this subject, compare it honestly with what the Scriptures really do say, and then take the necessary steps to begin rewriting our textbooks and educating our peoples?

The question really comes down to this: If those who accept Jesus in this life rise to glory in the next, what does the future hold for the "unsaved", many of whom in this life never knew or heard of God? The answer reflects who God is, why he created us, and what he actually promises us. His word on this should be our last word! Listen to what Jesus says regarding this:

*"Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of [lit. judgment]" (John 5:28-29).<sup>11</sup>*

Though Jesus tells us in a matter-of-fact manner not to marvel, how can we not be amazed? Everyone who has ever lived and died will be raised back to life again!

---

<sup>11</sup> Correctly translated the NT Greek word "krisis" as judgment in English Standard Version. (Where "condemnation" is used elsewhere, there's yet another Greek word for this: "katakrima".)

Just an important note on the translation of this verse before we go any further. Jesus does not actually say “condemnation” as some translators put it; he specifically uses the word *krisis* as translated from Greek, and within the context of the passage distinctly means “judgment”. A few verses earlier, Jesus says, “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son,...” (John 5:22) Again, he uses the word *krisis*.

The specific Greek for *condemnation* is *katakrima* and it is a completely different word. Paul uses this word clearly in his letter to the Romans to indicate an adverse sentence:

*“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:1).*

Another illustration may help explain *judgment* and *condemnation* further. In Matthew 12:41 Jesus said:

*“The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.”*

Jesus uses those two words in one sentence, and in doing so he distinctly conveys, in the context of the discussion, their two distinctly different meanings. The Greek word *krisis* here is correctly translated “judgment”, and *katakrinousin* is correctly translated “will condemn”. So Jesus’ insight tells us that the people of Nineveh will be resurrected at the same time, in the judgment, together with the unbelieving peoples of his day!

Further light is shed on this as we read Revelation chapter 20. We see the first resurrection followed by a thousand years of Christ’s reign, after which time we then see the dead, now resurrected and standing, being judged:

*And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books (Revelation 20:12).*

These examples, therefore, prove that judgment and condemnation, though related, are quite different from each other. Condemnation is the passing of an adverse sentence; judgment, on the other hand, infers the actual process in deciding a verdict of either acquittal or condemnation.

Returning to John 5:28-29, did you catch what Jesus actually says? He tells us that all who have died will rise again from the grave. "*All who are in their graves*" literally means everyone who has ever lived, the good and the not so good. Two categories of people will hear his voice. In other passages, Jesus often likened them to "sheep and goats", "wise and foolish", as well as "wheat and tares". The righteous will rise to eternal life in glory, power, and holiness, and those who have done evil will be resurrected to judgment – and notably not to hell fire.

The Scriptures further tell us that everyone has fallen short of the glory of God. All humans have sinned, and we all deserve death. Thus everyone must be judged, in this lifetime or in the next, and the one worthy to judge is Jesus.

So the question about the future of all those who died without ever having known God, or those who lived in parts of the world where the good news of Jesus our Saviour never reached – who naturally lived sinful, ignorant lives – then becomes more understandable. God has provided us with hope as to what their future is. God is not going to resurrect masses of humanity to instant condemnation by immediately incinerating them in hell fire!

They will be resurrected to judgment, and that should make us think. If salvation depends purely on the results of Christian missionary work, then we have miserably failed to bring the good news of Jesus to every living human, past and present. And to whatever degree we have failed, then how well will we ourselves stand in the Day of Judgment?<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Jesus inferred that sinners who never knew or received him may be excused, unlike the unbelieving Jewish leadership of his day. (John 15:22)

Jesus further addressed this issue when he confronted the unbelief of his generation. He says that, *“it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you”* (Matthew 11:24).

Jesus here speaks of a future judgment, in which the people of Sodom and the people of his day would be resurrected and judged together. But that’s not all. The people of Nineveh, as well as the Queen of Sheba, will also be resurrected at that time:

*“The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here”* (Matthew 12:41-42).

It is interesting to note that according to Jesus, all peoples consisting of Israelites and Gentiles who died millennia apart will rise together at a future resurrection that is also a time of judgment.

At this point it pays to remember the overwhelming sentiment that comes through in Ezekiel chapter 37. God says to a great multitude of physically resurrected people (the ancient Israelites) who often lived contrary to God:

*Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them* (Ezekiel 37:13).

Centuries later, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus added to this by saying the masses of people who will be resurrected will face “judgment”. (Note that they will only come to know God when they are resurrected). So what precisely is judgment? It’s a good question, and one that deserves a truthful, biblical answer.

Judgment is a prerogative that only God has. We are clearly reminded in Scripture not to judge, because our understanding is often limited to “outward appearances”. Jesus cautions his disciples on this:



*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5).*

We learn from the Scriptures that God judges justly; that although the Father judges no one, all judgment has been given to Jesus who, having lived in the flesh, is now able to empathise with our weaknesses.

*For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, (John 5:21-22)*

*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).*

From Jesus, here referred to as a High Priest, we learn that:

*He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness (Hebrews 5:2).*

The prospect of judgment sounds less daunting as we work through its meaning. As stated earlier, judgment is not condemnation. On whatever terms judgment is to be, we can rest assured that, for the redeemed, it is in our favour – because of turning to God. God is for us. He loves us. God's grace, his unmerited favour toward us, is powerfully woven throughout the Scriptures. He is not willing that any perish. This is explicit in Peter's letter:

*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).*

Repentance means that we must willingly accept God's grace and change from our sinful ways. It is being ready to make the necessary changes in our life's walk, ready to resist wrongful ways and instead live a life that reflects those who "*keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus*" (Revelation 12:17).

While this is wonderful news, most of humanity has never had the opportunity to come to really know God. Satan's deceptive work has blinded their eyes and dulled their ears. There have been only a few, by comparison, who have really responded to God's calling and sought his will for their lives.

Scripture reminds us that the kingdom of God is only for those who repent, who change from their sinful ways, to then lead holy, blameless, and faithful lives. It is for people who live faithful and obedient lives once they come to know God. Furthermore, the glory of the kingdom is for people who accept Jesus as their personal Saviour, people on whom our Father in heaven attributes the righteousness of Jesus. Jesus affirms this Divine grace:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him* (John 3:16-17).

God's love for humanity is immense. It is a love that is also based on righteousness and justice. When speaking of entrance into the kingdom of God, Jesus specifically says:

*"Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie"* (Revelation 22:14-15).

God doesn't want to spend eternity with losers. That's why we're called to be winners – to choose Life, and in being given every opportunity to accept, all people must come to ultimately understand that a great price

has been paid in our favour. Jesus paid the penalty of humanity's sins in his death and resurrection, a fact we must first accept. The opportunity for this understanding must precede the verdict in the Day of Judgment for all those who haven't yet known God.

Of those who live righteously in this mortal life, having accepted Jesus as Saviour and yielded to him, we also read, interestingly, that "judgment" is now on the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). If judgment begins with the faithful now, in this age, then the future judgment for a future resurrected people will be to finally live their lives with a sound and increasing knowledge and understanding of their Saviour God.

This is not "a second chance" theology because for most of the resurrected peoples in the world, the resurrection will be their first opportunity to come to know the one true God: God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. The oneness of God's family will be extended to include every human being. No one need miss out, except, of course, those who won't change from their sinful ways, as described in Revelation 22:15, where they perish forever in the hell fire of God's justice.

The best news we can ever hear about what God is doing and going to do clearly refutes some commonly held views about what happens after we die. We are mortal, not yet immortal. There is no purgatory. Sinful humans aren't going to suffer an eternity tormented in hell fire. The dead are not conscious in any form; they are asleep in the earth and their spirit has returned to God.

Jesus is going to resurrect the righteous when he returns, and then a thousand years later, resurrect everyone else who has ever lived. Again, there is no "second chance" at salvation. The Bible does, however, tell us of a "second death". The righteous are not hurt by it (Revelation 2:11). Spelling finality, the second death is reserved only for the incorrigibly wicked, that is, those who refuse to repent (Revelation 21:8).

It seems many religious people still unfortunately believe that God is going to resurrect the unrighteous, which includes the ignorant who have never heard of God, only then to immediately send them to "hell" to

burn forever. But this is not what Jesus teaches in John 5:28-29. Contrary to the popular interpretation of 2 Corinthians 6:2, today is not the only day of salvation. (The Greek text of 2 Corinthians 6:2 has: “*now [is] a day of salvation*”).

Some of this clearly erroneous theology originates from an earlier generation of what we might call “hell-fire and brimstone preachers”. A few of them still exist today. Other contributing factors originate from pagan thinkers and philosophers whose ideas have crept into Christian thought. Concepts such as the “immortality of the soul,” among other unbiblical tenets, still linger in Christian thinking today.

Those ideas, however, present a problem: Where is our merciful, righteous, slow to anger, holy and just God in a world of merciless, perpetual, and torturous hell fire? It sounds very much like the devil has been victorious with his deceptive ruses!

Remember that we are God’s children and offspring. He made us physical with a specific end purpose in mind. The immortality of the soul cannot be reconciled with what Jesus teaches:

*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.  
Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell  
(Matthew 10:28).*

When we breathe our last, our body returns to the earth from whence it came, and our spirit returns to God who gave it. We learn from Scripture that the righteous have their names written in heaven’s Book of Life; the unrighteous do not. While the unrighteous will not burn forever in hell, their body as well as soul – the spirit signature if you will, or the essence that makes us uniquely human and uniquely created “in the image and likeness of God” – apparently can be *destroyed* by God in hell, as he may justly determine.

Again, the hell that Jesus spoke about is final, not perpetual. It is the judgment reserved for the incorrigibly wicked. We learn from Scripture that two world-dominant personalities, known as “the beast and false prophet,” are cast into hell fire:

*“Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone ”*  
(Revelation 19:20).

We can be confronted as well as reassured by what the Scriptures actually do say about what judgment is and what God’s plans are. The elements as we know them will one day be destroyed by fire.

*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare (2 Peter 3:10).*

Scientists corroborate this when they predict that in approximately four billion years, the sun will run out of the hydrogen that fuels it. As a result of the enormous gravitational pull inward, the sun will begin to collapse in on itself. When it reaches a point of critical mass, it will explode into a massive fireball, becoming a red giant and enveloping our entire solar system. At that moment the sun will destroy all life on earth as we know it.

That sounds like hell! We understand that we’ve already witnessed such events in the distant cosmos through our telescopes, and we know that the same fate is coming to our solar system. What is disturbing is that scientists now believe that we’re closer to that event than previously thought!

Let’s not speculate any further. We read in Revelation chapter 20, in the vision that God gave to John, that a resurrection of the evil, lost, unrighteous, sinners (call them what we may) occurs a thousand years after the resurrection of the righteous. Specifically of the resurrected and glorified saints, John writes:

*And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power,*

*but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years (Revelation 20:4-6).*

The first resurrection occurs when Jesus returns.

Hebrews 11:35-39 says that the faithful, not worthy of this world, had denied the comforts of this world so “*that they might obtain a better resurrection*” for their faith. Up until the time of that future resurrection, they are not yet rewarded.

The term “a better resurrection” suggests a “lesser”, or “less desirable”, second resurrection. A first resurrection indicates another to follow. Remember, Jesus said in John’s Gospel that “*all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.*” “All” refers to the righteous and the unrighteous, but of course, in their respective times. By implication, the second resurrection allows for “the second death”.

Jesus also showed John that, after a thousand years of Christ’s rule is established, something intriguing happens of which we have only the broadest outline, as described in this vision.

*Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while (Revelation 20:1-3).*

John learned that Satan is to be released from prison for a short while. The question we might ask is why? Why bind Satan for a thousand years, and then release him at the second resurrection when the masses of humanity are physically raised? What on earth is God doing? Why would God allow Satan to “get busy again” and presumably hold significant sway in the conscious decision-making and attitudes of everyday people? Because, as we read in Revelation, the net result of this is that the world again descends into one of apparent and prevalent deception, followed by war.

*Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them (Revelation 20:7-9).*

It seems that at that time resurrected humanity will have to make some life-choices in a world where the temptation to sin is as real as it is today, yet offset by the reigning presence of Jesus and his glorified saints!

Today, judgment is on the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). Everything you and I knowingly say and do in the presence of God is recorded against Christ's sacrifice. That, at the core of Christianity, is the foundational belief that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins through his death.

Therefore, every idle word we speak has to be accounted for (Matthew 12:36). While our life experience isn't one of condemnation, it is one of continual judgment. It's a process that takes time. Christ determines the outcome by asking us to participate in the gift of every day by the making of our free-will choices. By God's grace, we come to know that God exists as manifested in creation, reflected in Christ, and further resonating in our conscience by the Holy Spirit. With that backdrop we make daily conscious decisions to live holy lives - in spite of a world that is influenced and deceived by Satan.

Likewise, those in the second resurrection are also assured of a righteous judgment. Though not having known God, they will then definitely come to know him. There will be no excuse. There, alongside Christ, will be all the redeemed saints bearing the same glory as Jesus.

That's why it's so critical to make the right decisions today in relying totally on the Lord Jesus Christ so we too are a part of the first resurrection. God wants all people to choose life, but he will not force us. Today, we make those daily life choices in an adversarial environment where Satan works. We're called to resist temptation from within and

from the world, to wait patiently, to suffer, to labour and in faith wrestle those strongholds that oppose God. We are called to Jesus and then to abide in him. We are commended to speak his words and be his image-bearers in this world, and resist the temptation to live otherwise. Through that refining process and all that it produces, the end product is that Christ's righteousness may rest on us. We are rewarded not because we've anything to boast about, but because of God's grace alone. To the faithful today, Jesus says:

*"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12).*

The great judgment of God on the masses of humanity will be much like it is for us today, only with perhaps more overwhelming evidence of resurrection, in that by then we will have crossed over to eternal life. Our glorified lives together with Jesus will be witness to the power of the Resurrection. Let's read what John saw of the future:

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works (Revelation 20:11-13).*

A thousand years after the first resurrection, the rest of the dead now alive, small and great, stand before God and are judged according to what they had done in their new lives. Remember that the now-released Satan is part of this judicial equation, as much as scripture elucidates like he is today in this world. The "judgment" experience in the future will be much like it is for the faithful today, with the exception, of course, of the then well-known recent history of Christ's return followed his thousand year reign.



The more we explore this subject, the more we find just how remarkable it is. This is because of the summarily glimpse we have throughout Scripture. This naturally gives rise to additional questions. Why does the resurrection of the unrighteous quickly escalate into a time of war? How could people, after they were resurrected, still turn away from God? Does God really allow that kind of personal choice and freedom? I suppose Jesus meant what he said in his parable about Lazarus and the rich man. Referring to the rich man's brothers, he said, "*they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*" (Luke 16:31).

Everyone will one day know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that God is holy, that in righteousness his judgments are just and that he alone has the power over life and death. Sadly, for some, their rejection of God will mean partaking in the finality of "the second death".

As stated earlier, Jesus said that all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – the righteous to eternal life, and the unrighteous to a time of judgment of which we have only the most necessary of details.

We do, however, gain some insight into the nature of the two resurrections from Jesus' own resurrection experience as contrasted from the resurrection of Lazarus. While Lazarus was resurrected to a purely physical life, Jesus' post-resurrection body was remarkably much more than that. Remember, Jesus insisted that Mary not embrace him until he was presented to the Father (John 20:17); he later returned from heaven to find his disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:5-7). We also read of how Jesus bodily affirmed his post-resurrected presence:

*But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Handle me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."*

*When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marvelled, he said to them, "Have you any food here?" So they gave him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And he took it and ate in their presence (Luke 24:37-43).*

Jesus' resurrection as "firstborn of many brethren"<sup>13</sup> is a precedent for what will follow for the righteous later. Lazarus' resurrection was purely to a physical life (and conspicuously a metaphor for the second resurrection); later, he would have died in the natural course of events, presumably from old age. These two remarkable examples clearly illustrate two different kinds of resurrections: one distinctly to an immortal life and the other to a physical life.

The most graphic illustration of a future physical resurrection involving great numbers of people who didn't really know God is found in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet to the ancient people of Israel, and like many of the other prophets, his job wasn't an easy one.

As he did millennia later with John on the Isle of Patmos, God lifted Ezekiel out of the ordinary, in the Spirit, and in a powerful vision told him of things yet future.

*The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then he caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" So I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know" (Ezekiel 37:1-3).*

What an extraordinary vision. And, what a question for God to ask! Imagine Ezekiel suddenly finding himself in a valley of dry bones as far as the eye can see, and then being asked whether those bones can live! We may have seen the scattered, whitened bones of long-deceased sheep remains in farm paddocks, or the televised images of horror from the killing fields of Cambodia, but nothing on the scale or dimension that Ezekiel experienced. These were human bones, a vast array of people killed and left without even, it seems, the dignity of proper closure.

When passing by large cemeteries in our day, it's not hard to wonder just how many people are remembered there; because representing many people from all walks of life are literally endless acres of moss-covered,

---

<sup>13</sup> See Romans 8:29

greyed tombstones. The Old Ballarat Cemetery in Victoria, for example, is a resting place to some 35,000 Australian pioneers. But a valley as seen by Ezekiel, strewn with lots of old, dry human bones defies the imagination. The term “dry bones” indicates that they’ve been dead a long time.

*Again he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:4-6).*

God asked Ezekiel to speak prophetically to those dry bones in what certainly appears to be a physical, bodily resurrection. Why suggest it’s not? Some theologians of the preterit view explain this vision as just a metaphor of God redeeming the ancient Israelites from their sins, and restricting its setting to their time and era thousands of years ago.

But is it not, by the very words of God and as accompanied by its sheer detail, worthy perhaps of so much more – especially considering that a resurrected King David is prophesied to reign over them?<sup>14</sup> David was one of the greatest kings in ancient Israel, but by the time of Ezekiel’s writing, he had long been dead. Note that this vision is explicitly graphic with details of bones, sinews, flesh, skin followed by breath, and then “*you shall live*”. This graphically, extraordinary vision has implications that are so much more than just a message for Ezekiel’s time. This is also affirmed by the fact that historically the peoples of his day did not come to know God. This vision’s fulfilment remains some time yet future.

What is really striking, is that even though these people were Israelites, defined loosely as God’s own people (such as are our great Western, contemporary countries with Christian roots), it is only when they’re resurrected that, “*Then you shall know that I am the Lord*”. Remember, Ezekiel was “*brought out by the Spirit of the Lord*”, much like John later was. The visions God gives are confronting, and while they spoke to the

---

<sup>14</sup> See Ezekiel 37:24-25

ancients among whom the prophets lived and served, they carry a far greater message that implicates us today. History truly does repeat itself! Prophecy often consists of type and antetype – a localised event echoed/repeated on a grander scale somewhere yet future.

The ancient Israelites, perhaps not unlike to many peoples today, thought they were okay, that they could wear the badge of being “godly” and yet the sad reality was that they never really knew God. The people of ancient Israel were God’s “chosen people”. They should have known God. Yet, it seems they did not, and do not know him, that is, until the time when they are resurrected.

*So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.*

*Also he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army (Ezekiel 37:7-10).*

A resurrection on this scale would be surely one of the most momentous events in all of human history. One moment a valley of dry human bones; the next moment their skeletal frames being assembled, followed by muscle, skin and hair. And then breath enters them and they again live. What an allegory pointing to the power of Jesus calling the dead from their sleep!

How did these people die? From the text, they were “slain”. It’s been said that human history has been written in blood, and this prophecy seems to be testimony to that. With breath in them, these “slain” now stand, alive once again. Imagine seeing an exceedingly great crowd, perhaps millions of living, breathing, physical people of all ages and experiences. This is without doubt a physical resurrection that matches the future visions given to John, but it is on a such a huge scale that defies imagination!

*Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel<sup>15</sup>. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!'" (Ezekiel 37:11)*

In this prophetic, visionary account we also learn that those who are resurrected lament, "*Our hope is lost* [perished, gone]." Their bewilderment is not hard to understand. These people are nothing less than totally confused – one moment suffering the ordeals of death (as the Jews did, for example, in the concentration camps of World War II), and the next moment, sometime yet future, again experiencing conscious, physical life!

Those first few moments of resurrected consciousness in a fully restored body would be enough to confuse anyone who had not taken God seriously until that point. Everything they had lived for, at that moment of resurrection, really amounted to nothing. From the depth of the sleep of death, they were awakened by the voice of God calling them, their hearts beating normally, their lungs filled with fresh air and their eyes now aware of the millions around just like them. Imagine the sword (or bullet) wounds that resulted in fatalities of the worst kind now completely healed. Imagine dying of pestilence one moment, and then standing up restored the next – in a different time and circumstance. "*Our hope is lost,*" reflects the overwhelming sentiment that everything that once made sense now doesn't.

Of course, there may be people who, when resurrected, will have in their character imprint and moral compass deep-seated anger, hatred and defiance in relation to others as well as towards God. They too will be judged.

Jesus said all who are in their graves, the righteous and later the unrighteous, will hear the voice of the Son of God. That is a powerful promise, and one that underwrites any tragedy we might experience in this life!

---

<sup>15</sup> The term "house of Israel" refers to a political entity and system; it generally does not refer to ethnicity. In our time we might refer to it as all peoples of Western democracy with Judaic/Christian roots.

The vision portrayed to Ezekiel gives additional insight into the will and purpose of God for the future. In some ways it raises further questions. What about all those babies who died at or before birth? What about those children who still sleep in our pioneer cemeteries? Who will care for them? Furthermore, how and who will minister to this exceedingly great multitude as described in Ezekiel and Revelation?

Whatever our amazement or intrigue, it does give us a glimpse into an act of resurrection of people who have essentially lived their lives in ignorance, contrary to God, or who should have really known God, but did not. The one comfort we can glean from this is that most people, even if they loosely professed to being "Christian", did not truly know God until the miracle and fact of their resurrection.

Together with other passages in Scripture, this understanding addresses a key hope for all people everywhere and those you and I perhaps know. This hope includes all those throughout history who have never known or heard of God. Others have heard about God, but never really understood him. God just didn't mean anything to them. They were distracted by materialism, inadvertently swallowed the evolutionary lie, or just simply and casually put God out of mind.

The good news of God's purpose and plan counters and addresses a level of ignorance that still seems to exist today. Many unfortunately believe you're forever lost if you don't accept Jesus now in this life. Perhaps you too have heard of the preacher who cries out from the pulpit, "If you don't accept Jesus now, and you die tonight, you will go to hell." But as we have seen from the Bible, that teaching isn't true.

This brings us back to the young twin sisters tragically killed in that freeway accident. Where are they now? Jesus reassures us that they too are awaiting a future, physical resurrection. They will hear Jesus' voice calling them. They will awaken from the pains of death to finally know there is a God.

Billions of people like them will not only finally hear the voice of God, but also, if they choose, have the opportunity to come to know him. The future resurrection of all people highlights God's desire for everyone to

be saved. Jesus is the Saviour of the world. The hope of the resurrection, both the first (and better), as well as second resurrection, is the best good news message we could ever come to understand!

9

## The Journey to Hell

Clara was just 18 months old when she died in the winter of 1911. Her small, unmarked grave lies forgotten in the old country cemetery in Goulburn, New South Wales. She would have been Larry's great aunt. Larry's grandmother seldom spoke of her, and on those rare occasions when she did, it was usually in terms of looking forward to being reunited on the day of resurrection.

The contention in the local, then quite religious community was that Clara had never been baptised, and therefore she could never be saved. Her fate, it was automatically assumed, was torment in hell, for she had never confessed faith in Jesus. The irony is, of course, she was too young to know right from wrong, and too young to comprehend God's love for her, and the people who lamented her doom sadly and conspicuously ignorant, as we learned in the previous chapter.

Today, the pulpit is conspicuously silent on the subject of hell. In the public sphere we may remember a popular sporting figure recently ostracised for speaking about hell as he understood it. Thankfully, there's a new wave of understanding and insight into God's will and purpose for unbelievers.<sup>16</sup> Clara's future, and that of the millions like her who have died, must be accounted for. Guided by God's Spirit, our heartfelt affection for all such people, must reconcile their future with the will of a loving, merciful, and righteous God.

---

<sup>16</sup> Nowadays more Bible scholars and disciples of the Lord doubt such thinking, or reject it outright. Still considered "orthodox" by many, the doctrine of everlasting hell for unbelievers faces increasing opposition in Bible classrooms and is met with growing silence from church pulpits. Both better exegesis and consistent logic contribute to this departure from historic dogma. Blatant discord is easily recognized between the amazing grace and love of God and the god who decrees that most people who ever lived will be justly, agonizingly tortured without end for the sole "sin" of dying without the Christ they never knew nor had a chance to know. (Calvin Burrell, *Bible Advocate*, July-August 2014 [baonline.org](http://baonline.org))



Abraham, we read in the Scriptures, believed that the Judge of the earth would do right.<sup>17</sup> We believe the same today. A lot hinges on the faith that God is righteous, that he will do what is right, and that his will is indeed that none should perish.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Jesus spoke more about heaven than he did about hell. Our knowledge of both is thus entirely dependent on his words. In several remarkable instances, the Scriptures recount where men of God were carried “in the Spirit” and given visions of the throne of God. Our curiosity is naturally piqued as we are gripped by their distinct and vivid accounts, whether it be Isaiah’s, Ezekiel’s, or John’s extraordinary testimonies. However, little imagery is given for what hell might be like, other than, of course, being a consuming fire resulting in annihilation. Medieval paintings and folklore seem to make up the rest of popular belief.

Preachers in the past often promoted “turn or burn” evangelism. Thus, many religious people assume that those who die in this life without ever having encountered Jesus are automatically condemned to hell, a fiery and ongoing torture of “body and soul”. Like Clara’s predicament, they believe that they simply have no hope, indeed never had any hope. If we carefully think it through, Jesus’ redemptive victory over sin and death, at their moment of prophesied resurrection, is somewhat eclipsed and rendered ineffective!

Three questions become apparent at this point: Does the Bible teach eternal hell? Can such theology stand up to robust scrutiny? Do some of the traditions we have readily accepted really find their origins in the Bible? In exploring the subject of hell, let’s pay attention to what the Bible actually does say, what it doesn’t say, and then exercise care by not adding or subtracting from its message.

From the outset we know that destruction by hell fire awaits those unrepentant, wicked people who refuse Jesus. This is consistently

---

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 18:25

<sup>18</sup> 2 Peter 3:9

highlighted throughout many of Jesus' teachings. God is sovereign over life and death, as Jesus explained:

*"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"*  
(Matthew 10:28).

To the religious leaders of Jesus' day who refused and persecuted him all the way to his crucifixion, who misconstrued the Scriptures, whose words and actions trod on God's grace, Jesus said (alluding perhaps to what the serpent in the Garden of Eden represented):

*"Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?"* (Matthew 23:33)

There is little ambiguity in Jesus' exclamation. Hell is where those professing religious men were ultimately headed! You are either a child of God, or you are not.<sup>19</sup>

And yet contrasting this, Jesus' reaction was quite different to the battle-hardened Roman soldiers mocking, scourging, and torturing him and casting lots over his clothes.

*Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots* (Luke 23:34).

Unlike his response to the religious leaders, Jesus asked his heavenly Father to forgive those callous but ignorant sinners who were violently escalating his suffering and imminent death. Jesus' petition to his Father was one of forgiveness rather than condemnation. In this scene, we cannot dismiss the heart of a loving and merciful God, expressing grace and forgiveness to those who were deceived and who lived and operated in a spiritually darkened world through little original fault of their own. The only light they may have been exposed to up until that point was Jesus' petition for forgiveness! (Note that Jesus' prayer and the powerful

---

<sup>19</sup> John 8:42,44

events surrounding his death resulted, interestingly, in the Roman centurion's belief and path to conversion).<sup>20</sup>

What Jesus emphasised and taught was quite contrary to the selfish and dismissive tendencies of human nature. He admonished his disciples:

*"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven;..."*  
(Matthew 5:44-45)

This is radical, given the mores of society!

Ultimately, judgment is Jesus' to execute. He is a merciful, righteous Judge who, as the Creator of the world, redeemed it from destruction by his own blood. No one else is worthy of that honour and responsibility.

For those who presume that the second resurrection is a total and automatic wholesale assignment to the fires of hell, think again. The finality of hell is reserved for the wicked, who, although knowing better, by their defiance and wickedness "crucify the Son of God" all over again. This is clearly evidenced in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews:

*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame (Hebrews 6:4-6).*

Now we're narrowing down those whom Scripture defines as having gone beyond the grace of repentance and forgiveness, and for whom there no longer remains any hope. These are the ones who knowingly and stubbornly refuse Jesus. They have experienced God's grace, have

---

<sup>20</sup> See Mark 15:39

tasted the goodness of God, have experienced the Spirit of God, and yet have chosen a darker path.<sup>21</sup>

King Saul, the first Israelite king, might also be an example. Anointed with the Holy Spirit at his coronation, he soon despised its counsel, and thus lived the rest of his life tormented by demonic influences. In his demise, he desperately consulted the occult before being killed in battle.<sup>22</sup> We can assume, then that King Saul would be one of those spoken of in Hebrews 6.

In Jesus' day, some people followed a similar path. Those he reached out to consistently discredited his ministry, like the disbelieving religious leaders – who suggested that Jesus was in league with the “prince of demons”. To them he said:

*“But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:24).*

Remember, the ones Jesus spoke of here are not those who never knew God, never saw the light, never tasted the Holy Spirit, but instead lived their entire lives blinded and deluded in the grip of a Satanic deception, will awaken in the second resurrection when God will judge them.

So what did Jesus mean when he said it would be “more tolerable” for anyone in the day of judgment? Did Jesus' pronouncement, directed towards his audience, then amount to a judgment or condemnation?

When we think of Sodom, we generally think of wickedness and depravity. Sodom is synonymous with heinous acts of treachery, homosexuality, and mob rule. God passed judgment on those wicked people, and they perished in a fiery blaze. But, one day, those same people will rise from their graves to face their ultimate judgment. So why will it be “more tolerable” for the Sodomites than it will be for the peoples of Jesus' day? The answer lies in Jesus' words.

---

<sup>21</sup> John 15:22

<sup>22</sup> 1 Samuel 28:7-25

*“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24).*

Going on Jesus’ words, those in Sodom, perhaps had never heard of the true God – whom Abraham loved and believed in. We can wonder whether they ever had the opportunity to believe in the One who became Jesus. If not, then how can the Sodomites be accused of refusing the Son of God? But according to Jesus, the Jews who opposed him, will be judged with a less-than-favourable outcome than those Sodomites. For them the prospect of annihilation in hell is dauntingly real!

The Sodomites faced their punishment a long time ago. And yet, it would appear from Jesus’ own words, that it will be “more tolerable” for them on the day of judgment. That is, (please excuse the humour), will it be slightly less hot for them in hell than it is for others? Of course not! Does it mean that the Sodomites may ultimately be given the opportunity for salvation in Jesus Christ? Think about it.

God is a righteous Judge. He is a God of mercy, and according to Jesus’ own brother James, *“Mercy triumphs over judgment”* (James 2:13).

We must therefore exercise care when examining the scriptures. If we’ve assumed that the second resurrection is an automatic and indiscriminate condemnation to an eternal and fiery obliteration, then that assumption contradicts what Jesus said.

We must keep in mind, however, certain characters in the Bible whose lives aid our understanding of those who remain defiant despite being offered salvation in Jesus. One such man was Judas. Though one of the twelve disciples, he, in the end, availed himself as an instrument of Satan. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus seems more of a deliberate and premeditated action than something conceived “on the spur of the moment”. Judas was a thief, helping himself to the disciples’ collective funds. A study of his life reveals a certain ongoing disgruntlement.

Judas lived a double life, right there among the brotherhood of disciples. Jesus knew this. John perhaps had an inkling of it, but to the others Judas

effectively, it seems, travelled undetected. He sought and waited for an opportunity to “do his treacherous business”.

At a certain crucial point during Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, Scripture says, “Satan entered Judas”<sup>23</sup>, whereupon he hurriedly left their fellowship to venture out into the black of night. What did Jesus say of Judas?

*“It would have been good for that man if he had never been born”*  
(Mark 14:21).

Judas was a man who experienced the fullest extent of God’s light and love in the person and ministry of Jesus, and yet he chose a contrary, dark path. Jesus alluded that Judas’ life was worth nothing. For all that Jesus had invested in him, Judas still yielded to the devil to motivate his actions and attitudes. The tragedy of Judas’ life ended in suicide.

The lake of fire exists for those who, like Judas, reject Jesus – the same destiny that awaits the devil and his cohorts.

*“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels...’”*  
(Matthew 25:41)

The religious leaders 2000 years ago are also without excuse. They saw Jesus’ miracles, heard the preaching, witnessed changed lives, and were confronted by God’s grace. In denying the presence of the Holy Spirit, they blasphemed Jesus, who said to them:

*“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life”* (John 5:39-40).

At the resurrection judgment and their resulting condemnation, Scripture says some will exhibit a false display of sorrow at their imminent demise. Jesus illustrated this by using the recurring phrase of “weeping

---

<sup>23</sup> John 13:27

and gnashing of teeth". Directing his teaching at those pseudo-religious folk who lived a lie, Jesus said:

*"But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out"* (Luke 13:27-28).

"Weeping and gnashing of teeth" seems to convey an agonising anguish, a too-late regret tinged with anger, a state of mind perhaps much like the peoples of Noah's day when they finally saw the rising floodwaters. For years they had mocked God's faithful herald, as they witnessed Noah building a big, wooden ship. They sneered at the idea of a global storm. God was the butt of their jokes and derision. But when the flood came, it was too late! The door had closed; the ark was sealed, and those wicked outside perished at God's visitation. The account of Noah's experience is almost a metaphor of what is set to occur again.<sup>24</sup>

There is no room in God's kingdom for the unrighteous. God's ultimate judgment is reflected in the closing words of the revelation given to John:

*"He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death"* (Revelation 21:7-8).

The finality of hell fire is total and instant death, from which there is no longer any hope of redemption or resurrection. Hell isn't a place of perpetual suffering. It is simply the second and final death by fire. Any lingering traditions and folklore about hell that doesn't match Scripture must be dismissed as myth. Jesus' words assure us of the finality of hell.

*"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming*

---

<sup>24</sup> Luke 17:26, Matthew 24:37

*shall burn them up... You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this," says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 4:1,3).*

God offers everyone extraordinary hope in the saving work of Jesus Christ. The rich tapestry of salvation history throughout the Scriptures, in those who have lived before us, forms and defines this thread of hope. And while we do not have all the answers, we do have the sure and adequate words of Scripture, echoing Jesus' very own thoughts. We would do well to take them to heart:

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2).*

As stated earlier, God is not willing that any should perish<sup>25</sup>, and thus the journey to hell only begins when the Holy Spirit is scorned through the unrepentant sinful things that those who hate God intentionally say and do. Jesus reminded his listeners of the ultimate price that awaits those who don't take him seriously:

*"And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell" (Matthew 5:30).*

Of course, as an infant, all this was beyond Clara. She therefore sleeps in her innocence, awaiting the voice and justice of Jesus. The tears her parents cried way back in 1911 will be more than recompensed when they see and again embrace their little girl. She will be judged by what she had done in her short and innocent life. God's goodness will be overwhelmingly evident and convincing!

Those who may have doubted God's grace in this resurrection to judgment will finally be gladdened to witness the fathomless depth of God's love and redemptive power.

---

<sup>25</sup> 2 Peter 3:9



Today, Clara's grave site is unmarked and forgotten. But not in God's mind. Not far from where she lies sleeping in that old Goulburn cemetery is a weather-beaten tombstone from an earlier generation. Dated 1889, it remembers the tragic and untimely death of a fifty-year old man named David. For all intents and purposes, it equally speaks of Clara's hope. David was a goodly man, and apparently deeply missed. The final words his friends and family left with him feature on his curious but hope-filled epitaph.

*Earth to earth and dust to dust  
Calmly now the words we say  
Leaving him to sleep in trust  
Till the resurrection day  
Father in thy gracious keeping  
Leave we how thy servant sleeping.*

## 10 Abraham Believed

**A**s we encounter the personalities throughout the Scriptures, some people really stand out. For example, Abraham is one of the historically great people of the Bible, referred to by name some 253 times. He is known as the “father of the faithful”, as well as a “friend of God,” and is portrayed in numerous works of renaissance art. Abraham is also recognised by Christians, Moslems and Jews alike. As Lord of Old Testament times, Jesus spoke to Abraham, and when on earth Jesus spoke about him. Remember Jesus’ words:

*“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58)*

The story of Abraham is worth revisiting to help us better understand the role of faith in awaiting the resurrection. The Scriptures tell us that Abraham was a hundred years old, and Sarah his wife was ninety. Apart from an earlier and troubled surrogacy, they were childless. Yet, despite their age, God had told Abraham that his descendants, through one particular child, would number as the stars in the sky. On that count we learn that: “Abraham believed God.”

God pointed out something so amazing and far off, and Abraham with child-like faith, simply believed (Genesis 15:5-6). What a significant moment between God and man! Likewise, the resurrection promise, while seemingly distant and somewhat beyond our comprehension today, similarly challenges us to just believe God.

But like us, Abraham experienced doubts along the way. Despite these, God again told Abraham and Sarah in their very old age that Sarah would indeed give birth to a son. They would experience the promised parenthood after they had waited for perhaps longer than many people live today.

Remember, Sarah was ninety, and she had spent her entire married life yearning for a child. The son she gave birth to certainly didn’t come, as we’ll discover, “in the normal way”.

We are privy to a conversation between God, Abraham and Sarah:

*And he [God] said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"*  
(Genesis 18:10-12)

Sarah laughed at the very idea of parenthood. Sure it was joyous news, but preposterous as well. Then again, they were talking with God.

Sometime later, true to God's word, Isaac (whose name means "laughter") was born at the appointed time. He was the apple of his parents' eyes, a miracle boy, a child of promise.

One can only wonder sometimes at how God, in his will and purpose, chooses to deal with us. Remember that we are created in his own image and likeness with similar feelings, emotions and identity. So why did God allow Abraham and Sarah to wait until they were old before granting them this boy? It's an interesting question, and perhaps tells us more about God's experience in waiting for his sons to be born than anything else. Indeed, Scripture tells us that the entire creation is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God.

*The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time* (Romans 8:19, 22).

God created us in his image and likeness, and the fullness of the creation process that takes us to immortality apparently requires a lot of time, equalled perhaps as waiting for a promised son took a long time for Abraham and Sarah. During this time, the shaping process takes place every day in our lives. Oh, that it would be instant! God is waiting, perhaps for a long, long time, until the fullness of his many sons are born, beginning with "*the firstborn of many brethren, Jesus Christ*" (Romans 8:29).

This may help explain Abraham and Sarah's seemingly indeterminable wait – a wait through which God can convey to us in later generations of just what is happening in the fullness of time. Otherwise, waiting just doesn't make sense; we would never be able to understand the patience of God's creative will. Neither would we understand why God often tells us to patiently endure the difficulties in this life. Patience, after all, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and therefore part of the very essence of God.

What makes this so hard is that we have been born into what some quite rightly term the "instant age". We turn on the lights with a flick of a switch; we buy cans of instant peas, heat instant soups, and drink instant coffee. Then, there are instant finance loans, instant cameras, instant hot water as well as instant gratification in so many other areas of life.

In a similar vein, parents as well as youth leaders often recommend to teenagers what's termed "delayed gratification", which is basically waiting for something rather than having it immediately. We can readily understand the wisdom of this in waiting to marry and even waiting to purchase something.

But imagine a lifetime of waiting for a promise that, as the years crept by, became even more physically remote and impossible – especially considering that Sarah's menopause was long past.

As Abraham and Sarah entered their seventies and then eighties, even the pleasure of married intimacy became nothing more than fond memories. No wonder Sarah said, "*After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure...*"

There is, however, another side to this. In writing a letter to the believers of his day, Peter sheds light on God's perspective on the passing of time:

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness (2 Peter 3:9).*

Actually, God does things just at the right time. We have to believe this if we're going to have any chance of understanding what God is doing, especially with the assurance of resurrection. Paul attested to this idea when he wrote to the Romans:

*And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly (Roman 5:5-6).*

Paul made the assertion that Christ died “at just the right time”. Essentially his statement highlights that God’s value and appreciation of time differs from ours. God determines the times and seasons of his appointments according to his will and purpose in no haphazard way.

God also knows what he’s doing and has a goal in mind, even when we absolutely have no idea. When Isaac grew up, God asked Abraham to do what seems to be the most preposterous and counter-productive thing possible:

*Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:1-2).*

This request far exceeds anyone’s expectations, considering that God reveals himself throughout Scripture as loving, kind, merciful, slow to anger, gracious, just and righteous.

If Abraham perchance was like us, he likely questioned the voice he was hearing. He knew the deception that happened in the Garden of Eden. He had previously talked with God on numerous occasions before and therefore implicitly trusted God. He knew the Master’s voice, like a sheep knows the shepherd’s voice. Perhaps that best explains why Abraham saddled up the very next day and headed off to do just what God had told him to.

*So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off (Genesis 22:3-4).*

Unlike his persistent petition to the Lord regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, here Abraham appeared strangely silent and compliant. It would be wrong to prematurely judge his understanding and faith in God as benign and dumb. Rather, we can take a clue from what Abraham did say:

*“Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you” (Genesis 22:5).*

We cannot but hang onto his affirming and faith-filled words, *“We will come back to you.”* That’s quite an assumption, given what Abraham was asked to do. It seems that he knew God on a level that is both revealing and reassuring. Still, the next few verses are painfully touching:

*So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” Then he said, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” So the two of them went together (Genesis 22:6-8).*

Isaac appeared familiar with the requirements of the burnt offering as used in their worship of God. Was he aware of the substitutionary animal sacrifice that we understand was ordained *“from the foundation of the world”* and fulfilled in Jesus Christ? Isaac didn’t question the fact of the sacrifice; what he did query, however, was the obviously missing lamb.

As we read this account in Genesis, we gain some insight into the depth of Abraham’s knowledge and understanding of the things of God. Abraham knew that God’s blessing and promises would be through Isaac, being the chosen son, from whom would come many nations. *“My son,”* said Abraham, *“God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.”* That is a bold and telling statement.

No wonder Abraham is called the *“father of the faithful”*. Faith is believing God, even when everything seems to the contrary. Faith is then acting on that belief, as opposed to being frozen into inaction. Faith is simply stepping out in the direction that God bids.

*Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son (Genesis 22:9-10).*

The question remains, how could Abraham go through “with the plot”? How his heavy heart must have pulsed, and his fingers trembled as he felt the weight of the knife. He could not avoid the fear in his son Isaac’s eyes. This was no small, easy matter. The Genesis account doesn’t go into the melodramatics of it, but we do gain a clue from the Holy Spirit inspired insight into this account written millennia later in a letter to the Hebrews:

*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death (Hebrews 11:17-19).*

It’s worth reading that last sentence again, “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.”

Yes, Abraham really knew God, and what is more, he absolutely trusted him, even as he agonisingly took the knife.

*But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” So he said, “Here I am.” And he said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son (Genesis 22:11-13).*

It’s likely that God and Abraham talked about a lot of other things, things we would all like to hear but weren’t of necessity recorded in the Genesis

account. Perhaps the subject of the resurrection of all people may have been discussed to one degree or another, considering it is so central to what God is doing. The text in Hebrews alludes to that. After all, God told Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the sky and as the sand on the seashore! We also know that long before Abraham, Enoch knew of Jesus returning with all the holy ones (saints, Jude 14-15).

Abraham thus reasoned that God could raise the dead. As simple as that! He must have had some insight into the power and reality of the resurrection that's woven into the very fabric of God's dealings with us, his children. We know Abraham had faith.

Through the example and testimony of Abraham and Isaac, God wants to convey to us the importance and gravity of what he as our Father went through in ordaining the sacrifice and resurrection of his only Son, Jesus. Through Abraham's and Isaac's experience we can better understand the nature, depth and cost of the sin sacrifice offered on our behalf.

As Abraham may have agonised over the very notion of what God asked him to do, averting the painful look on Isaac's face, so too God the Father agonised as he turned away from his Son, Jesus, as he was dying on the cross. For the first time in all eternity, Jesus was abandoned, alienated from his Father – because Jesus had taken on himself our sin, and in doing so, became “sin”. It was a shocking but defining moment in history, and one that also led next to Jesus' resurrection.

*Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me”  
(Matthew 27:46).*

Perhaps Isaac cried out those very words as he saw Abraham, with eyes averted, pick up the knife. Isaac would have felt devastatingly abandoned and alone – as Jesus did – but not for long.

If it were not for an appreciation of what the Son of God, Jesus Christ, went through and pioneered on our behalf, it might be hard to understand the issue at the heart of God asking Abraham to journey to the land of Moriah (which is where Jerusalem is today) and there sacrifice his only beloved son Isaac.



God's request of Abraham to kill Isaac just doesn't otherwise make sense. There is no other explanation, because it just doesn't fit anywhere else except in the life, work, purpose, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Thus we again see an example of the type and antetype, a local event with distant prophetic ramifications). Granted, the book of Genesis gives us only the broadest brush-strokes of "life back then", and what we do have certainly stimulates a further sense of curiosity.

If we view the life-story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac as being nothing less than a miracle and a parable for what God over time is accomplishing in us, we might have a better chance to understand God, and perhaps why he chooses to interact with us on the level that he does.

Through the past experiences of, for example, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, God is telling us his story. Perhaps the only way God can convey the depth of his love for us, and the extent he will go to in redeeming us, is in the attachment and empathy we have for Abraham and Isaac.

As we've learned, God makes certain promises to his people, and we can depend on him to keep those promises, in his time and in his way. God says that Jesus will return. He says, of that time, that there is a resurrection of all the righteous when they will rise to glory. God also says that there is a second resurrection a thousand years following the first resurrection.

Right at this moment, from our perspective, these promises might sound distant and unreal. But if we believe God, put our faith in him, and fix our eyes on Jesus alone, then those promises are as real as tomorrow's rising sun. They certainly were for Abraham. Together with Abraham, we await the fulfilment of God's remaining promises.

## 11

# God Raises the Dead

**Y**ou may have heard a popular song by Bette Midler expressing the sentiment that God is watching us from a distance<sup>26</sup>. You could be forgiven for thinking that God is somehow disconnected from his creation, far away, or even abstract in existence. Scientific methodology, the media, and current social norms seem eager to confirm this. The greatest enquiring minds with the highest IQs write lengthy dissertations asserting, in effect, that God doesn't exist. Their premise is that we simply evolved into existence over time.

Don't believe it. It's nothing more than an oft-repeated lie. Take note instead of what David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), affirmed in the Psalms: *"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'"* (Psalms 14:1).

Evolution is the greatest lie ever launched on humanity! It's a devilish deception intended to hide our true identity and purpose. The truth is, every atom in the entire universe is held together by God's sustaining and intentional power. And, as we shall see in this chapter, that power not only creates and sustains now, but also raises the dead in the last day.

John, a disciple of Jesus, introduced us to God when he wrote:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made (John 1:1-3).*

The author of the Book of Hebrews shed further light on this:

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made*

---

<sup>26</sup> "From a Distance," Bette Midler, 1990

*the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power... (Hebrews 1:1-3)*

God is not only the Creator, but also the Sustainer of everything that he has made. This hardly allows for a remote, disconnected relationship with his creation and, perhaps more importantly, with us.

Jesus tells us, in Matthew chapter ten, that God knows the number of hairs on our heads. He's not distant, absent or far away. But before saying this, Jesus gave a remarkable description of God:

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:28-31).*

This passage tells us of a Father who is connected to his creation and perhaps more importantly to us as his children. It tells us that God is acutely aware of everything, and able to do anything according to his time and purpose. It also reminds us that our lives and ultimate hope are in his hands. Our Father is a compassionate, loving Father, a God who cares.

*For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask him (Matthew 6:8).*

God's work here is perhaps the most important thing happening right now in all the known cosmos. In fact, we learn from Scripture that the entire creation groans awaiting for the revealing of God's children. That's how important we are to God!

*The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19).*

While we wait, we grow in our walk of faith, as Paul says:

*...we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:3-4).*

For most people, give or take a few, we live to around seventy or eighty years of age. Inevitably, day by day we grow older until eventually, we reach our last day, our last breath and our last thought.

At that moment, we go to sleep. It's a deep, deep sleep with no dreams, no thoughts, no consciousness, no awareness of anything. This isn't depressing or morbid; far from it, because God's promise of resurrection still awaits us. We can be encouraged by the next thing we'll experience: what the scriptures call "the last day".

Listen to Jesus' teaching on this as recorded by John:

*And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:39-40).*

John again remembered Jesus' exact words:

*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).*

Jesus also said, in a similar context:

*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:54).*

Jesus spoke these words with divine, heavenly authority. Remember what offended the religious leaders of his day: the "I Am" statements that are attributable to God and God alone. "I Am your shield," God told Abraham. "I Am that I Am", God told Moses. "I Am the bread of life," said Jesus.

When Jesus spoke these words as the Son of God, it was God speaking. Whether you attribute the "I Am" to God in the context of the Old Testament, or in the person of Jesus, it is the same voice, the same

authority, and the same purpose. Here, Jesus affirmed what he is going to do at some point in the future: *“I will raise him up at the last day.”*

The “last day” is the Great Day of God, the time when God mightily intervenes in human affairs. The angelic host who sing praises to God highlight this:

*“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth”* (Revelation 11:17-18).

Angels weren’t the only ones who understood and valued God’s work in the future; so did the ancients. For example, Job said:

*If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made* (Job 14:14-15).

Daniel also had many unanswered questions about some of the things that God had shown him. Some of those prophesied events were sealed up for a much later time, and the messenger who spoke with Daniel reassured him:

*“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt”* (Daniel 12:2).

*“As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance”* (Daniel 12:13).

In Scripture, God makes big, bold, unambiguous as well as far-reaching promises to us about the future. Our part is to believe him – to take God at his word, no matter what plausible but contrary explanations may arise. We can take to heart the angel’s reassurance to John, as recorded in

## Resurrection Hope

---

the Book of Revelation, that, *“These are the true words of God”* (Revelation 19:9).

Even more important than God’s promises is Jesus’ own resurrection – a precursor of our own:

*...that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles (Act 26:23).*

On the day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven, Peter preached a sermon with emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus:

*But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Act 2:24).*

Ultimately, our fate rests entirely on the word of God, on his promises, on his will and timing – and on Jesus as the firstfruits of resurrection. Of course, we’re naturally interested in the timing of all this. So too were the disciples. They often asked Jesus the “when” question.

Jesus said of his coming that no one knows the day or the hour; only the Father knows. The fact is that he is coming! It’s also a fact that, unless we remain alive at Christ’s return, we will die. But we have hope in Jesus. (Atheism, contrastingly, gives us no hope). He raises us up by the will and call of the Father. The Holy Spirit that has been given to us seals us for that “last day”; this is God’s guarantee to his promise.

*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).*

*“No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44).*

Just before my mother died after a prolonged illness, she reminded her family that death is like a deep sleep. She looked forward to the rest that would relieve her suffering.

As she breathed her last, in the very next instant, eclipsing the passing of time, she would hear the voice of Jesus calling her. That hasn't happened yet, as Jesus is still coming; and yet for her, it's as if it has already happened.

Every time our family visits her grave, we're encouraged by the words on the bronze plaque that reads, "Asleep Until The Resurrection".

When Jesus finally returns, there will be no doubt in anyone's mind as to the power and purpose of our awesome God when he raises us up from the sleep of death. Only then will we know what it is like to embrace someone who is back from the dead!

## 12

# The State of the Dead

*When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? (Isaiah 8:19)*

**W**hat a perplexing question for God to ask of those he calls his own special people! I mean, who would remotely consider looking for answers from those dark, demonic forces when you can come to know the love, power, truthfulness and justice that embody the great living God? Sadly, there is a historical precedent where such a concern has some merit. For this, let's go back to the time of the imminent demise of the first king of the ancient Israelites.

Because of his life choices and unwillingness to admit his failings, King Saul progressively turned away from God. He no longer sought after or followed God's will. Over time Saul's circumstances turned from bad to worse. With an imminent battle looming against Israel's long-time foes, the Philistines, Saul knew he needed spiritual help. But instead of going to God, and against his better judgment, he sought answers from a medium, something specifically prohibited throughout the Scriptures.

*Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said. So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name."*

*But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" Saul swore to her by the LORD, "As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this" (1 Samuel 28:7-12).*

King Saul had originally rid the land of mediums and spiritists. (1 Samuel 28:3) Now he sought help from one such medium.



*Then the woman asked, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” “Bring up Samuel,” he said. When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!”*

*The king said to her, “Don’t be afraid. What do you see?” The woman said, “I see a spirit coming up out of the ground.”*

*“What does he look like?” he asked. “An old man wearing a robe is coming up,” she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.*

*Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” “I am in great distress,” Saul said. “The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.”*

*Samuel said, “Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbours – to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines” (1 Samuel 28:11-19).*

What a soul-piercing conversation! The question that interests us in this account, however, is to whom was Saul talking? Was it an apparition? Was it an evil spirit? Or could it even have been Samuel himself?

On this point we can go no further than what the Bible states. The woman shrieked when she realised two things: first, Samuel appeared to come up out of the ground, and second, a disguised King Saul made the request of her.

What is also of interest is that “Samuel” told Saul that, “*tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.*” Where was that? In the grave, dead, asleep – the same place for both the righteous and unrighteous.

Samuel, a righteous prophet called into God’s service since birth, had died and was buried. He wasn’t in heaven, purgatory, or a fiery hell. In this text he was asleep in death, and it is suggested here that he was disturbed from that sleep. The Bible doesn’t say it wasn’t Samuel. We can surmise that it could have been a demonic apparition. Certainly, every word turned out to be true, as the very next day Saul and his sons were killed in battle. Despite the truth of Samuel’s predictions, God specifically warns that we’re not “*to consult the dead on behalf of the living*” (Isaiah 8:19), or for that matter, have anything to do with the occult.

Saul should have known better. Had he done things differently, his legacy could have been among the saints listed in the “faith chapter” of Hebrews 11. While Samuel rates a mention among countless other faithful people in that chapter, Saul is conspicuously absent.

*And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies (Hebrews 11:32-34).*

In addition to listing faithful men and women, Hebrews 11 tells us of their future. Did they at death receive their “eternal reward”? Not if we read a few verses on.

*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect (Hebrews 11:39-40).*

This is really important to understand. As we have seen previously, the righteous have not yet received their reward from God! Samuel died a faithful man of God; Saul, however, died laden with sin, alienated from

God. Yet both lie asleep today in their graves. The story proves once again that death is the great equaliser in this life; justice for everyone is served – not at death, as we learned earlier, but at the resurrection, when the righteous are raised to eternal life, and the unrighteous to judgment. These are the very words of Jesus.

I officiated at my mother's funeral a number of years ago. She had been ill for more than three years. When our family finally gathered at the chapel in the funeral parlour for a final viewing, I stood in silent grief by her wooden casket. My mother, a woman of quiet faith who only a few weeks earlier had taught me the Greek word for resurrection *anástasis*, was now certified dead. She didn't any longer look or feel like my mother; she was still, motionless, not breathing.

Considering her deceased state, what did Jesus mean, when he said, "*whoever lives and believes in Me will never die*" (John 11:26)? He meant that though my mother had died, one day she will rise bodily in the first resurrection, meet Jesus, and be clothed with immortality. That truth is capsulised in a bronze plaque my father had made, with the epitaph reading: "Domna Klassek, 1932-2009, Asleep Until The Resurrection".

The Bible does leave us with some good clues that help us better understand the implications of the state of the dead and the resurrection. We find those clues in the book of Revelation.

Remember, the aging John, one of Jesus' original disciples, was imprisoned by the Romans on the isle of Patmos. As John felt the affliction of imposed isolation, Jesus appeared to him. John wrote about that encounter and the visions that followed in Revelation.

John describes Jesus opening the fifth seal, heralding a time of worldwide divine retribution.

*When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow*

*servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed (Revelation 6:9-11).*

This is a vision, much like a vivid dream state. In this vision the souls of the righteous who had been slain call out with a loud voice, and we sense that those very souls of men are waiting for God's justice! They are told to wait a little longer. Given the fact that John is writing about what he saw in a vision, is the wait literal, analogous, or metaphoric?

Revelation is richly symbolic. (For example, fine linen is associated with the righteous acts of the saints.) We do know, that at this point in the Revelation prophecy, evil in the form of impending martyrdom still holds sway over the lives of the remaining faithful.

Still, whichever way we perceive God's revelation to us, we get a feel for what's at stake in this divinely inspired vision. The presence of souls under the altar has to be something completely other-worldly and largely beyond our capacity and perspective to fully comprehend. Are the souls under the altar part of the state of the dead? It is in this context that we read in Genesis where Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground where he was murdered<sup>27</sup>. We understand this to be a figure of speech.

Let's go back to the letter to the Hebrews for a moment, when the author compares the old covenant with the new.

*But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).*

Notice, that in our coming to God, we also come into the presence of "the spirits of righteous men made perfect". Perhaps this ties in with the words of

---

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 4:10

the wise teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes when he discusses the aging process and the great equaliser called death:

*...the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7).*

Note that “*the spirit* [apparently of all people] *returns to God who gave it*”! The breath that God breathed into Adam at creation is the breath or essence that is finally “exhaled” at death, and goes back to God.

The broad brush-strokes of Scripture point us to a greater reality we struggle to fully comprehend. Surely theologians have tried, and men wiser than I have formed statements and creeds that attempt to quantify things simply too great for any of us.

However, one certainty we can be confident of: God has a plan and a purpose for us, which we’re called to simply believe in and respond to. There is hope beyond this life. That hope is personified in the Lord Jesus Christ, his message, and his saving work. He is the Way. He is our hope. We need not fear death, for as much as we can understand from Scripture, death is akin to sleep. It’s a sleep that will be woken by the voice of God. As for some of the intriguing details, well, we’ll just have to wait and see.

## 13

# Out-of-Body Experiences

If you browse any mainstream bookstore or search the Internet for “out-of-body experiences” or “near-death experiences”, you might be surprised at just how much information is available.

Literally dozens of allegedly reputable new books are being published that tell of people who have purportedly died and remained unconscious for a significant period of time, only to be resuscitated to then tell of “what heaven is like” on the other side.

They are, on the surface, pretty amazing testimonies. They report that after dying, a person remembers being generally drawn towards a light source before experiencing the absolute bliss of being in the Lord’s presence. Heaven is often described quite differently in individual accounts. Some tell of hearing voices; others report seeing angels, their deceased friends or great fields of colourful flowers. Still others describe floating invisibly around the hospital ward. They see “themselves” from above, lying motionless on the hospital bed and fully aware of all the intrigue surrounding their decease. They then suddenly wake up back in bed, returning fully resuscitated to themselves again, to later tell the story.

The question we might ask, of course, is how does such an experience measure up with the testimony of Scripture? Is there anything in the Word of God that might convince us of the truth or otherwise of these reported near-death incidents? Let’s see.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the actual details of the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Crucified along with Jesus were two other men, common criminals who had become subject to Roman law in the worst kind of way. Their brutalised bodies were nailed to wooden crosses, or stakes, and they were perhaps only hours from dying. One of them mocked Jesus, but the other requested:

*“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

*Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).*

This passage prompts two questions: Did the repentant criminal end up that day with Jesus in paradise? What did Jesus precisely mean by "paradise"?

In order to answer these questions, we must first understand the true nature of death according to Scripture. Death is the cessation of life. Surely, then, the grave cannot be described as paradise! Scripture more aptly describes death as an enemy. It tells us that the penalty of sin is death, and all of us deserve that penalty. We're made mortal, subject to death. Jesus, however, paid the price for our sins by his death. Death by its very nature doesn't have any glory. How thus could death be a blissful release into God's presence? Read the Scriptures and we'll discover quite the opposite! Jesus was about to die, and so were the two criminals with him.

What Jesus conveyed to the repentant criminal was, in fact, that his sins were atoned for, that his repentance and faith were acceptable, and that he would assuredly arise to glory to forever be with Jesus in paradise – contrasting the torturous, brutal and bloody events they were experiencing. That was the singular point of Jesus' encouragement.

If we believe that Jesus died, and that his next conscious experience was blissfully in heaven with the Father, then we really should read on.

In John chapter 20 we learn that early on the first day of the week, which we commonly call Sunday, Mary Magdalene stood weeping by the empty tomb where Jesus had been laid. The tomb's stone door had been rolled away.

Looking into the empty tomb with tear-filled eyes, Mary saw two angels who asked her why she was crying. She didn't query who the two angels were, why they were there, or how they might be implicated in all this. Through her tears, she simply told them of her bewilderment.

*"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).*

Looking around, Mary was suddenly aware that the angels weren't the only ones there. She saw a "gardener" standing there, not realising that it was Jesus.

What did Jesus say to her at that moment? He asked her the exact same question the angels had asked, before adding a second question.<sup>28</sup>

*"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

*Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."*

*Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher) (John 20:15-16).*

Mary didn't recognise Jesus when he called her by the rather generic term of "woman". But when he used her name "Mary", in the manner he had done perhaps hundreds of times before, Mary suddenly recognised Jesus.

Amid the blur of emotions and events, Mary turned towards Jesus with outstretched arms. Listen carefully to what Jesus then said.

*"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17).*

Whether Mary actually flung her arms around Jesus or not isn't specifically played out in the Gospel account. The point is, Jesus refused Mary's embrace for a particularly pressing reason: he still had unfinished business to attend to, as he was to be presented before the Father as the perfect "wave sheaf" offering. Jesus was now cleansed, with our sin

---

<sup>28</sup> A study of the scriptures can surprise us just how many times God chooses to ask us questions at critical points in our experience with him. God's questions demonstrate his interest in our perspective and often help "unpack" our dilemmas.



completely atoned for. What he then said, however, ought to capture our attention: *"I have not yet returned to the Father"*.

Later in the day, after he had appeared to Mary, Jesus ascended to heaven, where he was presented to the Father, and then returned – when we see him eating broiled fish with the disciples. He was then, in every sense, touchable by those men. But at that early morning encounter with Mary, he had not yet ascended to heaven and still had to be presented before his Father.

As we relive the lead-up to the resurrection account, something important about Jesus' death becomes clear. Jesus does not appear to have had a "heavenly" or other divine experience while he was dead. He was in the grave, "in the heart of the earth", for three days and three nights "asleep". This was the only sign Jesus had earlier given as to the authenticity of his Messiahship. He was asleep in death. Was he in communion with the heavenly realms while he was dead? From what Jesus said, absolutely not. To Mary he said that he had not yet ascended into heaven, to his Father, *"to my God and your God"*.

For Jesus to be conscious during his decease undermines the nature of Jesus literally dying for our sins. Remember, death is described throughout Scripture as an enemy, not a blessed release.

So, by looking at Jesus' testimony alone, "near-death" or "out-of-body" experiences that tell of "going to heaven" or other having sublime encounters can only be treated as medical or neurological phenomena. While we must respect the views and experiences of others, our understanding of such things must first defer to the testimony of Scripture. According to Scripture, Jesus died. He was asleep in death, and three days and three nights later was resurrected by the power of God.

We know at death, the body returns to the ground, and the spirit returns to God. This was illustrated in what Stephen cried out while he was being murdered: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"* (Acts 7:59).

Entering long before our first breath, this spirit enlivens body and soul and imparts higher intelligence, reasoning ability, an aesthetic sense, the

capacity to love and a God-consciousness. At death it somehow returns to God. The process of disengagement from the natural body may account for reports of near-death experiences. If the patient is resuscitated, the spirit may indeed have “recorded” environmental events that can be recalled.<sup>29</sup>

What else does the Bible have to say about “out-of-body experiences?” Are there any tangible examples in Scripture we can learn from? And if so, what insight might we gain?

In an overall reading of the Bible you will encounter numerous testimonies that find their origins from beyond this physical world. Men experienced various visions and directly attributed them as having come from God. For example, Jacob saw a stairway leading to heaven. Ezekiel saw a stunning vision of a future resurrection. Daniel saw a vision detailing successive world empires. And as noted in a previous chapter, John saw Jesus in vision amid apocalyptic end-time scenarios.

Then there is a curious passage in Paul’s second letter to the faithful at Corinth. He wrote:

*It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter (2 Corinthians 12:1-4).*

It seems here Paul was writing, in the third-person, about himself. That experience had stayed with him for some 14 years, and he didn’t really know how to fully describe it. We are not privy to how and why this happened to Paul, but we do know that at certain times in his life he was almost killed. An example of one such event happened at Lystra.

---

<sup>29</sup> “Alive in the Spirit,” James McBride, *Bible Advocate* (November-December 2013) 12, baonline.org

*Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead (Acts 14:19).*

After this brutal form of execution, the disciples gathered around Paul, presumably praying and anointing his lifeless body. Paul somehow survived.

During one of those cruel encounters, perhaps Paul's life teetered on the edge, where his spirit experienced some level of "disengagement" from his body! We don't know.

We do know, however, that his experience hearing "*inexpressible words... not lawful for a man to utter*" was mirrored in John's Revelation vision, when he was told not to write what he had heard from the "seven thunders".<sup>30</sup> This is what John experienced in his own words:

*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day,... (Revelation 1:10)*

From our physical and limited perspective, we'll never adequately answer some questions in this lifetime, and that certainly includes Paul's and John's visions. But we don't need to. Our only resources are what is written in the Holy Scriptures, embodying the very words of Jesus as well as the testimonies of those faithful to him.

You've probably heard the old hymn that resounds with the words of, "*On Christ the solid rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand.*" These lyrics reflect the biblical standard that anything else beyond Jesus' teaching must be treated for what it really is: unworthy to be built on.

But what about other references in Scripture, which some may cite, that to one degree or another appear to imply some aspect of "other worldly" experience after death? Is that a valid conclusion, or is something else

---

<sup>30</sup> Revelation 10:4

going on? For example, the apostle Paul talked about being without the body and being with the Lord<sup>31</sup>.

To explore this further, note where Jesus shared a parable in which Abraham and the rich man conversed sometime after their decease. Some take from this that the dead carry on conversations with each other. Jesus also conversed with Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration account, and Peter, John, and James saw them briefly. When they looked up again, only Jesus was there. By all appearances, Moses and Elijah were in conscious communion with Jesus, even though they were believed dead and awaiting resurrection.

Another example might be Peter's comments (1 Peter 3:18-19) that Jesus preached to spirits in prison – and associating these events with his death and resurrection.

These examples can pique our belief that there might be some kind of “dis-embodied” life or consciousness after death. (After all, Jewish tradition suggests that the spirit of the departed sojourns locally for several days).

Alternatively, we can also view this conclusion as a contradiction to the Hebrews chapter eleven testimony that all the faithful who have lived and died have “not yet received the promises”.

Referring to 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, Paul no doubt experienced “visions and revelations” of some kind. The truth is, in this passage Paul was expressing his deepest desire and longings to be with God. He held dear to God's promises as they transcend this physical experience and age. Paul wasn't saying that at death we become conscious, disembodied spirits. We must be careful not to imply more than what is stated in Paul's writings.

Regarding the reference that Jesus' “*was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,*” (1 Peter 3:18-19), Peter was simply referring to Jesus'

---

<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:6-8

death and resurrection three days later. Peter did not say that Jesus preached during the time of his decease.

The simple point of Jesus's allegory of Lazarus and the rich man lies in the words of Abraham: even if someone were to rise from the dead, it would still be insufficient to convince the unbelieving and unrepentant mind.

The purpose of the Transfiguration account was to help Jesus' disciples understand that even though Moses stood tall representing the law, and even though Elijah came to represent the quintessential prophet, (hence the term the Law and the Prophets), they were now to focus their attention on and listen to Jesus. When the vision was gone a few moments later, a voice came out of a cloud saying, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.*" The purpose of the fleeting vision was not to prove that Moses and Elijah were now glorified with Jesus – but rather a glimpse from beyond time, matter and space.

John particularly understood what it meant to receive a vision. In the epic Book of Revelation he stated that he was "*in the spirit on the Lord's day*". This can be understood as John having received a vision on the Lord's day being the weekly Sabbath, or perhaps better as that "great and terrible Day of the Lord" referred to elsewhere in Scripture, where God begins to reign and brings justice and judgment to all. The dream-like state of a vision is further verified when we read of John uncontrollably weeping (as we might in an intense dream):

*"I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside"* (Revelation 5:4).

Sometimes God draws from his eternal repository and uses idiom, metaphor and allegory to convey a truth – a truth that we otherwise might not readily understand. For example, the point of Peter's vision<sup>32</sup> asking him to kill and eat "unclean" animals wasn't about the animals at all. The vision was simply to help Peter understand that the Gentiles were brothers too. God was showing Peter he had to change from his

---

<sup>32</sup> As recorded in Acts chapter 10

blind spot! As the context of this passage indicates, God wasn't introducing a change to dietary laws.

The vision given to Ezekiel differs. Its explicit nature and the overall message God gave throughout its presentation, while applying in part to the peoples of Ezekiel's day, also resonated with an emphatically literal and future tense when God spoke of the resurrection, *"Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves"* (Ezekiel 37:13). To relegate this passage as exclusively applying to Ezekiel's time is to strangely interpret the Scriptures.

What about visions today? One of the less-than-helpful tendencies of religious people is to seek out "spiritual manifestations". Sincere people of faith can at times feel somewhat inadequate or deprived unless they have a dream, see a unique event, feel the Spirit, or hear a voice. For example, thriving movements within the Christian community put extraordinary emphasis on speaking in tongues. Other experiences include apparent mass healings at public rallies; yet others specialise in prophetic utterances, and so on.

In one sense, it's almost a natural response to expect the same today when we read the Scriptures with numerous illustrations of the "supernatural". For example, the Bible tells of an axe head that floated on water, a fiery chariot appearing, water flowing from a rock, the sun going back, the sea parting, heavenly dreams, and a man who was resurrected when he was hurriedly thrown into Elisha's grave.

The danger in seeking spiritual "manifestations", however, is that when on occasion the spirit realms are opened up to us, we may not be sufficiently equipped to discern truth from lies, light from darkness. Scripture reminds us that even Satan transforms himself into an angel of light!<sup>33</sup> Eve certainly was easily beguiled. But Jesus knew of the trickery presented in his temptation encounter with the devil.

---

<sup>33</sup> See 2 Corinthians 11:14

Also, we can run the risk with being so overly fascinated with the spiritual manifestation or experience that we can easily fail to fully appreciate whether it is authentic or not.

We don't need to search too far in order to really find God. God reminds us that he's not far or distant:

*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*  
(Jeremiah 29:13).

Jesus taught that we can experience the intimacy of God's presence in our daily lives.

*"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"* (John 14:23).

In the next few verses we read where Jesus was speaking about the Holy Spirit. Jesus' promise of, *"We will come to him and make our home with him,"* is a deeply personal and close communion with God that surpasses anything else we might experience in our lives today. What could be greater in our journey today than God coming and dwelling in us! Further on in John chapter 17, Jesus prayed for our oneness in him to reflect his oneness with our Father. What more could anyone ask for than God the Father and Jesus Christ coming and living in us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit!

The Scriptures are the full sum of God's revelation to us, and are further magnified to aid our understanding by the Holy Spirit. Any new proposed idea or text, such as near-death experiences, that goes beyond the Word of God becomes mere hypothesis. There are some certainties that God has given us, and there are other things that largely remain a mystery - this we must accept.

*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever* (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Paul affirmed this when he wrote to the faithful in Corinth:

*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12).*

Mirrors of Paul's day were made of highly polished brass, and they fell far short of the clarity we see in the mercury-coated mirrors we use today. Paul, one of the great men of God in the first century, was quite prepared to humbly confess that we only know in part.

This certainly is true of what happens when we die. We do know, however, that the normal human being was created out of the earth to eventually transcend our current physical, earthly composition. We were made "*in God's image and likeness*". When God created us, "He breathed into our nostrils the breath of life". (At one time, Jesus again breathed on his disciples, saying, "*Receive the Holy Spirit*", and we again see our Creator-Saviour Son of God at work – John 20:22).

Our sense of being, reflected in our intellect, emotions, and consciousness, is a mystery to science. The origin of thought is an enigma. Medical discipline has unsuccessfully tried to isolate and understand our consciousness. God has given us something we can't see, like the wind, which the writer of Ecclesiastes pondered over:

*"...the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).*

There are other references to the "spirit in man".

*"...for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me – the breath of man that I have created" (Isaiah 57:16).*

*"When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:29-30).*

The author of Hebrews coined the phrase "*the spirits of righteous men made perfect*". He pointed to the reality and promises we're called to embrace that far transcend what the ancient Hebrews had until that time



understood. Jesus mediated a new covenant, and with it a renewed hope, and in his work we have some absolutes we can be certain of.

*But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).*

How we long to understand fully those things we write and ponder about; how we long one day to finally see what by faith we believe!

Some things, however, we can be confident in. We do know that God created us. We do know that we all ultimately die. We know that death is an enemy. We understand that death is likened to sleep that will be awakened from by the voice of God. We do know that Jesus is the “*the author and perfecter of our faith*” (Hebrews 12:2) and “*the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.*” (Hebrews 5:9) We do know that God will raise us up in the manner and glory Christ was raised and that one day we’ll be clothed in immortality as the children of God.

In coming to terms with all that God has promised, may we in humility confess that we really know only what he has chosen to reveal to us through the testimony of the Scriptures. Given our human tendencies, any speculation beyond what God has specifically revealed surely isn’t to our advantage.

Those who have experienced near-death events, or heard of others’ testimonies, are often more than convinced of the authenticity of what they have experienced. Yet the testimony throughout the Bible speaks significantly different on this.

The Bible speaks of death as being like sleep, with no conscience experience. Again, near-death experiences may be attributed to the brain’s response to oxygen deprivation, as these sensations often reflect the culture of the person, be they Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist.

When challenged by Satan in what is commonly known as the “great temptation”, Jesus simply referred to the authority of Scripture by prefacing his response with, “*It is written...*” (Matthew 4:4). It is on the authority alone of what is “*written*” that we too must rely.

## 14

### Hope Beyond All Hope

In *Surprised by Hope*<sup>34</sup>, a remarkable book that challenges traditionally accepted views of what might happen at and after death, author N. T. Wright, former Bishop of Durham for the Church of England and a respected theologian, asks some intriguing and important questions about what we believe.

On page 27 of his book, under the heading “The Key Questions”, he writes:

My own church, the Church of England, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, declares that it finds its doctrine in scripture, tradition, and reason, taken together in their proper blend. I suggest that a good deal of our current view of death and life beyond has come from none of these but rather from impulses in the culture that created, at best, semi-Christian informal traditions that now need to be re-examined in the clear light of scripture. Scripture, in fact, teaches things about the future life that most Christians, and almost all non-Christians, have never heard of.

Tom Wright goes on to say:

Second, do we have immortal souls, and if so, what are they? Again, much Christian and sub-Christian tradition has assumed that we all do indeed have souls that need saving, and that the soul, if saved, will be part of us that goes to heaven when we die. All this, however, finds minimal support in the New Testament, including the teaching of Jesus, where the word *soul*, though rare reflects when it does occur underlying Hebrew or Aramaic words referring not to a disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body, but rather to what we would

---

<sup>34</sup> N. T. Wright *Surprised by Hope, Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. (Harper One 2008)

call the whole person or personality, seen as being confronted by God.

The scholarship in *Surprised by Hope* represents a remarkable break with traditional orthodoxy on these subjects, and compares several commonly held views with Scripture.

Tom Wright summarises his thoughts here on page 29:

The ultimate future hope remains a surprise, partly because we don't know when it will arrive and partly because we only have images and metaphors for it, leaving us to guess that the reality will be far greater, and more surprising, still.

It is our hope that texts like Tom Wright's, with its courageous and honest scholarship, spearheads further groundbreaking and frank research into what the Bible actually says.

Jesus' own testimony that addresses the resurrection of all people ought to be sufficient for us. Embodied throughout the faithfully recorded and preserved Scriptures – covering thousands of years, civilisations and events – we also have the underwriting of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only affirms our sonship but also helps enlighten the very Scriptures on which we base our hope. It is, in fact, the Holy Spirit that strengthens and renews this hope in us. The Holy Spirit seals us for that great day when hope will be finally realised.

Giving us an understanding and insight we otherwise would not have, Paul wrote to the faithful in Rome:

*For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Romans 8:13-14).*

*Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we*

*hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness (Romans 8:23-26).*

The coming of Jesus will finally give form to the certain hope we now have. It will assuredly be bigger and better and far more glorious than anything we might imagine today. Be prepared to be surprised!

Paul said it this way:

*It is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.*

*The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2:9-12).*

We don't have to live our lives today without a reasonable understanding of what God has in mind, of what he is doing and how it involves us. No doubt we must be familiar with what the Bible states. In drawing near to God in prayer, never underestimate the power of asking him for understanding.

As we do, we'll begin to better understand the Bible's story flow, the personalities and events that form its histories, as well as its distinct teachings and life instructions. We'll absorb the morality woven into those long past events. We'll read of prophecies, how they were fulfilled, and perhaps wonder at those that still await fulfilment. We'll learn from the successes and failings of faithful people, and equally be edified by the experiences of those darker souls at enmity against God. Most importantly, we'll see the Lord Jesus Christ right at the centre of everything, from Genesis through to Revelation.

With a familiarity that grows by reading the Scriptures and then naturally by personally coming to Jesus himself, the aspirations that fill our days can be anchored to an absolute certain reality. By the power and

presence of God's Spirit in our lives, we can believe in the literal and glorious return of Jesus that will precipitate the momentous resurrection of the righteous. We can then look forward to finally standing before God, holy and blameless in the image and stature of Jesus. Having attained to the fulness of Christ, the greatest, most exciting hope we could ever dream of will become reality. We are destined to become God's glorified offspring, eternal, to be his children forever – sharing a glory with Jesus Christ himself.

*...until we all may come to the unity of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, to a full-grown man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).*

We also hold dear that there is hope for those who, in this life, never really knew God – those who were hidden from the glorious light of God by a hideous, devilish deception. We've learned that God will raise all people back to life. That includes our friend Larry, whose funeral was tinged with doubts about his future. Included in this hope are the twin nine-year-old girls killed in that horrific freeway accident, and the young criminal gunned down by police. They will all rise again, not to be immediately condemned but to experience judgment and with a life of finally knowing God. Never underestimate God's grace! What hope this gives us!

We can't help but be excited that all people will then ultimately have the opportunity to come to understand the beckoning words of Jesus:

*"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).*

Until Jesus returns, when hope becomes reality, may we take to heart his encouraging words:

*"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12).*

May this resurrection hope encourage and inspire us to believe and experience the best news we could ever hear. May this hope change and direct our lives in every way. May we embrace Jesus just as Mary did on

that first day of the week! The encouraging words of Paul, to the faithful in Rome, are as relevant today as when they were penned two millennia ago:

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).*

## 15 By the Way...

**T**here's a strange but interesting story in the Bible. Matthew includes it in his Gospel:

*At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him" (Matthew 14:1-2).*

Herod had beheaded John the Baptist, an outspoken prophet of God. Matthew chapter 14 recounts the gruesome story. The question that might intrigue us is why did Herod proffer that Jesus was John resurrected from the dead? Was Herod simply trying to appease his guilt-ridden conscience? Was he making some kind of shrewd political move? Or did he actually believe in the resurrection? After all, John was highly regarded as a prophet by the Jewish multitudes, and now Jesus had inherited a similar spotlight. The news of Jesus' mighty works and the power of his teachings had spread like wildfire throughout the region.

First, let's get some background. Jesus and John were first cousins; their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth were also close friends. We don't know much about the growing years of the boys. They were about 30 years of age when John introduced Jesus to the multitudes: "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,*" (John 1:29).

Later, when speaking of John, Jesus attributed to him the legendary status of being in the spirit and power of Elijah, a historical prophet in Israel's bygone days.

We've already read about Jesus taking his closest disciples, Peter, John, and James, with him high up on a mountain. While they were secluded, the disciples witnessed a vision of Jesus, shining bright as the sun, talking with Moses and Elijah. As they left the mountaintop and descended, the disciples wanted to know more:



*Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."*

*And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"*

*Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands."*

*Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:9-13).*

Notice that Jesus explained two things about Elijah. First, he indicated that, *"Elijah is coming first and will restore all things."* And then, *"that Elijah has come already..."*

Jesus here seems to have spoken of a future re-emergence of an "Elijah"-type person, as well as that of one they all knew as John the Baptist. Biblical prophecy is often characterised by duality; events that happen in the past have still a yet future parallel reverberation.

Elijah wore a coat made of hair and a leather belt. He was quite an untamed man of few words, and is remembered for the extraordinary powers that God gave him. On one occasion he was instrumental in bringing down fire from heaven in a confrontation with the prophets of Baal, and another time he commanded that it not rain for three years. John the Baptist was also noted for his own peculiarities. He also wore a coat of camel's hair and a leather belt. John the Baptist, however, may have been more "talkative" than Elijah, which was why Herod imprisoned him. (John the Baptist's entire life from conception, as conveyed by the angel to his father, was destined to be *"in the spirit and power of Elijah"* - Luke 1:13-17).

As for a yet future "Elijah" type, we need only turn to the last book of the Bible to help us understand Herod's reaction to John's death. Revelation states its purpose in the opening verse:

*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly take place (Revelation 1:1).*

Looking into the future at the end of this age, two prophets (or witnesses) appear on the world scene:

*“And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.”*

*These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner.*

*These have power to shut heaven, so that no rain falls in the days of their prophesy; and they have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire.*

*When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them.*

*And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.*

*Then those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves.*

*And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.*

*Now after the three-and-a-half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them.*

*And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them (Revelation 11:3-12).*

The two end-time witnesses, as prophetically told, initiate events that are not unique to history. Revelation foretells not only Elijah-like events, such as no rain for three-and-a-half years and consuming fire from heaven, but also Moses-like events of turning water into blood and striking the earth with all kinds of plagues.

Revelation tells us that after their witness is completed, the end-time prophets are killed and left lying in the streets of Jerusalem – characterised here as Sodom and Egypt, symbols for wickedness and slavery. The whole world celebrates. But not for long. Three-and-a-half days later, *"the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet..."*

The spontaneous celebration of the death of these two witnesses (or prophets) quickly turns into one of great fear. They are resurrected! It's not hard to visualise the live television coverage as this event is instantly broadcast around the world. Jerusalem is abuzz with journalists. The evidence is shocking and unexpected. No conspiracy theory or alternate explanations can deny what has just happened. Two dead Christian prophets, widely regarded as "terrorists", have come back to life! And as they levitate into the clouds, a hurried attempt to place a media blackout simply fails. (What happens next belongs to another book!)

Returning for a moment to Herod's comments regarding "the risen John": was he aware of an end-time "Elijah" being resurrected? We don't know apart from what he did postulate.

We probably have more questions, however, when it comes to what lies directly ahead. Who are those two witnesses? How are they commissioned? Are they literal flesh-and-blood men, or do they represent a figurative metaphor we have yet to understand? Are these events in our lifetime, or are they yet still "over the horizon"? Will nominal Christianity at large (as opposed to dedicated followers of Christ) recognise and affirm the work of these two witnesses? We can be

sure, however, that those who live through those days will make the connections that God intends to impress on humanity.

The resurrection themes, events, and discussions recurring throughout the pages of the Bible illustrate in many different ways a powerful testament to our ultimate destiny: the faithful will be resurrected to immortality and become nothing less than glorified sons of God, just like Jesus. Everything in “history” it seems centres on the resurrection of the righteous.

*For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God... For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now (Romans 8:19, 22).*

How we get there, and what it is like when we experience it, will probably be more surprising and more amazing than we could ever in this life imagine. That day, however, is assuredly coming.

## 16 Where is Larry?

Our thoughts at this point might return to Larry who died in the prime of his business career and was remembered earlier in this book for his untimely death. We have endeavoured to answer, from the pages of the Bible, the very questions that Larry's death prompted.

Where is Larry today? And, we may ask, what might his ultimate future be? He's not in heaven; that we have established. He's not in a fiery hell suffering eternal torments. Nor is he in an intermediate, conscious state such as purgatory. Larry is asleep in the grave, awaiting the second resurrection, a Day of Judgment in the very presence of God.

The questions that might linger at this point are twofold: How much did Larry understand about God to be fairly held accountable, and what might his judgment then be? A little background may help.

Larry was a certified A+ computer technician who enjoyed his work. He was a bright, friendly and a good-natured man, genuinely appreciated by all his clients. A few weeks before his death, in one of those chance conversations with one of his long-time customers, Larry was confronted with one of the biggest questions anyone could ever ponder.

It wasn't the question he anticipated on this ordinary weekday at the computer shop. Larry didn't mind his customers watching him while he worked. On this occasion, as he replaced a faulty main board, his customer friend, Dave, remarked with wonderment at the progressive development of computer technology.

Looking at an old computer main board, Dave commented, "It looks like a miniature city, doesn't it, as you'd see it flying into Los Angeles."

"Yes, it is bit like that," responded Larry. He previously had similar conversations with a few of customers over the years.

Larry picked up the main board and turning it over in his hands, proffered, "It's quite a combination of transistors, capacitors, resistors and connectors isn't it! And, what's more, they all work together and invisibly by 'software'!"

Dave, impressed by his friend's technical knowledge, said, "It's hard to think that this main board simply evolved unaided by intentional design. Evolution, mate - that's what we're led to believe!"

Larry laughed, "What came first? The chicken or the egg?"

Dave continued, "I mean, we both appreciate the development of the computer over the past 30 or so years. It's not without its designers, programmers and engineers."

"Mmm." Larry wondered where this conversation was headed, but nonetheless mused, "It is pretty amazing."

Dave continued, "We all too often hear, from men supposedly cleverer than us, that we evolved into existence from primaeval slime. I find that just too hard to reconcile with being the intelligent creatures we are today. Our eyes, for example, are the most complex organisms ever examined. They could not have just evolved!"

He widened and rolled his eyes, as if to comically demonstrate the eye's remarkable function, then paused for a moment, before continuing, "The computer has taken years to develop to where it is today. Behind it all are the brightest and best brains around! It didn't evolve by itself, unaided. It just didn't. It took creative and collaborative intelligence. That's easy to see."

Larry didn't immediately answer, perturbed by his friend's insistence. His momentary silence, however, didn't mean he wasn't interested, or that he didn't care for this kind of conversation; instead, he found himself reflecting on his own life and how much he had taken for granted to be natural, random, matter-of-fact - well, evolutionary.

Finally, Dave caught Larry's eye. Pointing to a hard disk drive laying on the workbench, he said, "You know better than I that software is based

on what's called 'binary code'. In fact, as you've said before, computers are really, really dumb. They can only count between one and zero, but they do it very, very fast!"

Larry laughed again, and commented, "Yes, the ol' PC isn't much of a mystery at all. Here's one for you: Why do computers get sick?"

Dave stopped abruptly in his thoughts. "Why?" he asked.

"Because they get viruses!"

They both laughed, but the lighter moment didn't dissuade Dave.

He watched intently as the computer was being repaired, before breaking the silence: "Speaking of programming, you've probably heard of the recent DNA discoveries. Apparently DNA consists of programming code - not in binary form but in strings of four-letter code! We're only just beginning to understand how DNA enables life to so successfully replicate. It's a complete data storage and retrieval system far superior to anything we've ever engineered! It's truly *out of this world!*"

Larry nodded, before again conceding, "Yes, it is quite amazing."

Dave now seemed even more excited. "It doesn't take much to see that the entire finely tuned universe didn't just accidentally happen! It took nothing less than a brilliant and deliberate mind behind it all."

Larry was listening, and though it crossed his mind, he didn't have the heart to try another joke.

"I believe that we were created," Dave confided. "There is a greater intelligence out there: God. To think that it randomly happened is just nonsense!"

Larry didn't respond at first, as he deliberately reconnected the various serial disk drive and power cables to the main board. He had been in the IT industry for many years. Admittedly, it had been a long time since he had really thought about *these* things. There was no circumventing the logic of Dave's analogy; the implications of which at that moment

seemed to pose some awkward questions: What if God really exists? What if the evolutionists were the ones who were terribly wrong? What if all that he had been taught about God during his boyhood was in fact the only reliable explanation for life? And, what about the “hereafter”? The rush of those overly persistent questions seemed, at that moment, somewhat overly inconvenient.

At that moment Larry remembered the Bible verses his parents had him and his brother recite many years ago, , *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”* (Genesis 1:1) He also recalled, a few days earlier, seeing a billboard outside a local church, that read: *“...you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just”* (Luke 14:14).

“Yeah,” sighed Larry, as he shrugged his shoulders and looked past his friend into the busy street, “You might be right. Who knows?”

“We’ll find out one way or another, that’s for sure,” grinned Dave, “on the day when we’re resurrected. Any other option just doesn’t exist!”

Suddenly, another customer walked into the shop carrying a notebook presumably in need of repair. Larry straightened, and feeling somewhat annoyed by a sudden sense of vulnerability, conveniently brushed their conversation aside.

Within two weeks, Larry unexpectedly died from a heart attack. He was only 54.

You see, the tragedy was that over the years Larry had become content with the explanation given by many who say that humans evolved from apes, or that they are our cousins, that life, as incredible as it is, can be explained by gradual, unaided, ascendant development.

What further appeased Larry’s worldview was the notion that so many evolutionary scientists and university professors couldn’t all be wrong about the origins of life. Isn’t evolution the most plausible, rational explanation available? And, isn’t religion, as one atheist put it “a virus of the mind”, a crutch we should have long dispensed with? Thus, Larry had conveniently put God out of his mind – the God who created us and promises us eternal life.



Larry died uncertain, uncommitted and possibly unconcerned.

What about all those others like Larry? If you've read this far, you may find yourself either agreeing or disagreeing with anticipated hope. You may have lost a loved one, and find the prospect of being reunited at a future resurrection deeply comforting. Perhaps you've been delighted to discover that everything you had hoped for about the promises that God offers us is now further affirmed. You may have even found your personal beliefs and assumptions about the Bible challenged, and compelled to reexamine them again. This is reason to celebrate!

Alternatively, you might feel somewhat dismissive, offended that your long-held beliefs are under scrutiny – whether you're a religious person or an ardent atheist.

For some the very thought that God exists, has created everything, will resurrect the righteous to immortality in the fullness of time, and resurrect billions of people back to physical life for the fairest, most righteous judgment, is absurd! And yet, this is exactly what the Scriptures affirm and promote through the authoritative words and person of Jesus. There is no other sane or reliable explanation for life.

We want you to take to heart the hope God offers, and make those necessary life changes. Turn to Jesus as your Saviour. Then and only then can you live your new life with unquestionable hope and faith.

Is Larry's apathy easy to relate to? Are you too cruising through life as a borderline agnostic? Then you must seek definitive answers to those questions about the purpose of life.

You can have genuine hope – not a hope based on wishful thinking – but on the absolute assurance of God's own words. You don't have to be like the dying criminal on the cross, who at the very last minute cried out to Jesus, *"Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom"* (Luke 23:42).

God gives us free will. He gives us approximately 70 or so years to explore and learn from this life. Essentially, we have two roads on which to travel; two options from which we can choose. One directs us to a loving, righteous and almighty God revealed in Jesus. The other proffers

that there is no God except the self. One leads us to life, the other leads to death.

Renowned preacher Billy Graham once said, “Death is the forbidden subject of our generation.” He’s probably right. We really don’t like to talk about it.

Is it all over when we breathe our last? There are only two possibilities. Either we lie in the dust, forever forgotten, or we awaken sometime in the future to finally stand in the presence of God.

Given what we’ve discussed so far, it’s not the sort of outcome we should readily dismiss; God gives us every opportunity to choose life, and he assures us of this:

*“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”*  
(Jeremiah 29:13).

In the words of the author to the Hebrews, we’re encouraged to:

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful* (Hebrews 10:23).

## 17

# The Gladness of God

The most momentous prophesied events that await the future are the two resurrections of all people: first the righteous to become just like Jesus, then sometime later, everyone else who has ever lived to a time of judgment.

We anchor our hope in Jesus' own words:

*“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of [lit] judgment” (John 5:28-29).*

We know from Scripture that all creation yearns for the revealing of the sons of God. Some 2000 years ago Paul expressed his faith about this in a letter to the faithful in Rome:

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:18-19).*

In other words, all of the created order is watching and waiting for that momentous event when the faithful, otherwise known as the saints, are finally clothed with immortality and take their place alongside Jesus. The veracity of Christianity hinges on the evidence and power of Jesus' resurrection. And the future is tied to the promise and power of many “sons of God” coming to glory. How we pray that God hasten that day, for the glimpses of that glory still beckons:

*“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”*  
(Revelation 3:21 NKJV)

As we have seen, Scripture is peppered with a variety of metaphors, parables, allegories and stories that help orient us to what God has

promised. They give us a glimpse, in terms we might understand, of what lies ahead. Through these, as magnified through the lens of faith, we somehow visualise what God is telling us.

We are much like the apostle Paul, who confessed his own limitations:

*“For we know in part and we prophesy in part”* (1Corinthians 13:9).

Unfortunately, instead of just staying with what is written in Scripture, many have inadvertently adopted non-biblical positions. I recently helped with a gospel stall at a large agricultural show, and in the course of giving out free Bibles and literature, I conversed with hundreds of visitors. As I listened to numerous people share their views of the hope that exists beyond this life, I became aware of their diverse and sometimes vague positions, often at odds with Scripture.

Many expressed the belief that the “lost”, the unsaved who die in this age having never known God, are already and forever condemned to hell, eternal torment, outer darkness, and weeping-and-gnashing-of-teeth.

I asked one man who seemed eager to share his opinion, “What about twin nine-year-old girls who were tragically killed in a horrific freeway crash? The girls had never been to a church. They had never considered the name of Jesus. What is their future? How do we reconcile a merciful God with condemning them to eternal torment?”

Most people either shy away from giving an answer, or at best are rather vague. And yet the details given in the vision to the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 37), seem to convey not doom of eternal torment but an overwhelming gladness and anticipation from God’s perspective! Ezekiel 37:13, quoted previously, bears repeating here, along with verse 14:

*“Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,” says the LORD* (Ezekiel 37:13-14).

Can we sense the anticipation in God's voice? The gladness in God's heart is profound. The passage suggests that he looks forward to the resurrected being truly amazed at having come back to life, and then immediately attributing it to himself. God says that he will raise them back to physical life, and unlike in their lives previously, they will finally know him.

An old and familiar hymn to the strains of Beethoven, titled, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee", tells us in the first chorus:

*"Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!"*

As said in the previous chapter, the first resurrection is a celebration of immortal gladness, when resurrected saints begin to co-reign with Christ. The second resurrection is to the judgment of God, but it is also a time when gladness and sadness coexist: gladness for those who, in coming to know God, will receive complete forgiveness and redemption, and sadness for those who insist on rejecting God, for which there will be the fiery indignation of God's wrath. Remember, this is the second and final death where body and soul are destroyed and from which there is no further redemption.

The "Giver of immortal gladness" is God. He is the only source of all our joy. Hence the hymn opens to the strains of, "Joyful, Joyful."

Today's world, however, exists far from God. Our history has been written in blood. Suffering is the norm. Our present is undermined by uncertainty, secularism, and increasing violence. Any gladness we might try to imagine somehow falls short of the heights of immortal gladness that God promises.

Some parables and stories in Scripture, especially in the ministry of Jesus, do, to some degree, whet our imagination for what immortal gladness might look like.

Luke recorded one such story – a parable of Jesus commonly known as "The Prodigal Son". A better title might be, "The Prodigal Son's Father", because the real hero in this story is the father. It was the father who saw

half of his wealth squandered. He suffered the indignity of his son's wild lifestyle. And it was he who waited and looked and hoped for a better outcome. Days became months, perhaps years.

Eventually the young man's wealth dwindled, and he ended up feeding pigs for a living. From his poverty, he decided to humbly return home.

*And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him (Luke 15:20).*

"Father, I have sinned..." he uttered in deep remorse. "I'm not worthy to be called your son."

What joy! What deep, deep emotion! The forgiveness and gladness of the prodigal son's father was overwhelmingly evident when his lost son returned. He ordered the servants to fetch clothes, sandals, and the family signet ring. Through the eyes of the father, the prodigal son had been "as good as dead".

The father then consoled his other faithful but grumpy son who reasoned the celebration was unjustified:

*"It was right that we should make merry and be glad, [and throw a party and celebrate] for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32).*

Jesus' parable gives us a glimpse of what it might be like to embrace someone regarded as good as dead. The father embraced his son, as if he were back from the dead! Perhaps this also gives us insight into how our Heavenly Father longs and yearns for his wayward children to "return home".

Other references can help us understand, to some degree, that level of joyous reconciliation in the hope that beckons and awaits us.

The prophecy given to Ezekiel (picturing a valley of dry bones representing millions of people who are resurrected back to physical life) has never yet happened – even in type! The ancient Israelites never

turned to God and remained faithful to him. Thus they never really knew him. The striking and painful reality is that, as a result, God never knew the gladness he had longed for. God longed for his covenant people to accept him, and yet he was repeatedly rejected. He longed for his Son, whom he sent into the world, to be accepted, but he was also rejected and duly killed – by the very ones he called his own.

How do you think God feels when he is rejected? A couple of scriptures illustrate this quite well. God implored his people through the prophet Isaiah:

*For thus says the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength. But you would not..." (Isaiah 30:15).*

Jesus lamented when he surveyed the society in which he ministered:

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37).*

That's how God feels! Chickens would never think of rejecting the care and protectiveness of their mother hen, and yet the Israelites rejected God. God offered them everything good: prosperity, health, success, wealth, protection from enemies and blessings all around. But, they were not willing! The sadness and brokenness caused by rejection, unbelief, and the way of sin leading to divorce, brings nothing but alienation and ultimately death.

But, those who stand newly resurrected on Judgment Day cannot and will not reject the overwhelming "proof of God" evidenced by their own resurrection. They will quickly learn who God is, what his heart is, and what deep and enduring parental zeal he has for everyone. God then assures them that:

*"I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it," says the LORD (Ezekiel 37:14).*

Few know the joy of embracing someone who comes back from the dead. When someone dies, we don't expect to see them alive again in this life – except, of course, perhaps in a movie.

The prodigal son's father experienced that overwhelming joy when his lost son, thought dead, returned. Several profound incidents during Jesus' ministry on earth clearly demonstrated that joy.

There's the moment when the widow from Nain embraced her only son, who had died. She was on the way to the cemetery where she had previously buried her husband. Now she was about to bury her son. As the funeral procession made its way to the cemetery, the widow unexpectedly met Jesus and his disciples. Before raising her son back to life, Jesus told her not to cry. Can you imagine how she hugged her boy through tears of joy?

We read that Martha's sister Mary, deep in grief, at first couldn't raise herself from the floor to greet Jesus, even when she knew he had arrived. Their brother Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days when Jesus came and called out his name. A certified dead man then walked out of his grave. Imagine how Mary and Martha felt as they embraced Lazarus again! Scripture doesn't give us those explicit details (except to say that many believed in Jesus), but we can imagine the joy and wonderment, as well as the flurry of eager embraces that followed.

We also recall Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb talking to a man she thought was the gardener. When he called her by name, Mary suddenly realised that it was Jesus resurrected from the dead. "Don't cling onto me" (or as the original Greek records it, "Touch me not"<sup>35</sup>), said Jesus. We can imagine her desire to fling her arms around her Teacher, Lord, and Saviour.

These examples all have one thing in common. They convey the intensity of emotion of what it is like to lose a loved one. We too share these people's agony of what it is like to grieve over a lifeless, cold body. For

---

<sup>35</sup>John 20:17



we also at times have shed those same tears and experienced that agonising sense of loss. Death, as we've said, is an enemy.

Imagine, then, the indescribable joy of embracing someone you so dearly love, whom you thought was dead and for whom you had grieved, and who is now again living and breathing and smiling!

If the accounts so far seem too much in the distant past, let's take a look at a contemporary example where echoes God's mercy, grace, and love become evident.

Over a decade ago, a front-page feature story appeared in the *Sunday Times*, Western Australia's weekend newspaper. Titled "PROOF MIRACLES REALLY DO HAPPEN"<sup>36</sup>, the article described the events that followed the drowning of a toddler:

*This is the little Perth boy who came back from the dead. He's a cheeky-faced, blue-eyed marvel named Joshua Van De Klashorst.*

*He lay lifeless for more than 90 minutes – a backyard drowning victim. He was pronounced dead at the Joondalup Health Campus, a death certificate was signed by a doctor and his grieving family had said goodbye.*

*Mrs Van De Klashorst said, "I had rung my family over east and told them that he had been pronounced dead. We had the police chaplain there and a policemen from the coroner's office had arrived."*

*As the chaplain consoled the family amid the discussion of an autopsy and the possibility of donating Joshua's organs, a policeman attached to the coroner's office spoke up.*

*Joshua appeared to be breathing. Impossible. It was probably just gases leaving his body.*

---

<sup>36</sup> *Sunday Times*, 19 August 2001

*When it happened again 15 or 20 minutes later, a nurse was called, then a doctor and suddenly Joshua was being treated again. He was transported to the Princess Margaret Hospital and declared alive.*

*More than an hour earlier Joshua had been riding his three-wheeled bike around the backyard. It was a wet Sunday morning, and from the family room Mrs Van De Klashorst could hear the excited tones of Joshua playing. She knew his three older sisters were nearby.*

Mrs Van de Klashorst said:

*“My husband looked out the window and he said, ‘Oh Jesus’. I grabbed the phone and rang for an ambulance and he jumped in the pool, pulled him out and started doing CPR.”*

*The Van De Klashorsts had not been in the northern suburbs home long, and one of the first things they had done was install isolation fences around the pool. But on that Sunday two gates remained open from the night before so the family dog could wander the entire yard while Mr Van De Klashorst was on nightshift.*

*“It was just sheer stupidity,” Mrs Van De Klashorst said. “We had been so cautious in getting the fence in and then to leave the gates open was plain stupid.”*

*When Joshua came out of the pool, his father couldn’t find a pulse.*

*At the hospital, the battle to save the young life continued for a further 40 minutes without any sign of success. Joshua was pronounced dead, two years old.*

*“I’m not an overly religious person, but I remember doing some praying at the time,” Mrs Van De Klashorst said.*

*“I remember thinking, if this is it, Jesus, then take him and look after him, and I didn’t question it. His survival has just been like a miracle. So many people, when they find out who he is, just want to talk about the issue. To meet someone who comes back from the dead and to be the way he is, I think is an incredible thing and people enjoy seeing that.”*

*From a scientific view, Joshua's survival may fall into a couple of categories, but there has been no concrete explanation given for it.*

Joshua's return to life had the entire medical fraternity in Perth "in a spin". The Joondalup Health Campus was severely criticised in numerous scathing reports as medical experts wrestled with what had happened, and tried to blame junior staff, procedure, funding, and hospital culture.

What really caught my attention, however, and why I particularly remembered this story, is that a week later, the *Sunday Times* told the rest of what happened to Joshua, in a small column on page 8:

***Prayer pulls boy from brink***<sup>37</sup>

*There's a moment in the life of police chaplain Barry May he will never forget.*

*"His chest started to rise," he explains.*

*"He was trying to breathe. Imagine it. The mother has the child in her arms – the only son – and he's dead and we're talking about autopsies, talking about funeral services."*

*For the first time since witnessing the incredible return to life of Perth's toddler Joshua Van De Klashorst, the chaplain has spoken publicly about the experience.*

*Joshua was two years old when he was pronounced dead at the Joondalup Health Campus after falling into his backyard swimming pool last year.*

*The chaplain prayed over the little boy. "I said this inadequate prayer, really," he said.*

*"It was something like 'Lord, you've done this plenty of times before, how about another one with this little bloke?' It was very unclassical."*

---

<sup>37</sup> *Sunday Times*, 26 August 2001, Page 8

*After more than 90 minutes showing no signs of life, Joshua started breathing again. As reported in the Sunday Times last week, he is close to a complete recovery, much to the amazement of Perth's medical fraternity.*

This remarkable story of the apparent resurrection of a toddler is a reminder of God's watchfulness, his love for us, and that nothing escapes his attention – even of those hurriedly uttered inadequate prayers of “Oh Jesus”!

The story speaks to us of a father's and mother's love, their agonising sense of tragic loss, only then to have their son returned, alive – against all explicable odds.

It is said that a parent who loses a child prematurely apparently never fully recovers; they always remember the pain. A man recently told me of his 21-year-old son who was killed in a traffic accident some 15 years earlier. He said, “You do heal – as you would having had an arm or leg amputated – but you're never the same person again .”

The Scriptures, however, tell us that there is hope. Despite death being an enemy, we are also given a foretaste of the future victory over death. In our current mortal state, we are reminded of just how fragile life is, and why hope beyond his life is so important. We have seen and felt, through these examples, what it is like to hug someone “returned from the dead”!

God is a righteous judge and the Giver of immortal gladness. We can only just begin to comprehend what awaits the faithful. We are in the process of becoming “born again” and raised to glory. Yet, this side of the resurrection it's hard to fully comprehend and embrace, let alone visualise, what this promised reality might be like and how eager God is to celebrate our resurrected state.

Paul touched on this when he quoted Scripture in his first letter to the faithful living in Corinth:

*But as it is written: “EYE HAS NOT SEEN, NOR EAR HEARD, NOR HAVE ENTERED INTO THE HEART OF MAN THE*

*THINGS WHICH GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM" (1Corinthians 2:9).*

Allegories, or stories, can sometimes help illustrate God's promises. For example, imagine for a moment, a hypothetical conversation between twins in their mother's womb.<sup>38</sup> (Remember, this is just "a story". It does help illustrate, however, an important point).

*One of the twins asks, "Do you believe in life after birth?"*

*The other twin responds: "Yes, definitely! In here we are growing and gaining strength for what will face us on the outside."*

*"I've never heard of such nonsense!" says the doubting twin. "There's no life after birth. Has anyone ever come back after delivery?"*

*The second twin excitedly continues, "I believe that when we get out of here to what awaits us, we'll see our Father's face."*

*The other chides, "How ridiculous is that! We have no Father. Have you ever seen Him?"*

*"It's true. I've heard His voice. I've also heard that we will eat with our mouths and run with our feet!"*

*The other retorts, "I have never heard such nonsense! Eating with our mouths, what a crazy idea! That's what we have umbilical cords for, to feed us. And how stupid to say that we'll run with our feet! That's impossible. Our umbilical cord is too short for that."*

One twin is a believer. The other isn't. When the time is right, both will be born the usual way.

This short allegory further illustrates not only the surprise element of what awaits us beyond this life but also that our often uninformed disagreements will seem just so trivial on that day of resurrection!

---

<sup>38</sup> Adapted from a variety of similar Internet sources

On that great day, we will see not only our Father's face but also share in his gladness.

Even the prolific writer Paul, in a letter to the faithful in Rome, compared resurrection glory to that of child birth:

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Romans 8:18-19, 22 ESV)*

Today, our faith is based only on the things we hear from God's Word. Some of the things he tells us defy our physical limitations. We just don't understand nor can fully comprehend, for example, how will we be brighter than the sun? How will we live forever? How will we see our Father's face? How will we reign with Christ? What will we do for eternity? And perhaps so many other similar questions.

A baby would quickly die if he or she prematurely emerged from the safety and sustenance of the mother's womb in an attempt to "see its father's face"! It is possible only after birth, at the right time. The reality of God's promise will exist, firstly, when the righteous are raised to glory. Then, when the unrighteous are raised to judgment, God's will is to write his Word on the hearts and minds of everyone.<sup>39</sup>

Jesus said to Nicodemus, a noteworthy Jewish leader, during their nighttime secretive meeting:

*"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).*

In other words, something dramatic has to happen first before we can see God. It's a process of being born again (likened in metaphor to human

---

<sup>39</sup> Jeremiah 31:33

birth), and fully realised on that day of resurrection to glory. Nicodemus struggled to understand Jesus' teaching, drawing conclusions on a more physical level.

Jesus emphatically told his disciples, *"I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."*<sup>40</sup> That is, there is no other way for our re-birth to happen. It is only through Jesus that our true potential is realised. In so many testimonies in scripture Jesus implores us to, "Believe me. Believe in Me. Trust Me!"

And so the exhortation for us is to never stop believing. The day of resurrection is coming for everyone who has ever lived and died. The final time of judgment is also coming, when having been with Jesus for 1000 years, the faithful will see and experience the gladness of God, amidst the gladness of his children – his children back from the dead!

One day our faith of today will become sight, and we will finally see the gladness of God – amidst rapturous hugs and tears of joy that are somewhat hard to describe this side of the resurrection.

Job spoke of God's gladness, when he referred to that day of resurrection:

*You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands (Job 14:15).*

God hasten that day of rebirth and resurrection!

---

<sup>40</sup> John 14:6

## 18

### All Because of Jesus

In our journey together, we've primarily deliberated through the possibilities of what resurrection means. And somehow we've come to see that it also is predominately about Jesus. He is the Resurrection. This is only possible because of who the Lord Jesus Christ is: the Son of God, the Creator, Logos (one who speaks), Messiah, Saviour, Redeemer, High Priest, Advocate, and metaphorically, the Bread of Life. Jesus is the epitome of grace and truth and the highest possibility and trajectory we can pursue and come to know in a deep, personal way.

As created, physical beings in his image and likeness, we have no lasting significance outside of and beyond Jesus. Our hope depends entirely on him. The universe exists because of Jesus. It is sustained at the sub-atomic level by the power of his word<sup>41</sup>, and nothing exists except through him.

Moreover, Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life."* He explained that unless we allow him into our lives, to feed on this Bread of Life, to follow his commands, to love each other, we have no worthwhile life either in this world or in the next. In the big scheme of God's sovereignty, without Jesus we're as good as dead!

Everything about our future hinges by faith on a covenant relationship with him. Unless at some point we respond to God's calling, and unless we come to Jesus and thrive in his fellowship, no amount of denial, scientific rationalism, or religiosity can save us beyond our last breath.

So in receiving of and believing in Jesus, the resurrection of the righteous suddenly becomes intensely desirable. It becomes our hope. It isn't our "righteousness", however, that makes it across the finishing line! Our worthiness is based on none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. When God our Father sees Christ's righteousness in us, and as we in faith yield to his sovereignty, accepting his blood in place of our sinfulness, only then we

---

<sup>41</sup> Hebrews 1:3



are assured of a resurrection to eternal life. Those who are Christ's have "*crossed over from death to life*"<sup>42</sup>. For them, resurrection to glory awaits.

So, how does this righteous-resurrection-reality translate into everyday life? What does it look like in this age? How can our future be assured as we ponder this awesome promise?

The answer looks like this: Jesus knocks on the door of our lives, and at some point we must respond by opening that door. We're equally free to ignore his attention, express defiance and literally shut him out. We have the freedom to choose thus. But as we put our hand and heart toward Jesus, his presence then comes (via the Holy Spirit) and lives in our hearts and minds.

At that point a radical transformation begins to take place. Selfishness, for example, progressively gives way to generosity. No longer do we cuss, but instead speak words that edify. No longer do we drink, take drugs, gamble, or peruse pornography. Over time, of course, our friends begin to notice a profound change. The old person we used to be becomes as good as dead. A new life emerges, and that is all because of Jesus!

Today, we patiently await Jesus' return. This hope of eternity is very close to the hearts and minds of his followers today as it was for first century disciples.

Even though we've accepted Jesus as Saviour and anticipate his return, it is nonetheless easy to be distracted and lose our focus — not just on his second coming but anything related to him. The devil, an expert in deception, wants Christ's followers to love him less, and in becoming overly busy become distracted. But, when close to God, in intimate covenant relationship with Jesus, when Jesus is the focus of our waking thoughts, prayers, and actions, then there's little threat for any serious "devilish" distraction. The devil simply flees!

---

<sup>42</sup> 1 John 3:14

Oddly enough, one of the hardest things for us is to openly proclaim our love for Jesus. This too can be the work of the devil. Often we justify silence because speaking up isn't part of our church culture, society or a natural part of our personality. Excuses are aplenty. Times are changing I believe within our fellowships and as expressed in our personal lives. We must share our joy with others of the joy of the day that Jesus knocked on our heart's door, and in swinging it open, he called us by name and invited us to mealtime fellowship.

We are called into a covenant relationship with Jesus bound by both expectation and responsibility. This fellowship becomes deep, intimate and accountable.

So although God the Father calls us, and Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts, Jesus will not push in where He's not invited. He did not perform miracles in the towns where unbelief existed. And so it is with us. God has given us freewill. We have the option to choose life, where we can bring our lives in complete surrender to Jesus. The detail of our life's journey is not completely foreordained. To Abraham, God said, "Now I know..."<sup>43</sup> only after Abraham's faith was displayed by his actions, tested to the very last moment. The future is changed and mountains are moved by the fervent, effective prayers of the righteous who put their faith in Jesus.

Although God is sovereign, we can never blame God for our past mistakes. For if we believed that our entire lives were preordained and orchestrated much like a puppet on strings without choice or sensibility, then we could also just as easily pass the blame for all our sins onto God. Not so. Although Jesus paid for our sins, he has also entitled us to freewill, beginning with the very choices given in the Garden of Eden. It is liberating to understand that we do have choice - a grace that stems from a God-given liberty.

We are also encouraged throughout Scripture to pray for wisdom, something God is eager to grant. As a result, as new creatures in Christ, we're better enabled to make righteous choices that reflect God's will.

---

<sup>43</sup> Genesis 22:12

*“A man’s mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps”<sup>44</sup>*, is a compelling proverb indicating that while we may have dreams and aspirations, it is only when we willingly submit to God that these hopes have any substance. That’s why followers of Christ pray every day, inviting God into our lives through every passing moment and into every desired outcome. This truly embraces what it means to have a covenant relationship with Christ.

The ordinance of baptism brings us into marriage communion with Jesus Christ himself, sealed with the Holy Spirit. The seed of the Spirit is planted at baptism with the laying on of hands. As years go by, his Spirit grows mightily, working with us and through us. When we enter the depths of a communion that begins to transform us into the very image of God’s Son, our eyes become more focussed on Jesus and his kingdom. We desire nothing this world can offer. Every other relationship or temptation pales into insignificance. Even our immediate earthly families must become secondary to the relationship we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In union with Christ, we are in love with him, his Word, his faith, his majesty, his righteousness, his law, his will and purpose, his love and attention, his awe and glory – to which nothing compares.

Thus, we find ourselves talking about Jesus all the time. He’s the head of every table, and the Lord of our hearts. We openly confess our love for him. His wisdom and presence adorn every grey hair, which the Father numbers. He is in our inner thoughts. His word and will mould our days and shape our lives. We approach his throne of grace in all areas of our personal and collective lives, especially, for example, when it comes to finding godly spouses for our children – even praying for those spouses decades before. Thus, we continually intercede for family members. We ask God for his help and guidance in all areas of our lives. Because of that covenant relationship, we want him from that moment onward to shape our destiny, and this is achieved by surrendering our will.

---

<sup>44</sup> Proverbs 16:9

What else happens in this relationship? Many things. Each day, Jesus wants us to creatively find ways that glorify his transforming work in us. He wants our trust. He wants to bless the work of our hands. Jesus wants us to live the surrendered life, to do his will above anything – even when our prayers seem denied, when we’re suffering, or struggling for decades through relentless difficulties. No matter what happens, God wants us to know that he is always with us. In confessing our love for him and our trust in him, according to our faith, we also know that he will call our names from the silence of the grave.

Those who choose a different path from Jesus live in delusion and are blinded by the god of this world. Some have left the faith, sadly breaking covenant with Jesus and deliberately making life choices contrary to God’s grace. Their tragedy is not unlike Judas’ demise. Did God cause them to leave the faith? No, of course not. God forbid! Life’s path is formed by those little day-by-day, moment-by-moment choices. Freedom and the law of natural consequences walk hand-in-hand.

The good news is that heavenly angelic hosts cheer when a sinner repents<sup>45</sup>. In one sense, we are indeed at the centre of the universe’s attention, waiting for the fulfilment of what God is doing in us through Jesus<sup>46</sup>. We’re invited into more than just a partnership; we are attributed as joint heirs with Jesus Christ to ultimately share in his rulership.

As the love of God grows in our lives, we increasingly become a new creation in Christ. We become people who are filled with love. Those around us immediately sense how much they’re loved. Our actions will “speak” of love. Our children will feel secure in this deepening love. Our motives will be understood through the lens of love. Discipline will not be harsh, but loving with kindly eye-to-eye contact. And people around us will feel and experience that love (and ultimately attribute it to God’s glory). We truly will be Jesus’ disciples when we love each other.

---

<sup>45</sup> Luke 15:10

<sup>46</sup> Romans 8:19-22

Originating from the Holy Spirit, love has to grow for it to thrive. It has to be in all we say and do. Even the truth must be spoken in love! And because of love we will listen intently to prompting of the Holy Spirit, conveying the very words of Jesus. Those who oppose us or cause us grief, we will kindly entreat. We're also wise to the devil's ruses and distractions that can if momentarily confuse us, should we, God forbid, take our eyes from Jesus.

May our focus, perhaps more than ever before, be open and transparent before Christ first, and then to each other. May we be accounted worthy to stand before Jesus as glorified Christ-like sons. May there be no straw or chaff in our lives, but only precious and good grain. May we be people of the Word, quick to bless, eager to forgive, and easy to entreat. Our lives, in every detail, must reflect the union we have with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus' is coming. The question finally remains: Will you hear Jesus' voice calling you from the grave as Lord and Saviour, or will you encounter him as Lord and Judge?

---

## Appendix

*My father tells the following account about his father's experience during World War II. I've included it here for your interest, as it provides one man's glimpse into a yet future resurrection.*

### A Glimpse of the Second Resurrection

*By Ernie Klassek*

In the spring of 1945, on the flat countryside of Schleswig-Holstein, there was a prisoner of war camp with a difference. Various units of the German armed forces, which had come down from Norway and Denmark during the last weeks of World War II, had surrendered to the British without a shot being fired.

For some time after the surrender, the camp area resembled a well-organised stopover for a division or two rather than a POW camp. Trucks, armoured carriers, and artillery were parked between neat rows of tents. The soldiers still had all their equipment, including rifles and machine guns. There were rumours that the British field marshal Montgomery had come to an agreement with some German generals to use their troops, backed up by the British, to push the Red Army back out of parts of northern Germany. Then word got around that the American, Eisenhower, vetoed the plan, so the Germans were told to lay down their arms.

My dad was among the infantry men who stacked their rifles where the British soldiers, better known as Tommies, could remove them, together with all vehicles and equipment, until only the tents were left with the field kitchens and latrine trenches. It was all done decently and in order, and somehow in line with what happens wherever there might be a member of the Klassek clan or their kinsmen, who, as far as I know, were never involved in deadly combat.

For my dad, it was almost a repetition of what had happened to him as a young man in 1918, towards the end of the First World War. He was drafted into the Imperial Austrian Army, even though he was unable to hold a rifle in the firing position. As a boy, he had broken both his arms, and they remained crooked. Twenty-seven years later, he was caught up in the last call-up of the Third Reich, which entailed all remaining males between 15 and 65.

(Early in 1945, three of my classmates were called up the day they turned 15. After three weeks basic training they were sent out against the Americans).

When my dad received his call-up notice, I remember him saying something like, "If the Germans have to call up an old cripple like me, they will lose the war." They did. All Austrians were considered Germans between 1938 and 1945, yet my dad always remained an Austrian – or, more specifically, a Styrian, or Steirer. (Styria, or Steiermark, is a land in the heart of Austria).

Though the war had ended in early May, the British took their time releasing their prisoners of war. They did it systematically. Those from rural occupations, like farmers and market gardeners, were to be sent home first, so when it was my dad's turn to front up at the interrogating officer's desk, he told him he was a Gast- und Landwirt, that is a farmer who runs a little tavern on the side, if you like. As he had been something of the kind years earlier, my dad was not telling a lie.

It must have been in early June when my dad and a farmer from Upper Franconia – that idyllic county in northern Bavaria where we lived at the time – jumped on one freight train after another until they arrived home. I don't remember my dad saying how long it took them to travel the distance of 600km south straight as the crow flies.

In early morning they jumped off the last goods train at the Bamberg marshalling yards. The farmer headed back for his village well to the north of town, and for my dad it was a few minutes' walk to the building where we had a flat on the second floor. To his amazement, he found all the doors wide open – the one to the main entrance downstairs as well as the door to our flat. When he entered the bedroom, he saw American GIs

sound asleep on our beds. He tiptoed out of there as fast as he could and down the staircase. He was in his German army uniform, and the Amis (pronounced *Ummies*), besides being a trigger-happy lot were known to round up anyone like my dad and cart them off to one of their POW camps.

The street was deserted. Where to now? Then a young girl came along, stopped in front of him, and said, "If you are looking for Frau Klassek, she is at the Maiselbräu." (The inn called Maiselbräu was more or less just around the corner.) And off she went.

Our reunion was a mixture of sheer joy and deep sadness: joy over seeing him again, after so many months of not knowing where he was, and sadness because my baby brother had died through malnutrition and poor hospital care.

We had lost most of our worldly possessions, too, when the Amis kicked us out of our flat. It was above a concert hall, and they wanted it to entertain their troops there. With only the things we could carry, my mother, my grandmother and I had moved into the one-room accommodation at the inn.

It was also a reunion with a difference. My dad had disappeared for months on end during the war – twice, if I remember correctly – and every time he came back, he wouldn't talk. We didn't ask too many questions, because that's how it was living under a dictatorship. This time dad told us all about his time away – where he had been and what he had done and not done. There was a lot of the latter because he did not enjoy his stint in the Wehrmacht at all.

One day Dad and I sat out in the courtyard, and he began to tell me about that prisoner of war camp up there in the northernmost corner of Germany:

"At one end of the camp was an old cemetery. The weeds had grown so high you could barely see the headstones, and there were a few ancient trees. Of all the fellows in the camp, I was the only one to go out there from time to time, just to get away on my own and find a few edible weeds. You know those thistles,



you peel the stems, and you eat the core. It helped not being hungry all the time, our daily rations were two biscuits and a bowl of soup.

“Once I sat down under a tree and went to sleep, and I had a dream I’ll never forget: I dreamt that I woke out of a deep sleep, and somehow I knew I was in the presence of God, but the only one I could see was a bearded man in a suit, and yet I knew it was you, and you were smiling, and I wanted to ask you about something, and then I woke up. You know that I am not one to dream, and when I do I soon forget what it was all about. But not this time.”

I remember my dad telling me about his dream mainly because I had never heard him talk like that before. As he himself admitted, he was anything but a dreamer. He had worked long hours all his life, and when he found time to sleep, he slept a deep sleep, the kind that when you wake up, you think you had just gone to bed. I was like that when I worked on a farm for some time, so I knew.

But me, wearing a suit? During the war and particularly in the immediate post-war period, which was close to anarchy, most of the men I knew who wore suits were either black-marketeers or con men, or both. My generation of youngsters knew nothing about buying clothes, let alone new ones. All I had to wear was a brownish pair of Hungarian army trousers and an oversized chamois leather chimney-sweep’s jacket with brass buttons from a 19th century military uniform. All through spring, summer, and autumn I would run around barefooted. After the war a GI from Texas gave me a brand new pair of US army issue boots with rubber soles, but I couldn’t wear them (much to his disappointment).

In June 1945, I was thirteen-and-a-half, and I could attach no possible meaning to my dad’s dream. But many years later, I started to think about it, particularly when I got into a habit of wearing a suit to go to Sabbath services, and when I grew a beard in 1974.

During all that time, God had done some work on me<sup>47</sup>, and my outward appearance had little to do with what he had revealed to me through his Word. If I kept on working out my own salvation with fear and trembling<sup>48</sup>, I would be in the first resurrection, the one Jesus called the resurrection of life<sup>49</sup>. This would happen only because I had done good – that is my sins, my evil deeds, had been forgiven, and all that is left is good. Also, God had given me the same faith that had made Abram righteous<sup>50</sup>, and judgment had begun on me in this life, as it has on the household of God<sup>51</sup>.

My dad would be in the second resurrection, the resurrection of judgment, because he had done evil, and it had not been forgiven in his lifetime. But when my dad will hear the voice of the Son of Man, and comes out of his tomb, he will be in the presence of God all right, just as he had dreamed in that cemetery back in 1945. Jesus will judge him and

---

<sup>47</sup> And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

<sup>48</sup> Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; (Philippians 2:12)

<sup>49</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment. (John 5:24-29) [The Greek has: to a resurrection of life and to a resurrection of judgment].

<sup>50</sup> Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6, New International Version)

<sup>51</sup> For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; (I Peter 4:17)

tell him that he himself has taken away his sins<sup>52</sup>, and why would my dad not accept that kind of judgment? I am sure he will with great joy and gladness and gratitude – maybe even more so when he sees me there, the only son left to him in 1945, as well as the one he mourned for, my little brother, who couldn't miss out on seeing God, because he was pure in heart.<sup>53</sup>

---

---

<sup>52</sup> Look, there is the Lamb of God Who will take away the sin of the world! (John 1:29, J. B. Phillips)

<sup>53</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8) For the children, being not yet born, neither having done good or evil... (Romans 9:11) ...before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right... (Isaiah 7:16, New International Version) ...your children who do not yet know good from bad... (Deuteronomy 1:39, New International Version) [Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, unless noted otherwise]

Christ Centred  
Spirit Led  
Bible Based  
Sabbath Celebrating  
Kingdom Focused  
Grace Oriented  
Truth Spoken

If we visit the very oldest of cemeteries, we might be surprised by what our great grandparents believed. Etched into their tombstones are epitaphs and sentiments that tell us of their faith. They anticipated being reunited again.

The resurrection of all people isn't a new idea. It's a forgotten truth, and not the sort of promise we can easily ignore. Either we die and remain as dust forever; or we die only to awaken, sometime in the future, to literally live again and finally see God.

This book is all about the future – promises we surely want to know about. Thus, we travel back in time and examine crucial eye-witness accounts of people who came back from the dead.

Found consistently throughout the scriptures, references to the resurrection are in our creeds and gilded in our epitaphs. Far from being ethereal, resurrection hope is profoundly comforting for those of us who have experienced the death of a loved one.

Film producer and Pastor John T Classic is married to Rebecca, and lives in rural Western Australia. John wrote this book based on the resurrection themes as found throughout the Bible.



With Jesus' warm and hope-filled words, may *Resurrection Hope* lift and inspire us to believe and experience the best news we could ever hear!

PUBLISHED BY  
MESSAGEWEEK MINISTRIES