

The Resurrection and Eternal Life

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Introduction

“O ye heathen, who have and deserve our pity, behold, we set before you the promise which our sacred system offers. It guarantees eternal life to such as follow and observe it; on the other hand, it threatens with the eternal punishment of an unending fire those who are profane and hostile; while to both classes alike is preached a resurrection from the dead.”¹ Such were the words penned by Tertullian to those who professed hatred of Christians and Christianity. Tertullian’s invective portrays none so subtly God’s sovereignty and omnipotence over all of humanity as Creator and judge. Plainly put, there is both a hope of promised resurrection to an incomprehensibly blessed eternal life for believers who have died in Jesus Christ, and for those who reject him, an equally certain future resurrection to an eternity of tormented punishment and separation from God. From a supernatural perspective, both resurrections will be equally miraculous, and the Christian’s hope and the heathen’s unspoken anti-hope stem from Christ’s own death and miraculous resurrection.

The call of believers is to bear witness to the truth of Christ’s death and resurrection and the promise of living forever with Christ and its intended blessings. Consequently, this paper will demonstrate the theological importance of Jesus’s resurrection in view of the gospel message and the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian hope of eternal life.

¹ Tertullian, “Ad Nationes,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 116.

The Foundation for Eternal Life

Given the omnipotence of God, that Jesus, as a man, died and lived again is a miraculous claim that is logically permissible under the Christian belief system. God's omnipotence is a description of everything that he is, the manifestation of all his perfections. Consequently, Christians can be confident that he can do everything Scripture describes him as doing and much more, including permitting and being the cause of raising Jesus from the dead. The theological importance of God acting in history through the resurrection of Christ is the validation of Jesus' person and message and, in the present context, his promise of eternal life.

The Message of Christ Validated

During his earthly ministry, Jesus used his imminent death and resurrection as a teaching device to both warn and encourage his hearers. For example, he used the experience of Jonah's death, three-day-long stay, and resurrection from the belly of the great fish as an example of his own death and resurrection (Matt 12:38-40; Luke 11:29-30). Jesus used this example to condemn the religious elite of Israel for their failure to repent, given his offer of the kingdom as Messiah. His death and resurrection ultimately confirmed his message and warning of "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15 NASB).

As a further example, and subsequently, perhaps the most significant encouragement came when Jesus, prophesying his death and resurrection, analogized that his body, the temple, would be destroyed and rebuilt without hands in three days (John 2:18-21; Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29). Few, if any, understood the significance of this statement until after his resurrection. His disciples, however, were able to put "two and two" together when they saw the risen Christ and remembered what he had said. More specifically, Jesus' resurrection confirmed Old Testament prophecy concerning his death and resurrection (cf. Psa 16:10) and his prior

predictions of the same in their presence (John 2:22). Jesus' death and resurrection again confirmed his message and that of Scripture. By implication, all Old Testament Scripture regarding the future Messiah was validated. Gary Habermas writes, "God raising Jesus from the dead is best understood as His placing His stamp of approval on Jesus's entire message. This is by far the best conclusion regarding the meaning of the event."²

The Focus of the Disciples' Preaching

That Jesus' disciples would have agreed with Habermas' conclusion is demonstrated by the resurrection becoming the focal point of their teaching. Peter opens his first epistle with a salvo of encouragement writing:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice (1 Pet. 1:3-6a NASB).

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom. 10:9-10 ESV). Paul is describing salvation (σωτηρία) as the product of both acknowledging the deity of Jesus Christ (the title "Lord" here indicating equality with God) and faith (belief in the heart) that he actually died and came back from the dead in the same body.³

² Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 2003), 112.

³ William Hendriksen, and Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 12-13, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 345.

Paul lays out compelling proofs in 1 Corinthians 15 for the resurrection of Christ in the form of eyewitness testimony (vv. 3-8). He then argues the centrality or significance of the resurrection, suggesting that if Jesus were not raised from the dead, then the Christian faith and preaching are fallacious (v. 14). Without the resurrection, the related eyewitness testimony of the apostles would be a lie (vv. 14-15), there is no forgiveness of sins (vv. 17-18), and professing Christians remain without eternal hope (v. 19). He sums up such a demise a few verses later, suggesting that if Jesus' resurrection did not occur, all people should just live it up because this life is all there is (v. 32b).

Fortunately, the weight of evidence validates a risen Christ and serves as the foundation for the Christian faith (1 Cor 15:20). Paul's earlier reservations, unfounded as they were, are resoundingly reversed—faith in Christ and preaching are not in vain; all professing truth claims about God and Christ cannot be charged as false; the forgiveness of sins has been affirmed; the hope of the living and dead in Christ is vindicated.⁴ In Colossians, Paul describes Christ as “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18 ESV). Carl Trueman offers that Christ's resurrection “establishes the foundation for the in-breaking of a new age. His rising from the grave was a miracle of God that marked the beginning of a new epoch”—the very foundation of the church.⁵ N.T. Wright joins in, stating, “There is no evidence for a form of early Christianity in which the resurrection was not the central belief. Nor was this belief, as it were, bolted on to Christianity at the edge. It was the central driving force, informing the whole movement.”⁶

⁴ Habermas, ix.

⁵ Carl R. Trueman, *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God, What the Reformers Taught ... And Why It Still Matters, The Five Solas Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 163.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 133.

After the resurrection, the disciples' lives were radically transformed from a position of doubt to enduring persecution and even martyrdom. As shown above, Jesus proclaimed he would be resurrected in the presence of the disciples. Following the miraculous event, their preaching displayed their strength of conviction. They were not just "claiming" Jesus rose from the grave; they believed it and preached eternal life because of all the resurrection accomplished.⁷

How Should We Then Live?

The title of this section is borrowed from Francis Schaeffer, but this question is appropriate for the context of this paper.⁸ Of course, no true believers would deny that Christ was literally crucified on a cross, that he literally died and was buried in a tomb and was raised from the dead three days later. But fewer believers likely can answer Schaeffer's timeless question as it relates to their own future resurrection to eternal life.

Summarizing the thoughts of Jonathan Edwards, John Hannah writes:

What Christ purchased at Calvary was eternal life, the life of God; what God the Father grants is that life that Christ purchased; what Christ purchased for us is the life of God, the Holy Spirit. God the Father is life; God the Son is the life of God revealed and purchased; God the Spirit is the life possessed! Redemption, the indwelling of the Spirit, creates what Edwards describes as "relish," a "taste of the divine," or a "supernatural sense" that "makes a great change in a man."⁹

Such a God-filled understanding should impact the lives of believers in many ways, three of which will be presented here by way of example.

⁷ Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 56.

⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1983).

⁹ John D. Hannah, "Jonathan Edwards's Thoughts on Prayer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173, no. 689 (2016): 85.

Sanctification and Eternal Life

First, the believer's expectation of eternal life means gaining admittance into God's Kingdom, and admittance into God's kingdom requires compliance with Jesus' kingdom message.¹⁰ Compliance with Jesus' kingdom message requires exercising faith in God and Jesus as his chosen messenger (Mark 1:15b; 10:15, 26-31; Matt 10:40). Such life-changing faith (i.e., unto salvation) should result in a radical commitment to Christ (Luke 14:25-35). This radical commitment is manifest by a believer's love for God with their entire person: heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:28:30). This radical commitment is also manifest by loving one's neighbor as themselves (Mark 12:31).¹¹

However, eternal life is so much more in the present life than simply living forever in a future age. For example, Paul implores believers to lay hold of eternal life today by fighting the good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12) and giving money (1 Tim 6:17-19; Gal 6:6-9). He also tells believers that the daily experience of being free from the tyranny of a sin nature is part of eternal life (Rom 6:23). Moreover, believers should look forward to an inheritance (i.e., reward) and the hope of eternal life promised with that inheritance (Titus 3:7). Similarly, Jesus proclaimed that eternal life itself is a reward to those who have abandoned things in this life for his kingdom's cause (Matt. 19:29).¹² Such abandonment is merely adopting a new set of priorities in this life, Jesus' priorities, that frankly look markedly different and foolish to the world.¹³ Darrow Miller observes that such a radical life change represents sanctification, writing,

¹⁰ Habermas, 140.

¹¹ Ibid., 139.

¹² David R. Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Salvation?," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 53.

¹³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, Inc., 1995), 487.

Sanctification is a lifelong process of becoming in reality what we already are in our position in Christ. Just like there is a moment of conception in a baby's life, and from then on there is a lifelong process of growth, so there is a similar process marked by spiritual birth and growth. While the call to justification is to stand in the shadow of the cross, sanctification is marked by the denial of self and the call to take up your cross daily and follow Jesus. In justification we are declared holy and just; in sanctification we are becoming what we have been declared to be—holy and just in practice!¹⁴

Experiential Perspective and Eternity

A second impact the truth of eternal life should have in the life of a believer are the attitudes and responses to trials or troubles in this life. The fact is that trials or difficulties in this life are just that—they are in this life and will end. James writes bluntly that all of us “are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (Jam 4:14 NASB). Yes, the trials or troubles will certainly end at physical death, but Paul explains, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18 NASB). William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker comment, “The apostle is thinking of sufferings in general; therefore also including pain (physical as well as mental), sickness, disappointment, unemployment, poverty, frustration, etc.”¹⁵ How apt are these descriptions given the times that are upon all people of the earth. The unprecedented worldwide pandemic that began in 2020 ushered in at least these very sufferings and the final temporal suffering of many in death. Nevertheless, despite these present-life sufferings, believers in Christ have the hope of eternal life where God promises to “wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Rev 21:4 NASB).

¹⁴ Darrow L. Miller and Marit Newton, *Lifework: A Biblical Theology for What You Do Every Day* (Seattle, WA: YWAM Pub., 2009), 130.

¹⁵ William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 12-13, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 265.

Such a promise should compel unbelievers to seek the Lord, and believers in Christ should be comforted in this life as these sufferings too will pass unto a glorious everlasting life with him.

Living with Eternity in Sight

Martin Luther is said to have quipped, “We ought to live as if Christ died yesterday, rose again this morning, and is coming back tomorrow”¹⁶ In other words, a third impact the truth of eternal life should have in the life of a believer is not losing sight of eternity. In Colossians 2:12-13, Paul writes concerning believers and Christ,

. . . having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions (NASB).

Paul uses present-tense language to describe believers who appear to have already died and been resurrected—not literally, of course, as their bodily resurrection is yet future. Trueman concludes Paul is demonstrating to the Colossians that they “are so identified by faith with Christ that there is a sense in which they have already died and been resurrected. Even now, their identity and their existence is determined absolutely by an act of God’s complete sovereignty and grace.”¹⁷

Being eternity-oriented is the ultimate goal setting. Paul says, “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14 ESV). Being eternity-oriented should also motivate all believers to live every day in sincere thankfulness to God: “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb 12:28). In the end, all believers should

¹⁶ Quoted in Matthew S. DeMoss, “A Literary Tribute to Dr. Roy B. Zuck,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170, no. 677-680 (2013): 272.

¹⁷ Trueman, 164.

be motivated to live an active life in this world and serve as a positive influence on believers and unbelievers alike in light of becoming more like Christ and the promised bonus of the next age.¹⁸ N.T. Wright observes that one cannot voice belief in the resurrection of Christ with “minimal involvement. If it happened, it matters. The world is a different place from what it would be if it did not happen. The person who makes the statement is committed to living in a different world, this newly envisioned universe of discourse, imagination, and action.”¹⁹

Conclusion

The resurrection of Jesus Christ represents an answer to all arguments that death is not the end. Death is ultimately a transition to a new, eternal life. As Tertullian rightly observed, Eternal life is preached by Scripture for both believer and unbeliever. For the unbeliever, eternal life is punishment and eternal separation from God. For the believer, eternal life also means living forever and includes a call to a new way of life in this present age. Dallas Willard remarks, “This is a call for us to reconsider how we have been approaching our life, in light of the fact that we now, in the presence of Jesus, have the option of living within the surrounding movements of God’s eternal purposes, of taking our life into his life.”²⁰

Living with eternity in sight means the present life of suffering and trials is a “light” matter compared to the “eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” that awaits believers in Christ (2 Cor 4:17 NASB). Believers must focus on doing God’s will and seeking his righteousness in this life, for these treasures will never pass away (Matt 6:9-10; 19-20, 33).

¹⁸ Klaus Dieter Issler, *Living into the Life of Jesus: The Formation of Christian Character* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 67.

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3 (London: SPCK Publishing, 2003), 714.

²⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 16.

Believers must recognize that “the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17 NASB). In the most basic terms, eternal life means not wasting this life. As Randy Alcorn notes, “At death we put the signature on our life’s portrait. The paint dries. The portrait’s done. Ready or not.”²¹

²¹ Randy C. Alcorn, *The Law of Rewards* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 72.

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