

The Resurrection: "Christ, the Firstfruits; Then, those who are His at His Coming"

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During the month of March in Central North Carolina the earth begins to awaken from the sleep of winter. The flowers begin to bloom, the birds begin to sing and the voices of the children of the neighborhood once again fill the air. Watching this change of things from dormant to vibrant is an annual reminder to me of the awakening to life that will occur when our Lord returns. This awakening from death, or resurrection, which all believers have to look forward to is an important topic to explore. A lot goes into understanding this great subject but we will focus our inquiry on one aspect. What are the guarantees that believers have of their coming resurrection? Two answers to this question are: 1. the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and, 2. the gift of the holy Spirit which believers possess.

In Acts Chapter 2 just after the outpouring of the holy Spirit the apostle Peter speaks concerning the life of Jesus Christ.

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

There are a couple of good points to draw out from this statement about Jesus' ministry.

The first is the picture of death which it paints. Death is coupled with terms such as agony. It is said to have its hold on a person. Elsewhere death is said to be an enemy which must be destroyed. We should not make the mistake of thinking of death in terms which are positive. Death is not the avenue for being ushered into the presence of God. Instead, death is an enemy which must and will be overcome by the power of God. It is God who raised Christ from the dead and he will raise us also. Second, it is important to note that Jesus was a man who died. He felt the agony of death. In this regard Jesus is not unlike all men. We are all mortal. We will all die. But Jesus was not abandoned to the grave. Instead God raised him from the dead. Praise the Lord! Death could not keep its hold on him and it can not keep its hold on all those who belong to him.

The Bible uses different terms to describe Jesus' role as being the one who blazed the trail from the grave to glory. But they all imply that there will be others to follow behind. Jesus is described as being "the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead", the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" and the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith".

In Colossians 1 verses 17&18 we read,

"He is before all things and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

The idea of Christ being the "beginning and the firstborn from among the dead" is important to our study. The word beginning is an everyday term which means to start something. Christ's resurrection is simply the start of something which will find its fulfillment when the "trumpet call of God" awakens all the other believers who sleep. The idea of Christ being the firstborn has equal significance. The firstborn implies not only that Christ was the first one in time to be

resurrected but also that he is the eldest in a family of which we are all members. We are in a sense on the same plain as Christ. He has led the way for his brothers and sisters to follow. Like Christ, we too will one day live a new resurrection life.

The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, speaks to the issue of the resurrection and has much to say about our subject.

"Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn; Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him." I Cor. 15:20-23

Paul here describes Christ as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep". The people to whom he wrote, living in the first century in an agrarian society would have understood this term firstfruits well. They knew what it was like to get the first taste of the grain, figs or olives that would soon be ready for harvest. Those first few mature fruits which come before the full harvest signify what kind of crop you will have and that it is soon on its way. They are a part of the harvest but are designated the firstfruits because the full harvest has not yet come.

This is what Paul was saying of our Lord. Christ had been raised from the dead, as the firstfruits. The people were able to know him and see what the full harvest would bring. Christ is not of a different kind than those who will soon be raised. He is the firstfruits and in him we know that our resurrection is near and we see what we have to look forward to. The possession of the gift of holy Spirit by each individual believer also serves as a guarantee of our future resurrection. The books of II Corinthians and Ephesians both contain sections which throw light on our subject.

"Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." II Cor. 1:21-22

"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory." Eph. 1:13-14

In both of these verses the holy Spirit is described as a deposit guaranteeing our share in the future inheritance of believers. The holy Spirit is a portion of that inheritance that we will receive. Just as the resurrection of Christ was the beginning of the resurrection of all believers, the holy Spirit we now have is the first taste of the feast we will enjoy when Christ returns.

In Christ's resurrection and the gift of the Spirit we are guaranteed our own resurrection. His resurrection has begun the final resurrection. He is the firstborn in a family of redeemed humanity of which we are all a part. And he is the firstfruits of the full harvest of believers who will be raised to life when the time is ripe. The holy Spirit which all believers possess is the very life-giving force by which Christ was raised and by which we will all be raised as well. Therefore we can wait patiently for our Lord's return, living for God and looking forward to that day because,

"we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence" II Cor.. 4:14

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