

Newsletter April 2014

In this newsletter we shall discuss the resurrection of the dead by utilizing edited excerpts primarily taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book I, chapter 8.3 and Book III, Chapter 20.7. The resurrection of the dead is an essential doctrine for Christianity to have any meaning, since without it Christianity would become but a hopeless religious exercise without any long-term benefit for the worshiper (cf. 1Co.15:13-19). There is most certainly no escape from death, because it is universal to all men (cf. Ec.8:8; He.9:27). Death must continue to reign until God's holiness is fully satisfied for Adam's offence, which has been perpetuated throughout the human flesh of mankind as a sin nature. God's satisfaction (i.e. propitiation) for all sin has been fully received in the death of Christ for we who believe and trust in Him. Our souls have been fully redeemed, yet we continue to groan in unredeemable corruptible flesh here on earth as we await the future resurrection of our incorruptible bodies (cf. Ro.8:23).

Death, as the word is most commonly utilized in Scripture, can best be defined as "the separation of the soul (the spiritual conscious identity of man) from the body (the physical part), the latter ceasing to function and eventually turning to dust in the grave. Quite understandably, we greatly fear an existence without the natural housing of our bodies that have served our every physical need for so long (cf. 2Co.5:1-4). Even for a Christian, the death of the natural body, which must precede its final transformation in the resurrection, can be a frightening prospect. For, although we have received the certainty of eternal life with Christ, we are mostly ignorant of what that future transformation and existence in an eternal state will be like. Nevertheless, the Scriptures do give us some insight into this matter, as we shall now consider.

Immediately after the death of the body, the spirit, which is eternal, continues to exist apart from the flesh, and the soul thus preserved remains fully awake and aware. In the believer, his or her spirit has become one with the Holy Spirit through being identified with Christ in the new birth (cf. Newsletter November 2012), while in the unbeliever the soul remains corrupted from the sinful fall of Adam without redemption. In either case, man's soul continues to exist when his conscious being is separated from his mortal body after its death. Flesh has never been the source of life but is only a physical dwelling for the immortal soul here on earth. As Jesus said, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (Jn.6:63). Therefore, though our mortal flesh must ultimately die, our spirit, which is the indestructible life-giving essence, continues and our soul lives on through its presence.

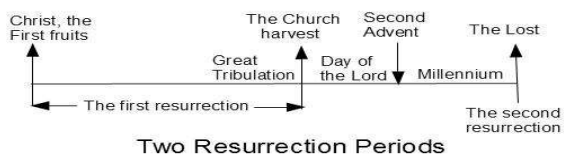
As believers in Christ, we should not assume that new and incorruptible physical bodies will be immediately given to us at the time of our death, for even Christ was without a physical body for a brief period as it hung lifeless on the cross and as it lay in the tomb. In like manner, we shall also know a period of time in which we shall exist without flesh as our body goes into a dormant state somewhat similar to natural sleep. Unlike natural sleep, however, the separated soul remains fully awake as the mortal body goes through a transformation process of decay so that its basic elements may be separated out in order to be later reconstructed into an immortal body as it awakes in the bright dawn of the resurrection. Following death, all believers shall immediately find themselves, soul and spirit, in the very presence of Christ Himself where they will be received and comforted (cf. Book III, page 654). They must patiently wait with certain hope for the ultimate resurrection of their bodies, wherein we shall be made perfect and complete in a new sinless physical form. Although a period of time will pass upon the earth, in the eternity of Heaven this waiting period will seem like a mere instant such that believers need not dread it (cf. Newsletter February 2012).

An often-mentioned exception to the necessary process of physical death is reserved for those believers who remain alive when Christ calls up his Church to join Him in the atmosphere (i.e. the "rapture"; cf. Book III, page 561, 565-570). However, even those men and women will have their spirit separated from their mortal bodies (as in death), but they will immediately receive a new immortal body as they ascend into the air to be with Christ (cf. 1Th. 4:17). The rapture, therefore, is not so much an exception to death, but an exception regarding the length of earthly time that the natural body sleeps before the new body springs forth from its elements. This miraculous translation of the living saints from a state of mortality to immortality will occur quite rapidly, as the Apostle Paul put it, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" at Christ's trumpet call to come forth (cf. 1Co.15:52).

Moreover, we should not grieve for those believers who have already died, whose spirit has left and their body decayed into ashes, before Jesus returns to call up his Church into his presence. For, we are told, “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (1Th.4:14). Upon hearing Jesus’ call to his own, “the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1Th.4:16). The souls and spirits of those who have died trusting Christ shall return with Him to be immediately joined to immortal resurrected bodies. Therefore, whether we, being a soul made alive by the Holy Spirit, are in the mortal body or absent from it in death at Jesus’ herald, we shall all be “caught up” with Him together into God’s eternal presence (1Th.4:17; Ac.1:9). “Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1Th.4:18).

To believe, as some do, that we shall become spirit beings in Heaven that no longer inhabit material bodies is not Scriptural. Angels are spirit beings (although we see that they can take on the appearance of human form for a time) whereas mankind is of a different order of creation that God has designed to function in a material universe. We shall each receive an indestructible glorified body in the likeness of Christ following our resurrection (cf. 1Jn.3:2). Paul answered the question regarding the nature of the resurrected body in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1Co.15:35–58) in this way: Our bodies are sown into the grave as corruptible flesh, but it is raised an incorruptible body (cf. 1Co.15:42). “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1Co.15:44). While in this mortal body we maintain the image of the earthly (i.e. Adam), our resurrected body shall bear the immortal image of the heavenly (i.e. of Jesus Christ; cf. 1Co.15:49). As we once bore the image of Adam in sin to death, we shall then bear the image of Christ in righteousness to eternal life. Our mortal body came from Adam who “was made a living soul” (cf. Ge.2:7); our spiritual body will come from Christ who was made a “life-giving spirit” (cf. 1Co.15:45), who now indwells us. Our bodies will be transformed into incorruptible flesh that cannot feel pain ever again. Nor can we ever know death again, for we shall be eternal beings even as Jesus is eternal. We shall be completely new creatures in the likeness of Christ. “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Ep.5:30). “So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall it be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1Co.15:54)! It is apparent that if our bodies were not physically raised, death and the grave would have their victory over us; our bodies would be annihilated never to know or rise again. “But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1Co.15:57)!

The Scriptures describe two distinct periods of resurrection as illustrated in the figure below. The first resurrection encompasses an interval of time that is bound by two very significant events. This interval began with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (the first fruits) as he also brought many of the notable Old Testament Saints out of paradise (cf. Book III, page 654) to bodily ascend along with Him at that time (Mt.27:52,53).



For the nearly two millennia since that great event, the souls of those who die in Christ are escorted directly into his presence. There they appear before his judgment seat to receive just rewards for those things that they have done for Him on earth while they were yet in mortal flesh (cf. 2Co. 5:8–10).

The closing event of the first resurrection will occur as the souls of the great multitude who are presently with Christ return to earth to occupy their resurrected bodies as they rise up from the grave (cf. 1Th. 4:14,16). The bodies of those saints who are yet alive in the flesh at that time will likewise be translated into immortal flesh (1Th.4:17). Both groups of saints will then be caught up together to meet with Christ in the air as his one true and complete Church. The first resurrection will also include all of those saints who will have died as martyrs during the brief but terrifying tribulation period as mankind’s depravity is allowed to run wild upon the earth (cf. Book III, page 580).

Following the harvest of the first resurrection, the wrath of God will be hurled upon the earth. In the Book of Revelation, those judgments are heralded by seven trumpets (cf. Re.8:2,6) the last of which leads directly into the pouring out of seven vials (KJV) or bowls of God’s wrath upon the earth (cf. Re. 16:1). The earth through that time will be totally barren of Christians — all of whom will have risen in the first

resurrection to be with Christ and safely away from the great judgments that are to take place upon the earth (cf. Book III, chapter 20.6). Those great judgments will ultimately make way for the return of Christ to the earth to establish his Millennial Kingdom upon the ashes of fallen man's failure (cf. Book III, Chapter 20.7).

Unlike the redeemed saints, the souls of the unredeemed reprobates do not immediately appear before Christ upon the death of their bodies, but will instead be incarcerated in a place of extreme anguish where they must contemplate their future judgment and state of existence. Immediately following the thousand years of the Millennial Age, a second resurrection will take place. This will be a general resurrection of the unredeemed in which the reprobate of all the ages must stand before Christ to receive their final sentence. In Revelation 20 verses 11–15 we see the great white throne with Jesus Christ sitting upon it. "For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son:" (Jn.5:22). Unlike those in Christ whose bodies will have been translated into immortal flesh suitable for the permanency of eternity, no mention whatsoever is made regarding the bodies of the rejected being translated in any way. When God raises them, it is most probable that their old corrupt bodies will be permanently restored to them in order that they all can receive suitable justice due for the evil works committed in their flesh. "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God..."(Re.20:12). "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and [the grave] delivered up the dead which were in them..." (Re.20:13).

"And the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (Re.20:12). The unsaved — whose names will not be found written in the Lamb's book of life — must be judged from the books listing their many depraved deeds committed during their mortal lives. All who have ever said that they could stand before God by virtue of their own works will be given that opportunity, but as we see it will only be to determine their punishment since all of fallen men's works are as filthy rags before God (cf. Is.64:6). "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (Re.20:15).

We also read in verse 14 of Revelation 20 that "...death and [*Hades*] were also cast into the lake of fire." The grave, which had a pernicious hold over mortal bodies, will be cast into the lake of fire along with the unredeemed. In this reference to the "lake of fire" we also find what is referred to in Scripture as the "second death" (Re.20:6,14). While the first death was a separation of the soul and spirit from mortal flesh, the second death will be a total separation from God and all his benefits in a place called Hell. Hell is a place of eternal torment, and its occupants "...shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Re.20:10). It will be a horrible place where the inhabitants will "burn" forever from the wrath of God, and shall know no peace, no rest from their agony. It will be a place where their sins will continually eat at their flesh — a place where the light of God's grace will never shine — a place of torment where the unredeemed will be fully separated from the love of God.

"Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Re. 20:6). All of us who have received divine redemption through the atoning blood of Christ will have taken part in the first resurrection. We shall never need to stand before the great white throne judgment because our names are written down in the Lamb's book of life. Nor will we ever experience the second death or the horrors of Hell, but we will instead rejoice in the wondrous estate of Heaven. Following the final judgment of mankind and the earth, time will come to an end, and the Eternal Ages will commence for all mankind. Those of us who are alive in Christ Jesus shall live and reign forever with Him in his wondrous presence and boundless glory (cf. Book III, Chapter 20.7)! Therefore, death can never hold the same dread for the Christian that it does for a sin-filled reprobate who consistently refuses the offer of divine redemption in Christ — whose only sure expectation can be judgment, the second death, and the outer darkness of Hell forever. As the elect of God, we must tenaciously hold fast to that marvelous hope of a glorious resurrection, inasmuch as we know through a predestined God-given faith that our hope is not in vain. For the present, we peacefully rest on God's promise of salvation from all judgment, which we have received in Christ Jesus. Then, when the time that God has given us here on earth finally expires, eternal life in Heaven with Him shall most surely begin (cf. Book 1, page 477; Book III, page 668). © Arthur J. Smith April 2014