

“IF A MAN DIES, WILL HE LIVE AGAIN?”

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If a man dies, will he live again? (Job 14: 14).

Although that question was asked millennia ago, by Job, a man who had more than his fair share of troubles and setbacks, it is as relevant today as ever. **If a man dies, will he live again?**

Well do I remember when as a student ambulance officer, my class had to spend a day in a morgue in Melbourne. The first post-mortem dissection was of a young person who had suddenly, unexpectedly died.

How can I ever forget witnessing that cadaver being dissected to determine the cause of death. I remember thinking how this youth had just a few hours before probably had not a care in the world, enjoying life, looking forward to all the adventure of a lifetime of promise. Now, lifeless --- someone's beloved son --- on that cold, metal slab.

As our class took the return bus journey to our ambulance campus, I clearly remember how the whole class of students was laughing and joking about all sorts of things. Perhaps this frivolity was their way of dealing with what we had just witnessed. But I sat there withdrawn. I was deeply troubled. A question was playing over and over again and again in my mind ... **If a man dies, will he live again?** How could that cut-up young person ever rise to live again? What power in all the Universe could raise the dead? What “god” could reverse this curse?

As a pastor, before I had joined the Ambulance Service, I had conducted probably well over 100 funerals for all situations for all types of deaths and people. But that day for me was different. That day death seemed so invincible, so powerful, so irreversible. All I had to that point believed and been assured of, was suddenly under attack. **If a man dies, will he live again?** The question had suddenly taken on mammoth proportions.

None of us will deny that death is cruel, cold, very permanent reality. Any thought that a man, or a woman, or a child who has died, could possibly rise up and live again, seems mere fantasy, just make-believe. And certainly, Christians who say we believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead suggests to many that we are living in La-La Land!

Face the scientific facts, we are told. Science proves that man, once dead, is dead. He disintegrates. He dissipates. He disappears altogether, no different to a dead dog or a dead cow. So get real. Dead people do not live again.

Such skepticism is nothing new. The apostle Paul wrote to a group of people in the city of Corinth who were also denying the possibility of the resurrection of the dead. Those doubters were mocking, **“There is no resurrection of the dead” (I Cor. 15: 12).**

Nothing has changed. Most likely those doubters in Corinth were under the influence of Greek philosophy which divided the human being into two parts: body and soul; the material and the divine.

The Greeks considered that during our earthly lives, the eternal soul was held in the prison of its body. At the time of death your soul --- the real you --- escaped the body and was freed at last from its physical and earthly prison. At death your soul could soar into the eternal heavenly realms. Free at last!

So, according to the Greeks, why would anyone want to have a body again? Why imprison the soul a second time? The Christian teaching that there will be a *bodily* resurrection was to them, not only ridiculously contrary to nature and all we observe, but also utterly undesirable, totally abhorrent.

Such Greek-inspired thinking is still popular today. That philosophy has become all-pervasive in our Western culture. You hear it all the time, "Our mate is up there, leaning over the balcony, looking down, having a beer for us!"

In answer to these doubters who say there will be no physical resurrection of the dead, the apostle gives a spirited and reasoned Christian defense.

1. THERE WERE RELIABLE EYEWITNESSES TO THE BODILY RESURRECTION OF JESUS.

The apostle affirms the linchpin of our hope is the eyewitness testimony of the many who saw the resurrected Jesus. He lists some of those who talked with Jesus, who ate with Jesus after he came out of the grave, over a period of 40 days.

He [Jesus] was seen by Peter, then by the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles ... and last of all ... he appeared also to me ...(I Cor. 15: 5f).

In our law courts, the testimony of first-hand witnesses is paramount. Hearsay is not admitted. No different in the ancient world. Based on these eyewitness affidavits, Paul writes, **Now, let me ask you something profound yet troubling. If you became believers because you trusted the proclamation that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, how can you let people say that there is no such thing as a resurrection? If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ. And face it --- if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ --- sheer fabrications, if there's no resurrection.**

If corpses can't be raised, then Christ wasn't, because he was indeed dead. And if Christ wasn't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. It's even worse for those who died hoping in Christ and the resurrection, because they're

already in their graves. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ *has* been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries. (*The Message* vs. 12f).

Now, of course, we can dismiss this eyewitness testimony. We can say, "Well, the disciples of Jesus concocted this fanciful story. They were, after all, victims of severe psychological forces that made them hallucinate. They didn't really see Jesus bodily raised up. It was just an apparition, or at worst, it was all concocted to save face."

THE DISCIPLES' DEATHS

Think about this for a minute. Consider how all these disciples who said they saw the risen Christ faced their own deaths:-

Matthew suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia, struck by a sword.

Mark died in Alexandria, Egypt, after being dragged by horses through the streets until he was dead.

Luke was hanged by pagan priests on an olive tree in Greece as a result of his fearless preaching about Jesus.

John faced martyrdom when they began to boil him in a huge basin of oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. However, he was miraculously spared from death but then sentenced to the mines on the prison island of Patmos. There he wrote the Book of Revelation. He was later freed, and returned to serve as Bishop of Edessa in modern Turkey. He died as an old man, the only apostle to die by natural causes in old age.

Peter was crucified upside down on a X-shaped cross because he told his tormentors he felt unworthy to die in the same way that Jesus Christ was crucified.

James the Just, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was thrown over a hundred feet down from the southeast pinnacle of the Temple after he refused to deny his faith in Christ. When they discovered he survived the fall, his enemies beat James to death with a fuller's club.

James the Greater, a son of Zebedee, was a fisherman by trade when Jesus called him to follow. Another strong leader of the church in Jerusalem, James was ultimately beheaded. The Roman officer who guarded James watched amazed as James defended his faith at his trial. Later, that officer walked beside James to the place of execution. Overcome by conviction, he declared his new faith in the living Christ to the judge and knelt beside James to accept beheading as a Christian.

Bartholomew, (also known as **Nathaniel**) was a missionary in present day Turkey. Bartholomew was martyred for his preaching in Armenia, being flayed to death by a whip.

Andrew, was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Patras, Greece. After being whipped severely by seven soldiers they tied his body to the cross with cords to prolong his agony. His followers reported that, when he was led towards the cross, Andrew saluted it in these words, "I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it." He continued to preach to his tormentors for two full days until he expired.

Thomas, yes "doubting Thomas", was stabbed through with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips to establish the Christian church in the subcontinent. Thomas had put his hands in the spear hole in the side of the now risen Christ and had touched and handled the nail scarred hands of the now living Christ.

Jude, the brother of Jesus, was killed with arrows when he refused to deny his faith in Christ.

Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas iscariot, was stoned then beheaded.

Barnabas, one of the group of 70 disciples, preached throughout Italy and Cyprus, was stoned to death at Salonica.

Paul, converted persecutor of the early Christians, had his life turned upside down after he met Jesus in a post-resurrection appearance. Paul was imprisoned more frequently, flogged more severely, exposed to the real possibility of death on numerous occasions for his loyalty to the risen Christ. He says, "Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep. I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked (2 Cor. 11: 23-27). Paul was in the end tortured, beaten and beheaded by the evil Emperor Nero in Rome in A.D. 67.

There is no need to continue. You get the picture. Christianity took off like wildfire in that world because the tomb of Christ was empty. The body was gone. Even Christ's enemies never disputed that the tomb was empty! Isn't it interesting that no record exists of any disagreement about the tomb being empty? The only discussion concerned what it meant, the implications of a bodily resurrection.

But men and women who have made stories up, those who have agreed to fabricate lies about a man physically raised up from the dead after gruesome crucifixion and burial for three days, do not die with triumphant assurances like these eye-witnesses died with the conscious knowledge it was all a fraud.

If there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we

would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ --- sheer fabrications, if there's no resurrection (vs. 17-19).

Either Jesus was raised up from the grave by God his Father, or the disciples lied in affirming it. And they are to be most pitied for their stupidity because they suffered horribly for this testimony! That is Paul's first answer to the resurrection-deniers. Nobody chooses a life of constant danger and persecution just for the heck of it. Nobody dies for a lie!

If a man dies, will he live again? The quality of the character of the eyewitnesses and their ability to unflinchingly face the cruelest of deaths, all speaks of the trustworthiness of their eyewitness testimony to having met the risen Christ.

2. THE OBSERVABLE WITNESS OF THE LAWS OF NATURE.

Now, the resurrection-doubters ask Paul a follow-up question, "Some skeptic is sure to ask, "Show me how resurrection works. Give me a diagram; draw me a picture. What does this 'resurrection body' look like?" If you look at this question closely, you realise how absurd it is. There are no diagrams for this kind of thing. We do have a parallel experience in gardening. You plant a "dead" seed; soon there is a flourishing plant. There is no visual likeness between seed and plant. You could never guess what a tomato would look like by looking at a tomato seed. What we plant in the soil and what grows out of it doesn't look anything alike. The dead body we bury in the ground and the resurrection body that comes out from it will be dramatically different

You will notice that the variety of bodies is stunning. Just as there are different kinds of seeds, there are different kinds of bodies --- humans, animals, birds, fish --- each unprecedented in its form. You get a hint at the diversity of resurrection glory by looking at the diversity of bodies not only on earth but in the skies --- sun, moon, stars --- all these varieties of beauty and brightness. And we're only looking at pre-resurrection 'seeds' --- who can imagine what the resurrection "plants" will look like!

This image of planting a dead seed and raising a live plant is a mere sketch at best, but perhaps it will help in approaching the mystery of the resurrection body --- but only if you keep in mind that when we're raised, we're raised for *good*, alive forever!

The corpse that's planted is no beauty, but when it's raised, it's glorious. Put in the ground weak, it comes up powerful. The seed sown is natural; the seed grown is supernatural --- same seed, same body, but what a difference from when it goes down in physical mortality to when it is raised up in spiritual immortality! (*The Message* vs. 35-44).

Now, let's not miss Paul's logic here. Paul likens the promise of our physical resurrection in Christ at the end of this age to what we already see everyday in nature.

Every time a gardener plants seed in the garden bed, he is enacting a principle that God the Creator has embedded within the laws of nature --- death is the necessary transition to new life.

God has locked the principle of bodily resurrection in this analogy of sowing and growing of seed in nature. Every seed carries the germ of its future resurrection.

William Barclay (¹) tells the story how during World War 2 a certain city church in London was all set out for harvest thanksgiving. In the centre of the gifts there was a sheaf of corn. The service was never held, for, on the Saturday night, there came a savage air raid and the church was laid in ruins.

The months passed on and the spring came, and someone noticed that, on the bomb site where that church had stood, there were shoots of green. The summer came and the shoots flourished and in the autumn-time there was a flourishing patch of corn growing amidst the rubble. Not even the bombs and the destruction could kill the life of the corn and its seeds. Life was stronger than death. The Resurrection is the final proof that life is stronger than death.

An even more remarkable example of this principle concerns the wheat seeds discovered in Egypt in King Tutenkamen's Tomb. They took some of those seeds long buried for millennia next to Tut and experimented. Would they germinate? Yes! They regenerated once planted in the right conditions! Wow! Life wins.

In this powerful demonstration from nature, God our Creator has given us proof that He will not abandon believers in Christ to corruption! God has decreed that from dead seeds will come new life.

Those who say there is no resurrection, that a decaying body will not be raised up again, are being naive, says Paul; Every wheat stalk, every corn stalk, every tomato vine contradicts the absurd logic that life cannot come from death. Just look around you, even in this fallen, sinful, world and you can see the principle of new life everywhere!

Just so, the risen Christ is **the firstfruits**, the guarantee, that a whole harvest of new-lifers is coming. Paul says that all who are in Christ will live again. He continues; **Let me tell you something wonderful, a mystery I'll probably never fully understand. We're not all going to die --- but we are all going to be changed. You hear a blast to end all blasts from a trumpet, and in the time that you look up and blink your eyes --- it's over. On signal from that trumpet from heaven, the dead will be up and out of their graves, beyond the reach of death, never to die again. At the same moment and in the same way, we'll all be changed. In the resurrection scheme of things, this has to happen: Everything perishable taken off the shelves and replaced by the imperishable, this mortal replaced by the immortal. Then the saying will come true:**

¹ *The Letters To The Corinthians: The Daily Study Bible*, St Andrew Press, 7th Impression, 1965 p165-166

“Death swallowed by triumphant Life! Who got the last word, oh, Death? Oh, Death, who’s afraid of you now?”

It was sin that made death so frightening and law-code guilt that gave sin its leverage, its destructive power. But now in a single victorious stroke of Life, all three --- sin, guilt, death --- are gone, the gift of our Master, Jesus Christ. Thank God!

With all this going for us, my dear, dear friends, stand your ground. And don’t hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort (*The Message*, vs. 51-58).

We started by asking, **If a man dies, Will he live again?** We have only scratched the surface of our great Christian hope. But I trust it brings us some significant comfort in our grief and sense of irreplaceable loss.

For we believe in the resurrection of the dead. Some will rise to everlasting shame (**Dan. 12:2**). But all who are **in Christ** will be raised to everlasting glory. Down through the centuries multitudes have proven in their own radically changed lives the truth of that eyewitness testimony. There is real substance to our hope in Christ.

And, we have the empirical, scientific evidence of natures’ laws. Every time a buried seed germinates we have a parable that the dead will come to life in new and glorified bodies when God’s kingdom-age dawns. **Christ the firstfruits** and then we will follow.

My dear friends, what a hope is ours in our risen Saviour, Jesus Christ! Christ is alive! Christ is risen! His promise is that, **“Because I live, you will live also”** (**John 14: 19**).

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony of our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God ... for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what I have entrusted to him (**2 Timothy 1: 8f**).