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IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

"If a Man Die, Shall He Live Again?"

"If a man die, shall he live again?" Job 14:14. This question has been asked by man from the dawn of history. Philosophers have asked it. The aged have asked it as they have faced the setting sun. Countless millions have asked it beside sickbeds and open graves.

Scores of answers have been proposed. The world has had its Aristotles, its Platos, its Robert A. Millikans, its Miltons, who have believed in the life beyond. It has also had its H. L. Menckens, its Bertrand Russells, its Clarence Darrows, its G. B. Shaws, who have scorned the idea of immortality. In too many cases the arguments pro and con have been based on rationalization and personal preference.

But, rising above the multitudes who have speculated about immortality, is the figure of One who said with calm assurance, "Because I live, you will live also." John 14:19, R.S.V. The answer to man's question is not to be found in man's reason, but in Jesus. His resurrection guarantees a life beyond death for His followers.

One of the tragedies of modern theology is the tendency on the part of many to deny the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus. For example, Paul Tillich considers the resurrection of Jesus as "a symbolic interpretation of the Cross without any kind of objective reality."—*Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 153. Karl Barth, despite his profession of concern about the importance of the "resurrection event," insists that the stories of the resurrection "are couched in the imaginative, poetic style of historical saga, and are therefore marked by the corresponding obscurity. For they are depicting an event beyond the reach of historical research and depiction."—*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, part 2, p. 452. Emil Brunner says regarding the resurrection, "It is historical only for the believer. It is not a piece of the historical continuum, but rather an 'intrusion' of that which is beyond history into history."—*Die Christliche, Lehre von Schopfung und Erlösung*, page 384, quoted by P. K. Jewett, *Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation*, page 27. In the theology of Rudolph Bultmann, "the resurrection texts are to be read . . . as adding only another detail to the mythic treatment of Jesus' Cross."—R. R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason*, page 60.

These efforts to reduce Jesus' resurrection to the level of myth indicate a great departure from the emphasis of the Scriptures. The Gospels tell a definite story of bodily resurrection. In his sermon at Pentecost, Peter said, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses." Acts 2:32, R.S.V. To the philosophers at Athens, Paul reported that God had "given assurance to all men by raising Him from the dead." Acts 17:31, R.S.V. Before Agrippa, Paul said, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" Acts 26:8, R.S.V. In the introduction to his letter to the Romans, Paul said of Jesus that He was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead." Romans 1:4, R.S.V. In 1 Corinthians 15 (R.S.V.), the "resurrection chapter," Paul recounts how Jesus "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Verse 4. He continues that if Christ be not raised, "our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." Verse 14. Jesus is called "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Verse 20. These texts and many more testify to the greatest fact in the history of the Christian faith—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Why, in the face of such clear testimony of Scripture, do the critics try

to explain away the resurrection of Jesus? The answer, in part, is the cringing fear of supernaturalism. To the modern theologian, the immediate working of God in human affairs is unthinkable. "What cannot be thought as occurring in nature also cannot be conceived as an historical event, in the ordinary sense."—R. R. Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 105. This being the case, the naturalistic theologian must interpret the resurrection as myth, fantasy, or mistaken faith. Even those who admit the resurrection "event" as the center of Christian history, must reduce this "event" from a historical happening to an intangible "experience" on the part of Jesus' followers. Pathetic efforts are made to save the resurrection "idea" while denying the resurrection fact. Throughout the New Testament, the resurrection is presented as an act of God. Why should not the Christian accept God's ability to bring Jesus forth from the tomb?

Unfortunately, evangelical Christians who sincerely believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus have often weakened their case by a mistaken philosophy of the nature of man. This fact was called to the attention of the Christian world in 1958 by Oscar Cullmann when he published his lecture, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (New York, Macmillan). In this book he pointed out that the idea of the immortality of the soul is a Greek invention, not a primitive Christian belief. He characterizes the Christian belief in the immortality of the soul as "one of the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity."—Page 15. His position is that "for the first Christians the soul is not intrinsically immortal, but rather became so only through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through faith in Him."—Page 17.

Cullmann recognizes the signifi-

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cance of this belief as it affects the resurrection of Jesus. He points out that Jesus could not gain the victory over death "by simply living on as an immortal soul, thus fundamentally *not* dying."—Page 35. Christ died in the truest and fullest sense of the word. "Resurrection," he goes on to say, "is a *positive* assertion: the whole man, who has really died, is recalled to life by a new act of creation by God. Something has happened—a miracle of creation! For something has also happened previously, something fearful: life formed by God has been destroyed."—Page 27.

This insight involves a clear understanding of "body" and "soul." The Greeks thought the body was evil, and that the soul alone survived. This idea was borrowed by Christianity. But the Bible teaches, as Cullmann points out, that "the body is not the soul's prison, but rather a temple."—Page 30. Jesus' resurrection as "a spiritual body" is an example of what will happen at "the last day," for Jesus was "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20, R.S.V.); the "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18, R.S.V.). Between death and the resurrection, "the most usual image for Paul is: 'They are asleep.'"—Page 51. The resurrection day will be a great re-creation of that which God made, but which was marred by sin and death.

Such an understanding of death and the resurrection makes unnecessary the theory of many sincere evangelical Christians that the soul survives death in a disembodied form, and is reunited with the body at the resurrection. How much more consistent to believe that man is a unit; that "God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Genesis 2:7, R.S.V.



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As a result of sin man became subject to death. Jesus won the victory over death in His great atonement, which reached its climax in His resurrection. As a result of this victory, Jesus could say, "Because I live, you will live also."

In the same manner that He was raised from death, body and soul, by the power of God, so those who have faith in Him will be resurrected in the last day. Just as He came forth with "a spiritual body"—real, recognizable, yet capable of things beyond the ability of the physical body we possess, so those who are resurrected will come forth glorified and immortal. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16, R.S.V. Immortality, resurrection, eternal life, are dependent upon faith. The alternative is death and eternal annihilation.

Why should many good people protest so vigorously against this simple, reasonable interpretation of Scripture? In his preface, Cullmann recalls how bitterly his viewpoint was opposed. He was characterized as "a kind of monster who delights in causing spiritual distress."—Page 5. He defends his position thus: "The attacks provoked by my work would impress me more if they were based on exegetical arguments. Instead, I am attacked with very general considerations of a philosophical, psychological, and above all sentimental kind. It has been said against me, 'I can accept the immortality of the soul, but not the resurrection of the body,' or 'I cannot believe that our loved ones merely sleep for an indeterminate period, and that I myself, when I die, shall merely sleep while awaiting the resurrection.'"—Page 7.

"I would venture to remind my critics that when they put in the forefront, as they do, the particular manner in which they *wish* themselves and their loved ones to survive, they are involuntarily giving grounds to the opponents of Christianity who constantly repeat that the faith of Christians is nothing more than the projection of their desires. In reality, does it not belong to the greatness of our Christian faith, as I have done my best to

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You open the door.' And when Jesus opens the door, Satan immediately says, 'Sorry, I have come to the wrong place.'"

With Christ in control we can have victory over every temptation. "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him."

Christ's redemptive power has been well described in the following words: "You are a sinner. You cannot atone for your past sins; you cannot change your heart and make yourself holy. But God promises to do all this for you through Christ. You *believe* that promise. You confess your sins and give yourself to God. You *will* to serve Him. Just as surely as you do this, God will fulfill His word to you. If you believe the promise,—believe that you are forgiven and cleansed,—God supplies the fact. You are made whole, just as Christ gave the paralytic power to walk when the man believed that he was healed. It *is* so if you believe it. Do not wait to *feel* that you are made whole, but say, 'I believe it; it *is* so, not because I feel it, but because God has promised.' . . . It is the will of God to cleanse us from sin, to make us His children, and to enable us to live a holy life. . . . There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.' Romans 8:1."—*Steps to Christ*, page 51.

"But," you say, "I have tried so often and failed." Think of Peter. He did the seemingly impossible. He walked on water. But the moment he took his eyes off Christ, the Source of his power, he began to sink. So likewise we can do the seemingly impossible through the power of Christ. He "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." Jude 24.

So long as life lasts it will be possible for us to sin. But there is no excuse for sin. We read in 1 John 3:9: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." The thought in the original Greek is, "He who is born of God is not habitually guilty of sin." Walking with Christ it is not our practice to sin. We may be overtaken in sin on the spur of the moment, caught unawares. But when that happens, praise God, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." 1 John 2:1.

Jesus has given us a wonderful picture of God's love for sinners in the parable of the prodigal son. This is the only place in the Bible where God is depicted as being in a hurry. The father *ran* to meet his son. So God is ever eager to meet the prodigal son or daughter returning home. In Psalm 37:23, 24 we read: "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and He delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand."

How often we have held the chubby hand of a baby and encouraged him to take his first step. What excitement there was when he walked unaided! So likewise the Lord delights in our progress. Should we stumble and fall, He says, "Get up, My son, My daughter, and try again." In Psalm 103:13, 14 He assures us: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust."

There is only one successful way to walk toward the kingdom, and that is "in union with Him." [END]

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expound it, that we do not begin from our personal desires but place our resurrection within the framework of a cosmic redemption and of a new creation of the universe."—Page 9.

A well-known reference work, Vergilius Ferm's *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, contains the following enlightening entry under the article, "Resurrection": "For Greek thought, the body was nothing but a prison in which the higher rational principle was confined, and from which it must be released before it could attain to its true being. For the Hebrews, the body was essential to a full life. The soul in itself had no force or substance, and must be reunited with the body if the actual man was to exist after death."

"Paul devotes his longest chapter (1 Corinthians 15) to a refutation of the doctrine, held apparently by Greek Christians at Corinth, that the soul, in the future life, is no longer clothed with a body. At the same time he admits that the immortal body is not the earthly one restored, but a new body, woven of heavenly substance. His chief interest is to maintain the continuance of personal identity, and he cannot conceive of it without some kind of body."

"Christians have always believed, however inconsistently, that in death they are released from this bodily life, and enter at once into another."

Why should Christians continue in this "inconsistent" belief? Just as Oscar Cullmann had the courage to challenge this belief, should we not exercise our God-given right to accept the Bible doctrine of resurrection in its clear, uncomplicated form? And let us thank God for the marvelous assurance of our Master, "Because I live, you will live also."

The great Christian doctrine of a future immortal life has tremendous practical significance in our modern world. It makes a difference when men really believe in eternal life. Stephen F. Bayne, Jr., in his recent book, *Enter With Joy*, has this to say: "Your neighbors live in a world in which death is the final thing. Therefore, it is very important for them that this world be just as comfortable and as nice as it can be, because it is the only reality they know. Therefore it behooves them to make their peace with this world, to get the curtains up and the rugs down, and find the comfortable anodynes which dull their sensibilities, to tear down their barns and build bigger ones, to learn how to live without believing in anything very much so they may escape the collisions which conviction brings, and to live without caring for anything very much, so they may escape the pain, the passion, of losing it."—Page 137.

What a bleak outlook! Bayne comments that such a life "has all the ruggedness and dignity of chocolate pudding." The hope of eternity with Christ is a basic truth of Christianity. This hope can give meaning to life. It is relevant not only at the graveside but in all the experiences of life. And the most convincing reason for believing in eternal life is the great historical fact that Jesus came forth from the tomb. He says to us, as He did to His followers in ancient times, "Because I live, you will live also." [END]