

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	29		Gary L.W. Johnson
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**AND ROSE AGAIN ON THE THIRD DAY
ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES**

Skeptics have consistently ridiculed or rejected the Christian doctrine of immortality. As we take a backward look through history we find the writings of the sages strewn with doubts and unbelief. Charles Darwin, for example, in his *Life and Letters*, wrote: “As for a future life, every man must judge for himself between conflicting vague probabilities.” Robert Ingersoll, in *Declaration to Be Free*, remarked: “Is there beyond the silent night/An endless day?/Is death a door that leads to Light?/We cannot say.” Clarence Darrow, the famous trial lawyer, was dogmatic in his views. On one occasion he stated: “The origin of the absurd idea of immortal life is easy to discover; it is kept alive by hope and fear, by a childish faith, and by cowardice.” And H. L. Mencken, the acerbic social critic, wrote in Will Durant’s *On the Meaning of Life*: “I do not believe in immortality and have no desire for it. The belief in it issues from the puerile egos of inferior men.” To these testimonies George Bernard Shaw, in *Parents and Children*, added: “If some devil were to convince us that our dream of perpetual immortality is no dream but a hard fact, such a shriek of despair would go up from the human race as no other conceivable horror could provoke.”¹ The doctrine of immortality in Christianity is directly linked with the resurrection of the body. The resurrection of Christ, is *the* cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith, a point underscored by the Apostle Paul – “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless² and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). James Orr (1844-1913), a noted Scottish theologian, made this helpful observation on the relationship between the claims of Jesus and his resurrection: “It has already been hinted, and will subsequently become more fully apparent, that the consideration of Christ’s Resurrection cannot be associated from the view taken of the facts which make up the Gospel history as a whole. This should be frankly acknowledged on both sides at the outset. Christ is not divided. The Gospel story cannot be dealt with piecemeal The Resurrection brings its powerful attestation to the claims made by Jesus in His earthly Ministry; but the claim to Messiahship and divine Sonship, on the other hand, with all the evidence in the Gospels that supports it, must be taken into account when we are judging of the reasonableness and probability of the Resurrection. No one can, even if he would, approach this subject without some prepossessions on the character, claims, and religious significance of Jesus, derived from the previous study of the records of His life, or, going deeper, from the presuppositions which have governed even that study. The believer’s presupposition is Christ. If Christ was what His Church has hitherto believed Him to be – the divine Son and Saviour of the world – there is no antecedent presumption against His Resurrection; rather it is incredible that He should have remained the prey of death. If a lower estimate is taken of Christ, the historical evidence for the Resurrection will assume a different aspect. It will then remain to be seen which estimate of Christ most entirely fits in with the totality of the facts. On that basis the question may safely be brought to an issue.”³

- I. **THE VERACITY OF CHRIST’S RESURRECTION.** No serious modern historian or New Testament scholar (even those identified with the infamous *Jesus Seminar*⁴ doubts that Jesus was in fact a real historical figure and that He was crucified.⁵ The veracity of Christ’s *bodily* resurrection from the dead is evident from the gospel records (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24,

and John 20). As Phillip Cary cogently points out: “Christian faith begins here, with the confession that Jesus is the Lord and the faith that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9). He rose again, reversing his descent into the depths of death, and this rising again is what is meant by the Christian term, *resurrection of the dead*. The Apostles’ Creed, that other great creed of the church, calls it literally *the resurrection of the flesh*. It is an event quite different from the widespread belief in the immortality of the soul (represented by Plato’s *Phaedo*, for example), according to which the soul in us does not die. The resurrection is not about a part of us that doesn’t die, but about God giving life to what is dead. Instead of a spark of immortality within us, the apostle pictures what is mortal in us being clothed with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53). The difference is illustrate by the word of the angels at Jesus’ tomb. They did not say, *His body is here, but his soul went to leaven*, but rather, *He is not here, for he has risen* (Matthew 28:6). *He* is not there because his *body* is not in the tomb anymore. He is once again a living human being, and living human beings have living bodies that do not belong in the grave. For the resurrection of the dead is not just life after death; it is death itself being undone.”⁶

A. ***The Recorded Testimonies.*** The angels (Matthew 28:5-7), the Roman guards (Matthew 28:11), the Apostles (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 for a sample listing of Christ’s post-resurrection appearances). In the Book of Acts there are over *twenty* references to the resurrection. “The number,” declares Wilbur Smith, “. . . will amaze anyone who has not given this particular point serious consideration (see, e.g., 1:1-3, 22; 2:24; 30-33; 3:15, 26; 4:10, 33; 5:30; 10:40, 41; 13:23, 30, 31, 33, 37; 17:3, 18, 31; 26:22, 23).”⁷

II. ***THE NECESSITY OF CHRIST’S RESURRECTION.*** “The core of the matter is not reached till it is perceived that the Resurrection of Jesus is not simply an external seal or evidential appendage to the Christian gospel, but enters as a *constitutive element* into the very essence of that Gospel. Its denial or removal would be the mutilation of the Christian doctrine of Redemption, of which it is an integral part.”⁸

A. ***For the Fulfillment of Prophecy.*** Christ, on the road to Emmaus, declared to the two disciples, “Did not Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself” (Luke 24:26-27).

III. ***THE EFFICACY AND BENEFIT OF CHRIST’S RESURRECTION.*** The resurrection of Christ is not simply a grandiose display of God’s miraculous power. It did demonstrate the power of God (Ephesians 1:19, 20), but it was not done like some Steven Spielberg special effect. Christ’s resurrection was the public declaration of our acquittal before God. “Just as our sins and Christ’s death are closely related, so there is an intimate relationship between Christ’s resurrection and our justification.”⁹ (cf. Romans 5:9, 19).

A. ***Our Justification.*** Christ’s resurrection demonstrates that His death atoned for our sins. Listen to the wisdom of the Dutch Puritan, Wilhemus à Brakel: “Let such a person go to God and ask the Lord, while pleading upon the resurrection of Christ from the dead (1 Peter 3:21), *Are not my sins punished? Has not my guilt been atoned for? Has not my Surety risen from the dead and thus entered into rest? Art not Thou my reconciled God and Father? Am I not at peace with Thee?* May such a person thus wrestle to apply all this to himself on the basis of the promises made to all who receive Christ by faith, until he experiences the power of Christ’s resurrection unto his justification and being at peace with God.”¹⁰

IV. ***THE PROMISE OF BODILY RESURRECTION.*** Alexander Thomson points out that, “We cannot define the kind of body possessed by Christ after His resurrection. It was a sinless body

prior to His crucifixion and required no change from that standpoint. It was a holy body. Our bodies will be changed, and they need to be changed, and they will be made like unto His glorious body (Phil. 3:21): but His body was never defiled by sin. We can go no further than Scripture in our description of His body. It was composed of flesh and bones: it could be seen and felt: it could appear and disappear at will in a manner impossible to ordinary men: yet He himself indicated that He was not a spirit. He was recognized by his appearance, the marks of the crucifixion being evident in His body: His mannerisms were also recognized, together with the tone of His voice, as in the case of Mary Magdalene. We therefore conclude from all evidences that Christ's resurrection was physical in its nature and that He appeared in the same, yet a changed and more highly endowed body."¹¹

CONCLUSION: Robert Stein, in discussing the Biblical meaning of Christ's resurrection, helpfully observes: "What does the New Testament mean when it says that Jesus rose from the dead? For some this is simply a mythical way of referring to *the rise of faith in the disciples*. It is a way of saying that somehow after the death of Jesus, perhaps by way of reflection, his teachings came alive for the disciples. They became convinced of the truth he had taught. Exactly what that truth is usually reflects the particular social and ethical views of the commentator. What the statement *Jesus rose from the dead* means for them is that God helped the disciples to see the value of Jesus' teachings, and as a result they recommitted themselves to his cause. The New Testament does not speak, however, of the resurrection *of the disciples* on Easter but of the resurrection *of Jesus*. Whatever may have happened to the disciples was the result of what happened earlier that day to Jesus. We should not confuse the resurrection faith with the resurrection itself. They are related as effect and cause. The faith of the disciples is the effect of the resurrection of Jesus. Without the latter the former is a mere illusion. Paul himself states, *If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. . . . If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied* (1 Cor. 15:14, 17, 19). The Gospel accounts portray the resurrection as something that happened to Jesus, not the disciples. What happened to Jesus (resurrection) affected the disciples (the rise of the resurrection faith), but they are separated in time and nature. What happened to the disciples took place after what happened to Jesus and is different from what happened to Jesus. For the disciples, it involved the rise of faith and its beneficial consequences – justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, eternal life, the promise of a future resurrection. For Jesus, it involved the translation of his body from mortality into immortality. The popular definition in some circles of the resurrection as *the rise of faith in the disciples* confuses an effect with the cause and misunderstands what the biblical writers meant by the term *resurrection*. Only Jesus experienced the resurrection. When the New Testament proclaims the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it does not mean by this that something happened to the disciples. The latter is, of course, true. Yet even if nothing happened subsequently to the disciples, the resurrection would still be true. The proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is precisely that – the resurrection *of Jesus Christ*. That resurrection is not the same as the fact of the empty tomb, even if it presupposes it. It is not the *resuscitation* of the body of Jesus to physical life. The resurrection of Jairus's daughter, of Lazarus and of the widow of Nain's son were of this nature. They regained physical life, but subsequently they died. In the case of Jesus, however, his resurrection involved rising to immortality. It was an eschatological event in the fullest sense of that term. All that was susceptible to mortality and evil was transformed into an immortal existence, and in the case of Jesus it involved a return to the glory he possessed before his incarnation and exaltation to the right hand of God."¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by C. J. Barber in the foreward to S. D. F. Salmond, *The Biblical Doctrine of Immortality* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1984).

² The word translated “useless” in the NIV and “vain” in the ESV is *kenos*. It means empty, without content, basis, truth or power, without result or profit, an illusion or delusion. Paul uses the word here and elsewhere (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:5; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16) to suggest that under certain circumstances, certain things would be pointless, fruitless, or in vain.

³ James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1980), p. 13.

⁴ For a good assessment of The Jesus Seminar, cf. N. L. Geisler & F. Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist*, Appendix 3 (Crossway, 2005), pp. 409-411.

⁵ Even non-Christian historical sources acknowledge this much. Graeco-Roman sources include the ancient historians like Thallus and Tacitus. From Jewish sources we have the record of fifth-century Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanh. 43a) that states that Jesus was hung on the eve of Passover because he led Israel astray. The Jewish historian Josephus likewise recorded that Jesus was put to death under Pilate. Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press, 1987), pp. 196-202 and Gary Habermar and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. T. L. Meithe (Harper & Row, 1987). More recently, Richard Bauckham has written *Jesus and The Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony*, Second edition (Eerdmans, 2017), which Martin Hengel called “Fascinating! . . . This book ought to be read by all theologians and historians working in the field of early Christianity. Further, Bauckham’s convincing historical method and broad learning will also help pastors and students to overcome widespread modern Jesus fantasies.”

⁶ Phillip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Lexham Press, 2023), p. 139.

⁷ W. M. Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (rpt. Baker, 1978), p. 192.

⁸ Orr, p. 274.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (rpt. Baker, 1956), p. 370.

¹⁰ W. à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service I* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), p. 632.

¹¹ A. Thomson, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?* (Zondervan, 1950), p. 137.

¹² R. Stein, *Jesus The Messiah: A Survey of The Life of Christ* (IVP Academic, 1996), p. 273. In sharp contrast to Stein’s assessment is that of the noted Roman Catholic biographer Donald Spoto, who said: “One more thing, which I suggest at the risk of irreverence, for we can never know the reality of it: it may be that Jesus was the most surprised person of all when he passed through death and was definitively transformed – not *turned into God* or *made God* but changed utterly in his humanity and taken up into the life of God Eternal. In that humanity, he may have hoped for but dared not presume to expect that God would, after all, completely vindicate him by a total transformation.” *The Hidden Jesus: A New Life* (St. Martin Press, 1998), p. 247. A cursory reading of Luke 24 in Jesus’s conversation with the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus thoroughly contradicts Spoto, for Jesus expressly declared that he knew that after his sufferings he would be resurrected.