

Raised to Judgement

Bible teaching about resurrection and judgement

THE apostles of Jesus Christ travelled the Roman world with a bold and urgent message. Jesus had died; but he had risen from the dead and his exaltation to God's right hand gave new hope to all who would try to follow his example of obedience. In spite of mocking, derision and persecution, these apostles sounded forth their great clarion call: being witnesses themselves of Christ's resurrection, they were galvanised into action, publicly proclaiming the hope of resurrection for all true disciples of the Lord.

There is probably no better way for us to learn more about this wonderful and comforting Christian hope and the associated teaching concerning God's judgement of man, than to examine it through the preaching of one of these apostles who had joined the group of witnesses, as 'one born out of due time' (1 Corinthians 15:8). He too was persecuted and imprisoned for the things he preached, but while in custody would not be silenced and continued to speak, even to his captors, of the hope which filled his own heart.

At the court of Felix

The Apostle Paul was in prison in an outpost of the Empire and distant from the magnificence of the capital city. But there is no doubt that, however unsavoury that prison cell may have been, the provincial governor's headquarters in Caesarea bore some similarity to the fashionable apartments known to Felix from his earlier life in Rome. With wide-ranging powers he had gathered to himself a court and dispensed what he would fondly and incorrectly call justice with a casualness and sadistic severity equalled, and later exceeded, by the recently enthroned emperor Nero.

At Felix's side was his teenage wife Drusilla, by all accounts a great beauty and just widowed as a result of the death of the Syrian king Azizus to whom she had been married, probably at the behest of her father Herod Agrippa I, at the tender age of fourteen. Whether the tenderness of her character matched that of her age may be questioned by her premature association with the uncultured Felix long before Azizus's death regularised the situation. It seemed part of the family characteristics of the Herods to disregard the sanctity of marriage and treat the bond with contempt. Had not John the Baptist been imprisoned and subsequently beheaded by Herod Antipas for his effrontery in criticising him for taking his brother's wife? (Matthew 14:1-11).

Civilisation corrupt

The thin veneer of civilisation cloaking corrupt and immoral practices parallels our own modern 21st century western world. Criticism of its ways was as unwelcome then as it is now. Yet it was against this background and before the two most prominently involved that the imprisoned Apostle Paul 'reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgement to come' (Acts 24:25).

It is therefore fitting that we in our day should examine the same principles, recognising in ourselves, as well as in the world of which we form part, the need for more exalted standards of thought and conduct. It is neither comfortable nor fashionable to speak of a time of coming

judgement. It seems a subject inextricably linked with the doctrine of hell-fire, which has become an object of derision and the butt of music hall jokes. But while eternal torment deep in the bowels of the earth is nowhere taught in scripture, judgement is an integral part of God's programme which will result in the world ultimately being full of His glory.

Just like Felix of old, though, if we try to push the subject from our consciousness we shall hardly succeed. Even Felix trembled as he saw the strong connection between his way of life and his ultimate destiny. He was unwilling to mend his ways and strive after the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Our own experiences teach us that, whether we like it or not, there is a connection between endeavour and reward; and between disobedience and punishment. It is the guiding rule in the disciplining of children and management of organisations and is summed up in the phrase 'the carrot and the stick'. Consider the following words, written by the same apostle who stood before Felix and Drusilla:

“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” (Titus 2:11-14)

There is, then, a responsibility incumbent upon those who wish to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ to lead lives consistent with, and reflecting the standards he taught. To do this it is necessary to “deny ungodliness and worldly lusts” *now* to the extent that we are aware of the certainty of his return. How similar these words are to those spoken to Felix!

Moral standards – then and now

Following God's ways (righteousness) involves a high degree of self-control. We must each acknowledge that left to his own devices man “is like the beasts that perish” (Psalm 49:20). How often do we hear of the very slender barrier that exists between order and safety in society and mob rule? The well-ordered and cultivated Roman Empire, degraded by men like Felix and Nero, became inevitably prey to the original Vandals and other ill-named barbarous tribes. In similar fashion, as the moral standards of our society crumble and respect for authority evaporates, the streets of our cities become battlegrounds and fighting and fear grow.

Nowhere is the quality of self-control or temperance upheld. Instead “each man does that which is right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Just as that was true at a critical stage in the history of Israel, so it is true today. Of course, if there are no standards set, there can be no judgement; or, to use the words of scripture, “where there is no law, neither is there transgression” (Romans 4:15). Our society, in order to flout the required standards for life set by God, has therefore had to reject the idea of judgement. The catchphrase for our age, as it was for the civilisation whose similar disregard hastened its destruction by flood and tempest in Noah's day, is: “Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32; Matthew 24:38; Luke 17:27).

God has specifically recorded that the wickedness of the world will result in His judgements being unleashed on the earth: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Our particular study, however,

concerns our individual response to the Gospel message and the impending judgement seat of Christ.

Tomorrow we die

This attitude of being responsible to no-one for our actions is increasingly prevalent. Most interestingly, however, when the Apostle Paul describes it, he links it with unbelief about the resurrection:

“What does it profit me? *If the dead are not raised*, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (1 Corinthians 15:32)

Clearly, then, the promise of resurrection from the dead should affect the way we live our lives. It is the reward God has promised to those who attempt in their lives now to follow in His ways and commandments. It is therefore necessary for us to understand what hope there is for man at his death.

Solomon, in the book of Ecclesiastes, reviewing the works of man and their ultimate value, declared that:

“All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked.” (Ecclesiastes 9:2)

His description of the death state is equally succinct:

“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.” (verse 5)

This last phrase perhaps expresses two thoughts. On the one hand, as time passes the dead are forgotten, even by close friends and acquaintances; but also a person’s memory ceases when death occurs. It is like many pocket calculators which have a memory function, only so long as power is available. Once that power is switched off, the ability to calculate, to recall from memory, or to display other functions has been removed. This is the condition of man at death, as these words spoken to Adam after his disobedience reveal:

“Thou shalt return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis 3:19)

Desire for immortality

Is this the fact which men and women wish to ignore, hoping it is not really true? None of us likes to think we are in truth ephemeral creatures, like a butterfly existing but for a brief day. Against the broad centuries of history, however, this is the case. Our individual ripples in the pool of life achieve little. Even those men to whom the world ascribes greatness only make slight adjustments in the course of man’s affairs. Yet there is in each of us a desire for immortality ó to leave something behind us. Parents see in their children aspects of their own lives being perpetuated and occasionally a child’s life is damaged by the parent wishing to live his own life again through his children. It is probably this desire which has caused men and women to express belief in an essential part of man which can never die.

This is a falsehood first uttered in the temptation in the garden of Eden: "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). This is the great untruth, clung to desperately by many, just as survivors of a shipwreck will attempt to ride a tempestuous sea on the scantiest piece of flotsam available. It is untrue, and if we wish to be true to ourselves we must abandon it and seek to place our trust in those things which are firm and steadfast "like an anchor for our lives, an anchor safe and sure" (Hebrews 6:19, NEB).

The faith of Job

This wish for permanence, to be able to pass on for the benefit of others the lessons a life's experience has taught, is not uncommon. In the book of Job, when that just man's suffering intensified the foundation of his faith, he cried out:

"Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!" (Job 19:23,24)

For a man like Job to make such a cry, the message he had to impart must be of importance. He had been attacked by a disease which was loathsome: a living death. On awakening each morning he would contemplate the finality of death and the futility of life. This crystallised for him a supreme hope, and it was this he wished to be preserved for future generations, for it was the vindication of his own steadfastness in adversity:

"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me." (Job 19:25-27)

That this was not just a pious sentimentality wrung out of him by the agony of his illness is attested to by God Himself, whose comment on Job is recorded later in the book. He says to Job's friends:

"Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, *as my servant Job hath*." (Job 42:7)

The right things about God which Job had spoken are important for us. He spoke of the living power of God able to redeem sinful men and women. In connection with that redemption, he expressed the hope that he would be present to see and hear God's judgement of him. And yet Job understood the nature of death as Solomon described it. He spoke of the decomposition of his body, but also believed that the same body would one day stand before God.

Isaiah's commentary

If Job was the only Old Testament character to make this claim we might have an excuse to discount his evidence. But he is not. In the prophecy of Isaiah the things we have learnt from Ecclesiastes and Job are repeated. Note first the description of the death state in chapter 26, verses 13 and 14:

"Other lords beside thee have had dominion over us í They are dead, they shall not live; they are deceased, they shall not rise: therefore hast thou visited and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish."

By careful repetition, there is an inevitability about the fate of these men ó ðdeadö and ðdeceasedö, they shall ðnot liveö or ðriseö. As Solomon had said: ðThe memory of them is forgotten.ö

In contrast, however, to this hopelessness, is the position of those who are God's people:

ðThy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out her dead.ö (Isaiah 26:19)

What we have therefore learnt is that though for some it is true that the death state is final, for others, although the death state itself is the same ó complete unconsciousness, the ðone event that cometh upon allö ó there is a hope of arising or being cast forth from the earth.

Daniel's prophecy

This categorisation is taken a step further in Daniel's prophecy where the second group ó God's people ó arise to an as yet unknown destiny. The wording used is critically important, as we shall see:

ðAnd *many* (not *all*) of them that *sleep* in the dust of the earth shall awake, *some* to everlasting life, and *some* to shame and everlasting contempt.ö (Daniel 12:2)

We know sufficiently well from our study that this is the language of scripture on this subject. ðThe dust of the earthö echoes the Genesis record of the fate of Adam, Eve and their descendants. Clearly there is to be a separation between those whose destiny is everlasting life and those for whom there will be shame and everlasting contempt.

The sleep of death

In common with other passages of scripture referring to the death of those who will subsequently be raised, Daniel speaks of them as ðsleepingö. On one occasion, when Jesus was called to the home of a leader of the synagogue whose daughter had died, he was ðlaughed to scornö by the professional mourners who had congregated there, when he avowed that the ðmaid is not dead, but sleepethö (Matthew 9:24). Had they been familiar with the real meaning of their scriptures they would have understood that this language confirmed Jesus' intention to raise her from the dead. This is therefore the way in which God Himself views those whom He intends to raise. For Him they are awaiting the call to reawaken at the dawning of the great day of righteousness.

Daniel's words are also related to another saying of the Lord Jesus Christ:

ðFor as the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to execute judgement also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.ö (John 5:26-29)

Resurrection is not a commonly discussed subject. Conceptions of what happens after death range across many conflicting theories. Some fondly think of an existence freed from all

trammels of this life and this earth, but otherwise purposeless. We should perhaps ask what pleasure such a destiny could give creature or Creator. Side by side with this view is the fear of eternal torment, blazing fires and sulphurous smoke. Common to both ideas is freedom from our present mortal bodies. Whatever our destiny may be, it will involve (so it is said) that part of us which is considered immortal ó the essential personality, or the soul, to use the common designation.

Human myths and Bible truth

From our survey of Bible teaching, we know these hazy ideas have no foundation. Instead, and in simple down-to-earth terms, there is a powerful and compelling truth concerning man's true state and God's scheme of redemption:

1. Man is born mortal, a dying creature inheriting his nature from all his ancestors back to Adam.
2. Man is sinful. All men are tempted and, with the single exception of the Lord Jesus Christ, commit sins transgressing God's laws.
3. All men die, from illness, accident, murder or old age.
4. Death is total unconsciousness. No longer energised by breath, the body decomposes to the earthly elements from which it is made.
5. God will raise from the dead all who know Him and His laws.
6. By the Lord Jesus Christ, and at his return to the earth, God will judge those who have been raised. Some will be granted immortality. The rest will return to their graves for ever.
7. The immortalised believers, the saints or sanctified ones, will live and reign with Christ in God's kingdom upon earth.

Alive at the coming of the Lord

In this programme, special arrangements have been made for those who will be alive when Christ returns. This was a matter of great concern to believers who could understand the teaching about resurrection and judgement, but thought that it could relate only to those who had already died. Many times in the New Testament the writers were inspired to clarify this. We should be thankful that they did, for the signs of mounting distress in the earth herald the great day God has appointed in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead (Acts 17:31). We may therefore be among the generation who shall not all sleep (die), but shall be changed by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ into the immortal subjects of his divine kingdom.

There will also at Christ's return be men and women (and particularly children) who have not had to decide what their response to the Gospel of truth will be. They will continue to live through the time when the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Micah 4:2). Because of the righteous rule of Christ, conditions in the world will improve and expectation of life will increase ó possibly equivalent to the times before the flood. Isaiah prophesied:

Never again will there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. (Isaiah 65:20, NIV)

But each, child, youth and aged, at their appointed times will die. At the end of this reign of Christ there will be a second day of resurrection, a second judgement and, for those not granted immortality whose names are not found written in the book of life, a second and utterly final death (Revelation 20:12-15).

The resurrection spoken of in the Bible is a bodily one, just as the era of peace and righteousness to be introduced at Jesus' return involves this earth on which we live. There is no hazy notion of a spirit world in far off places, as an examination of Jesus' own resurrection shows. Firstly, he was mistaken by Mary Magdalene for the gardener and had to rebuke her for holding on to him: "Take not hold on me; for I am not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:15,17, RV). Later, when his disciples were gathered together in the upper room, terrified of the consequences for themselves of his crucifixion, Jesus appeared and they thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus' answer to their fright puts the matter beyond all doubt:

"Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit (ghost) hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have." (Luke 24:38,39)

Bodily resurrection

Similarly, the resurrection at Christ's return will be a bodily one. Those that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth (John 5:28). It is no use for us to question the ability of the all-creating God to raise decomposed bodies, for He first formed man from the dust of the ground and can therefore re-form many men and women who have since that time returned to the dust from which they were made, trusting in His limitless power.

The similarity of the time of resurrection and judgement to Adam's own experience is very revealing. He was not created immortal. There was a choice before him to obey God or his own desires, and he chose to do that which formed the pattern that all mankind would subsequently follow. He was therefore judged by God: "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, cursed is the ground, in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground" (Genesis 3:17-19).

First of all, therefore, the resurrection involves what the word itself implies – a rising or standing up: not immediately a change of nature, but a reconstituted mortal body ready to appear for judgement. Some will have continued to sin after the similitude of Adam's transgression (Romans 5:14); others will have striven to follow the example of the Son of God, recognising the victory his death and resurrection achieved.

Who will be raised?

There will be many who have lived their lives oblivious of the purposeful power of God and unaware of the promised gift of life made possible through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We should not expect such to be raised. In ignorance of the principles involved, how could they be expected to make an answer before the Judge of all the earth? According to their own lights they will have lived lives, receiving equally with all other inhabitants of His earth the benefits which God showers daily upon us. Those, however, who do have a knowledge of His purpose are placed in a position of responsibility and each shall give account of himself to God (Romans 14:12).

This separation is the judgement to come about which Paul reasoned with Felix, and Jesus himself will be the judge.

The just judge

The work of judgement has been specifically reserved for Christ by God. How fitting it is that he should be the judge! He was born by the power of God of an earthly mother and thereby shared our human nature. He knows the temptations which cause us to stumble because he was tempted in the same way. Because he had purposed in his heart to be always about his Father's business he conquered each temptation. As a human being in the line of Adam the one event that cometh on all came upon him and he was crucified as a result of the machinations of men who were unable to accept his unimpeachable goodness. Because of his life of obedience the grave could not hold him and by the same power that brought about his miraculous birth, God raised him from the dead and on account of his righteousness granted him immortality.

That release is possible from the previously all-conquering enemy of mankind, as revealed to Job, Isaiah and Daniel was convincingly proved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of his victory over death, there is a guarantee for his disciples to share in his triumph. Knowing that man by himself cannot live a life of perfect obedience like Christ, God has promised that believers can be related to that life and enjoy the benefits which consequently flow.

The means of achieving this relationship is baptism based on repentance of sinful ways and acknowledgement of the truth of the Gospel message:

Know ye not, said the apostle Paul to Roman believers, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. (Romans 6:3-5)

Sweet reward of faithful following

It is impossible to read the Gospel teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and be unaware of the necessity for judgement. Whether openly to his disciples, or in the form of parables to the multitudes that flocked to hear him, Jesus distinctly taught of a day of reckoning for the servants of God. On one occasion he spoke of a nobleman going into a far country to receive a kingdom. (The parallel with his own ascension and promised return to establish God's kingdom on earth cannot be avoided.) At his return, the servants who had been entrusted with his goods were called to give an account of their dealings in his absence. The endeavours of the faithful servants were rewarded, while the mistrust of the unfaithful servant was punished by taking from him that portion of the nobleman's goods he had been given to use. Throughout the account, there is an emphasis on the word faithful. It is a believer's faith in the promises of God that will be judged. No-one has lived a life which of itself justifies confidence that a reward has been earned. Jesus himself said:

When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:10)

In harmony with this, the promise of eternal life is not described in scripture as something that can be earned. Instead, it is the free gift of God (Romans 6:23). Undeserved by its recipients, the gift has only been made possible through the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The basis of judgement

Abraham, one of the great figures of the Old Testament, is a good example of this principle. He had been asked to do things by God which we would think far beyond the call of duty. One of these was to sacrifice his own son, Isaac (Genesis 22). It was his ability through all these circumstances to be constantly aware of the certainty of a future resurrection (Hebrews 11:17-19) that marked him out as a man of great faith. It is recorded of him that as a result of his *faithfulness* God counts him a righteous man (Romans 4:3).

This then is the basis of the judgement. We are, perhaps by our association of the word with courts of law, tempted to envisage something of a kind of debate, with an argument of the relative merits of various incidents in a person's life. Rather we should think of the occasion as an opportunity for the verdict to be pronounced by the one who has been given authority to exercise judgement and who is therefore uniquely qualified to do so. The verdict will not be the result of achievement, for it was the ones who would boldly say, "Lord, Lord, have we not in thy name done many wonderful works?" to whom the Lord directed his dreadful reply, "I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:22,23).

As Isaiah had prophesied so long before, God's requirements are for humble and sensitive servants: "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). Rather, the verdict will be based upon commitment, the knowledge that we are each totally dependent on God's mercy for all things; in this life and also for the blessings with which the earth will be showered in the kingdom age.

From death to life

The judgement is, however, only a part of the process of leading faithful men and women from death to life. God's intention from the beginning was that mankind should be in His image. His son is and was able therefore to say to his disciples: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Jesus displayed the wonders of God's character most perfectly; he was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Many who heard him "wondered at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22); and it was his own, uncontested claim that he is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

How different this is from our own feeble attempts to perfect our characters! In different ways we each display a lack of ability to control ourselves. For one it will be an over-hasty tongue, for another a particular breed of covetousness, for yet others the common sin of pride. When we start a process of critical self-examination, the list is endless. Yet God has promised to those who strive to serve Him faithfully a share in His divine nature. Using eloquent language, Daniel describes this result of resurrection and acceptance at the judgement:

"They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." (Daniel 12:3)

Notice that they shall shine *ōas* the brightness*ö* and *ōas* stars*ö*. This is figurative language describing poetically the translation from mortality to immortality. *ō*God is light*ö*, the Apostle John wrote, *ōand in him is no darkness at allö* (1 John 1:5). Daniel was prophesying that those who are raised and accepted at the judgement will then be changed to immortal beings, living and reigning with Christ and displaying, as he does, the characteristics of his Heavenly Father.

This is the exalted hope which is held out in the Gospel message, the *ō*righteousness*ö* which will be revealed by the *ō*judgement to come*ö* which so troubled Felix, and which will only be fulfilled when the harvest of resurrection is gathered in. Christ, who is the firstfruits of that harvest (1 Corinthians 15:23), is the guarantee that all we have considered regarding this subject is certain to come to pass.

The day of opportunity

Felix sent Paul away with the words, *ō*Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee*ö* (Acts 24:25). We can, if we wish, do the same and turn our backs on the good news of the kingdom of God. We may convince ourselves that there will be a *ō*convenient season*ö* at some time in the future, but we shall be wrong. As the Apostle Paul said, writing to believers in Corinth:

*ō*Now is the accepted time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation.*ö* (2 Corinthians 6:2)

These are matters of life and death, and too important to be put off to another day.

By Michael Ashton

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