

Excursus: The Gospel of Resurrection

Death is a universal feature of human existence. It attaches itself to every human life and is just as much a part of life as eating, sleeping, and breathing. There is nothing more normative than death for human existence in this world, and yet it never feels normal. Even when it's consciously expected – as in the instance of terminal illness, death's entrance always feels like an intrusion by a foreign presence. Though entirely normal, death never feels *natural*.

The reason for this goes beyond the finality and sense of loss that attend death. Death provokes a visceral response in people even when they have no personal or emotional connection with the one who died. True, reports of death in the media often don't elicit much reaction, but this is because such depictions are remote and so feel unreal. But let a person watch someone die or be present with a dead body and the response is very different. Brought face-to-face with the reality of death, every human being is deeply affected. (Ongoing exposure to death can harden a person and make him insensitive to it, but because it is a psychological coping mechanism, such insensitivity itself proves the point.) The reason death affects people as it does is that, in the very core of their being, every human being senses that death is an intruder – a contrary power that opposes the way things ought to be; the way the Creator designed them to be.

1. Resurrection as Life out of Death

Death is a foreign intruder within God's creation, but not per se the *physical* death which marks the end of a created thing's animate existence. The mere cessation of physical life doesn't constitute a violation of God's creational order, and the Scripture doesn't in the first instance treat death that way. Rather, it reveals that death had become the defining human reality long before any person's heart stopped beating; indeed, the very first occurrence of the latter was the result of the former (cf. Genesis 2:15-17 with 3:1-4:8).

The Scripture treats death as the antithetical alternative to *life*, and it interprets life, not as animate existence as such, but a thing's existence in conformity with its created nature and function. *Thus death speaks of a thing's loss of its essential quality or capacity to realize or exercise its created design.* This explains Adam and Eve living on for many years after death swallowed them up; it also explains how a world bursting with animate life can be waiting with anxious longing for the day of its "birth" (Romans 8:19-22).

If life consists in a thing's conformity to its created nature and design, then life for man focuses on his relationship with God. The reason is that man is divine image-bearer, created for the purpose of being God's image-son. Man shares uniquely in God's life (cf. Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7), but in order to be capable and perfectly suited to intimate communion with Him. Man is *person from Person* in order to be *person unto Person*. This communion and the relational dynamics it involves are the essence of what it means to be human; what it means for man to *live*. And so, where the divine-human relationship is lost, man dies. He dies in two respects: First he has been separated from his true function and so cannot be who he was created to be. But more importantly, loss of relationship with God means man's loss of his knowledge of himself. Human identity and nature are bound up in God, so that a person's self-knowledge depends absolutely upon his knowledge of the One whose image and likeness he bears.

Adam and Eve were seduced by the lie that they could find personal identity and authenticity in themselves. They were persuaded that self-actualization – attainment of the fullness of one’s humanness – is a personal endeavor; a man finds himself by looking to and within himself. The serpent held out independence as the means to the realization of consummate humanness: “You shall be like the God whose image you bear.” The serpent promised life, but his counsel was the way of death. Autonomy meant estrangement from God, and given man’s nature and function, this meant man’s estrangement from himself, every other human being and the created order over which he was to administer God’s lordship as His royal image-son.

The fatal deception in Eden introduced *death* as the determining principle of all of God’s creation. The Creator’s good creation was now vandalized, discordant and hopelessly disaffected. Restoration, therefore, meant not merely cleansing or reordering, but life out of death. And this is precisely what God promised: Death had come through man, and so would life. At the appointed time, a son of woman would restore all things to God, overthrowing the serpent and his works and reconciling the creation – and most especially the image-son – to the Creator. God’s good creation had been plunged into ruinous death, but He would yet prevail. The one who’d succumbed to the serpent’s guile would be exalted as the mother of all the living.

The germinal promise of God wasn’t forgiveness, cleansing, or even atonement; God’s *protoevangelium* promised life out of death (cf. Genesis 3:15, 20). By promising the destruction of the serpent (and therefore his works), it held out the hope of a *resurrection* of sorts – a renewing of the created order that was now enslaved to death and dissolution. This divine intention swept everything into its grasp, so that every subsequent development in the unfolding salvation history served the realization of this primal pledge. And lest this fact be lost upon the human subjects of that history (or those who would read of it in the inspired accounts), God was careful to keep reiterating and emphasizing it by word and deed. Every step of the way, and through various means, God kept demonstrating that the accomplishment of His unchanging purpose for His creation depended upon His power in bringing forth life out of death.

- So it was in the first instance with the seed who replaced the slain Abel as the “seed of the woman,” and so it was with the “new creation” that later emerged from the Flood.
- So God’s call to the pagan Abraham spoke of the principle of life out of death. This man, engulfed in the dark deadness of an estranged world, was called by the Creator-Lord into the light of His life to be His friend and the foundation of a restored humanity.
- So the process of fulfilling His word to Abraham involved the exercise of divine power in opening dead wombs (cf. Genesis 11:30, 18:1ff, 25:21, 29:31, 30:22).
- So God’s raising up of His deliverer involved life out of death, even as that divine work anticipated Israel’s “resurrection” and new birth in the Exodus (Exodus 1:15ff, 12:1-2).
- So it would be for the dead bones of God’s covenant house when the life-giving Seed finally arrived. On that day, the Creator-Father would again breathe His life into His image-sons and His cursed creation – this time not as ex-nihilo creation, but as resurrection from the dead (cf. Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37:1-14; also Isaiah 45:11-25).

2. Resurrection as Incarnation

God's promise, issued in the Garden and resounding across the millennia of the ensuing salvation history, was that He would recover His creation from its estranged condition. In a son of Eve, He would effect life out of death for the entire created order, delivering it from its bondage to death and dissolution, purging and renewing it, and reconciling it to Himself unto an everlasting and harmonious inter-creational and Creator-creature relationship. In that singular seed, the creation would at last know the exquisite bliss of *shalom* in an unending *shabbat*. Through Him the Garden of God – His holy sanctuary – was to embrace the whole world as the knowledge of the Living One filled the earth as the waters cover the seas (Isaiah 11:1-10).

Resurrection speaks to the principle of life out of death, and for this reason must be seen to have its genesis in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Incarnation is the beginning of resurrection because, by it, *life* entered into and established its overcoming and transforming presence in the realm of *death*. This life manifested in the incarnation implicates the creation as well as the Creator, and is a primary theme in John's gospel account:

- Life is present in Jesus Christ first because He is true God. He is the incarnate *Logos* – the second person of the Trinity (John 1:1-4), and therefore also the substance and source of life to the “dead” creation (John 6:22-53, 8:12, 10:10).
- But Jesus is also the substance and source of life for men (and the whole creation) because He is true Man (John 5:1-27, 11:25-26, 14:6, 17:1-2). Estrangement is death because it stripped man of his capacity to know himself and so live into his true identity. The Fall rendered man a disfigured and debilitated shadow of himself, left to pursue self-identity and meaning within the isolation and bondage of a fractured mind. For man, the divine image-bearer, separation from God means the death of self.

God is the Living One: He is uncreated, self-existent Being and the source of existence and animate life for every living thing. And yet, life entering the dead creation when Jesus was conceived of the Spirit speaks primarily to His status as true Man, not true God. The reason is that the incarnation was the beginning of the “life out of death” God promised in Eden:

*The protoevangelium (and its subsequent reaffirmation and clarification in the ensuing preparatory salvation history) didn't promise that divine life would be present within the dead (cursed) creation, but that death would be swallowed up in life. **The divine oath was that creation itself was to be liberated from death and renewed to life.***

This renewal is the work of God, but God as He has become Man. In the instance of the Fall, death flowed through man to the rest of the creation; so it was to be with the renewal to life: Life out of death would begin with a new Adam – the seed of Eve – and flow through Him to the rest of the created order. In this way He would be the beginning of God's creational renewal – the first-fruits from the dead. *Jesus' resurrection finalized that transaction (1 Corinthians 15:20-22), but it had its substance in His incarnation.* That is where life penetrated and confronted the cursed creation; that is where death was overcome by life. Jesus' resurrection only finished that conquest, sealing it forever and bestowing it upon His Father's beloved world (John 3:16-17).

3. Resurrection as Redemption

Resurrection concerns life out of death, which found its substantial realization in the incarnation. But the “death” that Jesus overcame doesn’t speak in the first place to physical mortality, but to the creation’s alienation from its Creator. Man’s embrace of personal autonomy through the serpent’s seduction brought death upon the whole creation, including himself. And in that man is a personal, sentient being, death for him means confinement within a mind that is alienated from the person and mind of God. The Fall left the human race locked within a fractured self, and therefore in need of liberation.

Because death is enslavement, resurrection implies and is inseparable from *redemption*. In the scriptural vernacular, redemption occurs when a thing is released and restored from some form of obligation, containment, or captivity through the payment of a suitable ransom (price of redemption). In the case of the created order, the Fall subjected it to a true bondage: Man was taken captive to his own estranged and fractured mind, and the rest of the creation was likewise brought under the curse of alienation because of God’s design that it be subject to Him through man, the image-son and vice-regent (Genesis 3:17-19). Man’s slavery meant the enslavement of the whole created order, and therefore creational restoration had to begin with its liberation.

Thus the principle of redemption soon became a central theme in God’s revealed intention for His creation. In particular, this theme came to the forefront in God’s dealings with Israel.

- The notion of redemption first appears in relation to the *man* Israel (Jacob), who spoke of his own life as a series of divine redemptive interventions (Genesis 48:16).
- As the man Israel came to be corporatized in the nation of Israel descended from him, so also that nation was related to God through the same principle of redemption. First and foremost, Israel was “born” through and defined by a singular redemptive act (cf. Exodus 6:1-7 with 20:1-2).
- Redemption was fundamental to Israel’s identity and relationship with Yahweh, and He carved it into the nation’s consciousness by weaving it into the very fabric of their ethic and practice (cf. Exodus 13:1-16, 21:1-31; Leviticus 25, 27; etc.).

Israel’s identity and existence as the Abrahamic covenant kingdom was defined by redemption, but the reason for this lay in its role as a prophetic prototype: *The Israelite kingdom – as also the covenant by which it was established – was preparatory; it was the prototypical revealer and fountainhead for its everlasting counterpart – the true kingdom promised to Abraham* (cf. Genesis 13:14-18, 15:1-21 with Hebrews 11:10-16; cf. also Romans 4:13).

And just as the Israelite kingdom enjoyed “life out of death” through a great work of divine redemption, so it would be with the everlasting kingdom and its sons. The covenant Lord would establish the true Abrahamic kingdom through its own exodus (Isaiah 51:9-11). This time, however, redemption for the covenant sons wouldn’t mean deliverance from the bondage of physical subjugation under earthly powers, but the liberation of mankind – body and soul – from the death that is estrangement, desolation and divine condemnation (ref. Isaiah 51:1-54:17).