

THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD AND FINAL JUDGMENT

by

WALTER W. WESSEL

Walter W. Wessel, Associate Professor of Biblical Literature at Bethel College and Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, received his general and theological education at the University of California, Los Angeles (B.A., 1946; M.A., 1950) and the University of Edinburgh, Scotland (Ph.D., 1953). He has contributed articles to *The Biblical Expositor*, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, and *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*.

From Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Basic Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971).

We are not far removed from the time when in theological circles eschatological themes were considered unimportant and irrelevant. An apocalyptic world and a new emphasis on biblical theology have combined to change this situation radically. Theologians have again been brought to consider soberly the great eschatological themes of the New Testament, and to ponder carefully their meaning and significance for our age. Two of the most important of these eschatological themes are the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

Although belief in the resurrection of the dead has been generally unacceptable to both ancient and modern man, A.M. Ramsey is right when he says that for Christianity to have succumbed to the opponents of this truth would have been disastrous for the church. "It would have blunted the cutting edge of the Gospel and removed a doctrine which sums up the genius of Christianity in its belief about man and the world."¹ Indeed, Reinhold Niebuhr states that "there is no part of the Apostolic Creed which . . . expresses the whole genius of the Christian faith more neatly than . . . 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.'"²

The Old Testament is strangely silent about the future life. It has been suggested that this silence may have been a reaction against the Canaanite cults of the dead. Whatever the reason, the Old Testament usually describes the afterlife in terms of a shadowy existence in Sheol, the abode of the dead. When it does speak of resurrection, most often it is the resurrection of the nation, as distinguished from the individual, which is in mind. The well-known "valley of dry bones" passage in Ezekiel 37, and probably the resurrection passage in the Isaiah apocalypse,³ fit into this category. The only clear statement of a resurrection for individuals is Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Significant developments in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body took place during the

1 A. M. Ramsey: *The Resurrection of Christ*, p. 100.

2 R. Niebuhr: *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 290.

3 Isa. 26:19.

intertestament period, particularly during the time of the Maccabees. The intense suffering and persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes provided a stimulus for the further refinement of this doctrine. This is most evident in such apocryphal books as the Wisdom of Solomon and II Maccabees and the pseudepigraphical Psalms of Solomon and I Enoch.

It is not until we reach the New Testament that the full flower of belief in the resurrection of the dead appears. References to it appear in every stratum of the New Testament, from the words of Jesus, as found in the Synoptics, to the visions of the seer in the Apocalypse.

The basis of all New Testament belief in the resurrection of the dead is the fact of Christ's resurrection. I Corinthians 15 is the classic passage. Paul's answer to those who denied a future resurrection was Christ's resurrection. "Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised."⁴ But Christ has been raised and has become "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."⁵

Dr. Cullmann has underscored the difference between the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul and the biblical concept of the resurrection of the dead.⁶ The Bible does not embrace the Greek dualism of body and soul. The human body, in biblical thought, resulted from the creative activity of God, and as such is good. Thus, man is not conceived of as a soul housed in an evil body, from which he constantly seeks release. He is a body-soul, and the redemptive process includes his material as well as his immaterial self, a process climaxed by the resurrection of the body.

Very little is said by Jesus about the nature of the resurrection body. His most significant statement arises in answer to the question of the Sadducees as to whose wife the woman would be in the resurrection who had married seven brothers in succession. Jesus replied that because of an inadequate knowledge of the Scriptures and the power of God, they were wrongly limiting the conditions of the future life to those of the present. "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven."⁷ Resurrection life is of a new and different order of existence.

The Apostle Paul says essentially the same thing in I Corinthians 15:35-50 in answer to the questions: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" These were pertinent questions at Corinth, since the Greeks denied the resurrection of the body on the ground that corruptibility and bodily existence could not be disassociated. How could the future life have anything to do with a corruptible body? Paul concedes that the earthly body of man is corruptible.⁸

But there is more than one kind of body. Although the resurrection body has a certain continuity with the earthly body--Paul likens this continuity to that between the seed which is planted and the ear of grain which springs from it--yet there is a vast difference between the present body and the resurrection body. This difference is emphasized in a series of contrasts in verses 42-45. "What is sown [our earthly bodies] is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical

4 I Cor. 15:12, 13.

5 I Cor. 15:20.

6 O. Cullmann: *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*

7 Matt. 22:30.

8 I Cor. 15:50: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."

body, it is raised a spiritual body." Corruptibility, dishonor, weakness and a psychical (AV "natural") nature are all ascribed to our earthly body. In contrast, incorruptibility, glory, power, and spirituality (*pneumatikos*) are ascribed to the resurrection body.

This last mentioned characteristic has led to much misunderstanding. How can a body be "spiritual"? G.E. Ladd's answer is to the point: "The 'spiritual body' of I Corinthians 15:44 is not a body made of spirit, anymore than the 'natural' [literally, *psychical*] body is a body made of psyche. . . . However, it is a *literal, real body*, even though it is adapted to the new order of existence which shall be inaugurated at the resurrection for those who experience it."⁹ "Spiritual" in this context is probably best taken to mean "dominated by the Holy Spirit," or perhaps as Leon Morris suggests, "adapted to the needs of the spirit" [i.e., the human spirit]. "The spiritual body . . . is the organ which is intimately related to the spirit of man, just as his present body is intimately related to his earthly life."¹⁰ Whatever "spiritual" means here, Paul is convinced that the future life will be so glorious that our present earthly bodies will have to be radically changed in order for us fully to enjoy what God has prepared for us.¹¹

Although all evangelicals believe that the resurrection of the dead will be closely associated with the return of Christ,¹² there are numerous differences in details. Some hold to one general resurrection of all men at Christ's return. Others, on the basis of Revelation 20 in particular,¹³ see two resurrections, one (of just men) at Christ's return, but before the millennium, the other (of the unjust) at the end of that period. Dispensationalists split the first resurrection into two phases consistent with their theory of a pretribulation "rapture" and a posttribulation "revelation." Differences in details there are, but these do not prevent evangelicals from unitedly affirming, "We believe in the resurrection of the body."

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Closely associated with the resurrection of the dead is the final judgment. Our Lord declared: "The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."¹⁴

The New Testament idea of the final judgment arises out of the Old Testament concept of the Day of the Lord. That Day is the final crisis (the English word "crisis" is simply the transliterated Greek word for judgment) of history, when God will judge all men, with blessing for the faithful and destruction for the wicked.

Judgment is an essential part of biblical religion. In both the Old and New Testaments it inevitably arises out of the nature of God as righteous. A righteous God must judge sin and reward obedience.

The judge is none other than God himself, and his agent in judgment is Jesus Christ, the Son. Thus God "has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man

9 G. E. Ladd: *Crucial Questions Concerning the Kingdom of God*, p. 139.

10 L. Morris: *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 228.

11 Cf. Phil. 3:20,21.

12 Cf. Phil. 3:20,21.

13 Cf. also John 5:29; Phil. 3:11; I Cor. 15:23.

14 John 5:28, 29.

whom he has ordained,"¹⁵ and the Father has given to the Son "authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man."¹⁶

The judgment effected by God through Christ is universal. All men must stand before God's judgment bar.¹⁷ This includes Christians,¹⁸ as well as non-Christians.¹⁹ Whereas it is true that he who believes in Jesus will not experience condemnation,²⁰ for "there is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus,"²¹ these statements are not to be taken to mean that for the Christian there is no future judgment at all. Paul specifically states that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ,"²² and "all" in this context means "all Christians." The Christian, however, can face the judgment with confidence.²³ Christ's redemptive work has already acquitted him. It was Thomas à Kempis who said: "The sign of the cross shall be in heaven when the Lord comes to judgment."

Judgment of Christians will be based on works.²⁴ The work of some Christians will prove to be superficial ("wood, hay, stubble"). "The Day will disclose it," and it will be destroyed, but the believer himself will be saved, but "only as through fire."²⁵ Alan Richardson is right when he says that this "works judgment" for Christians "is no mere relic of Paul's Pharisaic ideology; it is no unconscious clinging to a doctrine of works. It is an assertion of the seriousness of the moral struggle of the Christian life . . ."²⁶ In this judgment, Christ's verdict of blame or praise is itself the punishment or reward.²⁷

The final judgment is the climax to a process of judgment which was actually inaugurated by the entrance of Jesus Christ into human history. "For judgment," said Jesus, "I am come into the world."²⁸ This present aspect of the final judgment is particularly stressed in John's Gospel. He who does not believe in the Son "is condemned already because he has not believed on the name of the Son of God."²⁹ The final judgment has already begun, and its basis is belief in Jesus. The same teaching is found in the Synoptics: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."³⁰

There are some passages³¹ that emphasize works as the basis for the judgment of the unbeliever (as well as the believer). Stauffer understands these passages to refer to those who "have rejected the work of Christ and relied upon their own achievements, and on their achievements they will be judged. . . . But such a judgment will lead inevitably to condemnation, for even the

15 Acts 17:31.

16 John 5:27.

17 Rom. 2:6-10.

18 II Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10.

19 Rev. 20:15.

20 John 5:24.

21 Rom. 8:1.

22 Rom. 14:10.

23 I John 4:17.

24 II Cor. 5:10.

25 I Cor. 3:12-15.

26 A. Richardson: *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, p. 342.

27 Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17.

28 John 9:39.

29 John 3:18.

30 Mark 8:38; cf. Matt. 10:32, 33; Luke 12:8, 9.

31 Cf. the "Great Assize" passage of Matt. 25:31-46; Rom. 2:6-10.

noblest deeds and characteristics are tainted with the poison of self-sufficiency . . ."³²

No uncertainty exists about the outcome of the final judgment. Both in the teachings of Jesus and in the writings of the Apostles, the ultimate fate of those who persist in their rebellion against God is eternal condemnation.³³

Differences, similar to those that exist concerning the resurrection of the dead, are found among evangelicals relative to the precise time and number of judgments. But unanimity exists on the great fact of the final judgment, a judgment that involves the end of history and the ultimate separation of souls.

The biblical doctrines of the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment have powerful practical implications for the Christian. Although he anticipates with joy the consummation of his redemption at the resurrection and the revelation of the lordship of Christ at the final judgment, aspects of the latter have sobering elements. *He* must stand before Christ to be judged on the quality of his Christian life--a potent incentive for holy living! All men must face the same Lord to be judged on the basis of the gospel of God's grace--an urgent plea for an increased effort in the proclamation of the truth concerning Jesus Christ, in whom there is no condemnation. How true it is that eschatology and ethics can never be disassociated; but neither can eschatology and evangelistic *concern!*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- P. Althaus: *Die letzten Dinge*
O. Cullmann: *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*
T.A. Kantonen: *The Christian Hope*
H.A.A. Kennedy: *St. Paul's Conception of the Last Things*
W. Milligan: *The Resurrection of the Dead*
S.D.F. Salmond: *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*
R. Summers: *The Life Beyond*
G. Vos: *The Pauline Eschatology*
G. Kittel: *Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament* [relevant articles]

³² E. Stauffer: *New Testament Theology*, pp. 221, 222.

³³ Matt. 25:31, 46; II Thess. 1:7-10; Rev. 20:14, 15.