

John 20:10-18 (Follow Up)
“We Believe in the Resurrection” (Part 4)

Introduction

Because as a church we’ve been working our way through the Gospel of John, and because we’ve now reached chapter 20 (the chapter on the resurrection), for the last three weeks, we’ve been rejoicing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe in the historical fact of the resurrection because of the eyewitness testimony which tells us that the resurrection which must happen has happened. In other words, we’re not a credulous people who believe in just any resurrection. We believe only that the resurrection which *must* happen *has* happened. It’s the “*has* happened” that depends on the eyewitness testimony that has come down to us in the four different Gospel. But the “*has* happened” is rooted, in turn, in a far deeper “*must* happen.” The Apostle John tells us that when he entered the empty tomb and saw the linen wrappings lying undisturbed where the body of Jesus had been, and the facecloth folded up in a place by itself, he believed that a resurrection was the only possible explanation – a resurrection that Jesus had foretold. He believed deep down that the resurrection *had* happened because of what he had seen with his own eyes, but he didn’t yet understand the Scriptures, that Jesus *must* rise from the dead. He didn’t yet understand what the resurrection *meant*. But that was about to change for John. Today, we believe in the resurrection because our eyes have been opened to see what the resurrection *means* and therefore why it was—and is—*necessary*.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians living in the ancient city of Ephesus:

I. “You were dead in your transgressions and sins”

- Ephesians 2:1–3 — And you were *dead* in your transgressions and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all also formerly conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

We were all dead. Obviously not physically dead. The Apostle Paul is speaking here of a spiritual deadness – a deadness in our transgressions and our sins. What does this really mean? If we were dead, how do we explain the language of “*walking* according to the course of this world” and “*conducting ourselves* in the lusts of our flesh” and “*doing* the desires of the flesh and of the mind”? In the light of all this “activity,” doesn’t it sound like we were actually very much alive? The answer is that all this activity is simply the sign of our deadness *toward God* and of our deadness *apart from God*. We could put it like this: When it comes to our sensitivity to the only true God who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures, we were spiritually dead corpses. We had no eyes to see the goodness and the beauty of His commandments. We had no ears to hear the sweetness of His rules and instruction. We had no appetite for His glory and for His righteousness. We were dead corpses – dead to Yahweh God and to all the things of God.

To be dead in our transgressions and sins—to be dead to the only true and living God—is to be dead indeed. And what makes this death even more terrible is that we choose it for ourselves.

Paul says that we “conducted ourselves in the *lusts* of our [own] flesh, doing the *desires* of the flesh [*our own* flesh] and of the mind [*our own* mind].” We did only what we desired. And all our desires—even our “spiritual” desires—were shaped and determined by that state of death in which we existed.

The result of these things, says the Apostle Paul, is that “we were *by nature* children of wrath [the wrath to come].” In other words, to be dead in our transgressions and sins *now* is to be liable to that ultimate death of separation from God forever in hell. Death brings forth death. Furthermore, ever since sin first entered the world, physical death has been the visible sign and reminder to us of this spiritual death. We read in Genesis chapter two:

- Genesis 2:16–17 — And Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may surely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it; for in the day that you eat from it you will surely *die*.”

We know what happened. Not only from the testimony of Scripture, but from the testimony of our own conscience and the work of the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:14-15).

- Romans 5:12 — Through one man sin entered into the world, and *death* through *sin*, and so *death* spread to all men, because *all sinned*.

If death (being dead to God and to the things of God) brings forth death (separation from God forever in hell), then physical death is the visible sign and constant reminder to us of this state of death in which we exist. “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24)

II. “Can these bones live?”

The prophet Ezekiel lived during the 6th century BC when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and God’s own covenant people were taken from their land into exile. This exile to a foreign land—and the death and destruction that went along with it—was a picture of that ultimate spiritual death and eternal separation from God from which the people still needed—somehow—to be delivered. It was a reminder of how, even as God’s own covenant people, they were still dead to God — dead to the things of God. They had no eyes to see the goodness and the beauty of God’s commandments. They had no ears to hear the sweetness of God’s rules and instruction. They had no appetite for God’s glory and for His righteousness. They were dead corpses – walking in death.

It’s true that there was always a faithful remnant in Israel, but this remnant was the exception and not the rule. It was also a mystery. Where it come from? How could there be any spiritual life at all in the midst of this people ruled by death? Moses could say to the covenant people of Israel at the end of his life:

- Deuteronomy 29:4 — “To this day Yahweh has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.” [To this day you remain dead to God and to the things of God.]

Nine hundred years later, when the people were taken from their land into exile, Ezekiel could still say the same thing. Listen as Ezekiel describes what he saw in a vision:

- Ezekiel 37:1–2 — The hand of Yahweh was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of Yahweh and caused me to rest in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. He caused me to pass among them all around, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and behold, they were very dry.

What do these “dry bones” mean? They’re a picture of what Paul was writing about in Ephesians chapter two: “We were dead in our transgressions and sins... and were by nature children of wrath.” In the words of Moses, we had no heart to know, no eyes to see, no ears to hear. But then Ezekiel continues:

- Ezekiel 37:3a — [Yahweh] said to me, “Son of man, can these bones *live*?”

Why does God ask this question? He asks it because He wants us to grapple with the apparent impossibility of answering “yes.” He puts this question to us because He wants us to comprehend just how incomprehensible is His mighty power. He puts this question to Ezekiel because He’s calling Ezekiel to live by faith. He’s calling Ezekiel to believe in something that in his day was without explanation, and therefore still—in his day—truly “impossible.” So Ezekiel continues:

- Ezekiel 37:3b — And I answered, “O Lord Yahweh, You know.”

For Ezekiel to have simply said, “yes, I know they can live because you can make them live,” would have been trite and presumptuous. Even if Ezekiel knew that the answer must be “yes”, the answer he gives is still the only “*right*” answer given the salvation-historical moment in which he lived. “I answered, ‘O Lord Yahweh, You know.’” Here is an answer expressive both of the faith and of the longing in Ezekiel’s heart.

- Ezekiel 37:4–10 — Then He said to me, “Prophesy over these bones and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of Yahweh.’” “Thus says Lord Yahweh to these bones, ‘Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh come up upon you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am Yahweh.’” So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rumbling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh came up upon them, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says Lord Yahweh, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these who were killed, that they may come to life.”’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet.

What does all of this mean? God Himself answers: “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh come up upon you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; *and you will know that I am Yahweh.*” In other words, no longer will the people be dead to God and to the things of God. Instead, God will

give to *all* His people a heart to know that He is Yahweh and so to walk in obedience to Him. He will *give* them eyes to see the goodness and the beauty of all His commandments. He will *give* them ears to hear the sweetness of all His rules and instruction. Listen to what God spoke through Ezekiel in chapter 36:

- Ezekiel 36:25–27 (11:19–20) — “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to do My judgments.”

In short, “I will raise you up out of death into life.” Can we see the radical transformation that this must be? This isn’t just a renovation, or a reformation, or a self-improvement plan. This is an entirely new creation — a new creation from nothing. And can we see how necessary it is to ask: How is this impossible miracle to be achieved? If we truly are dead in our transgressions and sins—dead to God and to the things of God, how can this death bring forth anything other than more death? If we truly are children of wrath by nature, how is it possible for our very nature to be changed? In the days of Ezekiel, we could only have answered, “O Lord Yahweh, You know.” But we’re not living in the days of Ezekiel, are we? We live today at a different moment in salvation-history.

If to be dead in our transgressions and sins is to be dead *to God* and to the things of God, listen now to what Paul says about the death of Christ:

III. “The death that He died...”

- Romans 6:10a — The *death that He died*, He died *to sin* once for all.

When Jesus walked on this earth in the days of His flesh, He was living under the authority and under the power of death. But we remember that death (physical and spiritual) and sin are inseparably bound up together. “The sting of death is *sin*,” Paul says (1 Cor. 15:56), and “the wages of *sin* is death” (Rom. 6:23). If, then, Jesus was living under the authority and power of death, this means that He was also living under the authority and under the power of sin. How could death and sin have any authority over Christ, the one “who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth (1 Pet. 2:22)? The Bible answers: “[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21).

And now here is a question that we love to answer. If, in Jesus’ voluntary and full identification with sinful people like we are, He Himself—the sinless Son of God—was subject to the power and the authority of sin and death, then what must His death on the cross *mean*? His death was His “escape”—His deliverance—from the power of sin and death. His death was His triumph over the power of sin and death. “The death that *He* died [alone of all the people in the world who have ever died], *He died to sin once for all*.” And this means that it was through His death that death itself was defeated. And so the law which says that death always brings forth death has, in Jesus, been turned on its head. And if, in the death of Jesus, death itself has been defeated, then how is it possible for Him to be held in death’s power (Acts 2:24)? How is it possible that

He should *not* be raised up from the dead? Here then is the wonderful, glorious “must” of the resurrection. Here is where we come to see what the historical fact of the resurrection means (theology).

If the death that Jesus died was a death to sin once for all, then what must be the nature of the life that He now lives?

IV. “The life that He lives...”

➤ Romans 6:10b — The *life* that He lives, He lives *to God*.

The *life* which Christ now lives is no longer conditioned in any way by the ruling power of sin and death because sin and death have been utterly defeated. The *life* which Christ now lives *to God* is a life which displays in a new and until now unheard-of way the power and the glory of God. In Christ then—in His death and resurrection—what we see is a whole new creation; a *life* no longer conditioned by the ruling power of sin and death; a *life* now wholly suited for the display of God’s glory and holiness. Isn’t this the very life that we need?—We who are dead in our transgressions and sins and who, as sons of disobedience, are by nature children of wrath?

V. “If anyone is in Christ”

A mystery in the Bible is something we could never know or conceive of unless it was revealed to us by God. Here, then, is a wonderful mystery. Water baptism represents to the Christian the fact that he has been brought into a living and vital union with Jesus Christ through faith. So the Apostle Paul writes:

➤ Romans 6:3–11 — Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were [even] *buried* with Him through [this] baptism into [His] death, *so that* as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be [and are even now] in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died has been justified from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also [and do even now] live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death *no longer* is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all, but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so [you who have been baptized into Christ Jesus] consider *yourselves* to be *dead to sin*, but *alive to God in Christ Jesus*.

What does the death and resurrection of Jesus mean? It means that we can be a whole new creation—in Him. It means that we who were dead in our transgressions and sins can now walk in the newness of His life.

➤ 2 Corinthians 5:16–17 — Therefore [says Paul] from now on we recognize no one [among God’s covenant people] according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according

to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

What does the death and resurrection of Jesus mean? It means that we who were dead *in* our sins can be dead now *to* our sins and alive to God — “alive to righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:24; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). It means that we can have hearts to know God and to walk in obedience to Him. It means that we can have eyes to see the goodness and the beauty of all His commandments. It means that we can have ears to hear the sweetness of all His rules and instruction. It means that we who were dead can, in Him, have life.

And this life that we have already and that is already at work within us is the guarantee that one day He will “transform [even] the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21).

- 1 Corinthians 15:53–57 — For this corruptible *must* put on the incorruptible, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. But when this corruptible puts on the incorruptible, and this mortal puts on immortality, then will come about the word that is written, “DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. “O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?” Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

We’re not a credulous people who believe in just any resurrection. We believe only that the resurrection which *must* happen *has* happened. If the “*has* happened” depends upon the eyewitness testimony that has come down to us in the four different Gospel accounts, then the “*must* happen” is rooted in what that salvation *is* that we needed, and that God has now achieved for us by His power in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul began in Ephesians 2 with these words: “And you were *dead* in your transgressions and sins...” And then he continues in verse four:

- Ephesians 2:4–7 — But God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, *made us alive* together with Christ—by *grace* you have been saved—and *raised us up* with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His *grace* in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Have you been raised up out of death into life? Have you comprehended the incomprehensible power of God that works a miracle such as this? Do you glory in His grace?—the grace which has given to you: A heart to know Him and to obey Him, eyes to see the goodness of all His commandments, and ears to hear the sweetness of all His rules and instruction? If not, then won’t you repent of your sin today and put all your hope and trust in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ? The death that *He* died, He died **to sin**, but the life that *He* lives, He lives **to God**. Even so, by faith, let us consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*, and so walk daily in this newness of life.