

Resurrection

We are standing beside the coffin of a man beloved. For the last time in his life his battles, his sufferings, and his purpose pass before the mind's eye. And now, at this deeply stirring moment, when we are released from the paltry distractions of this life, our hearts are gripped by a voice of awe-inspiring solemnity, which we seldom or never hear above the deafening traffic of mundane affairs. 'What next?' it says. 'What is life?... and what is death? Have we any continued existence? Is it all an empty dream, or has this life of ours and after death, a meaning?' If we are to go on living we must answer this question!

The above passage is from the explanatory notes from the first movement of the second symphony of Gustav Mahler, an Austrian composer of classical music who lived as the nineteenth century turned over to the twentieth. The notes were written by Mahler himself in 1894 after the death of his close friend, Hans Von Bulow.



Gustav Mahler

On the Feast of Trumpets every year, we too shut ourselves out from the "deafening traffic of mundane worldly affairs." That traffic is even more deafening today, in this 21st century, than it was in 1894. On the Feast of Trumpets every year, God's people ask these same questions: What next? What is life? What is death? Have we any continued existence?

In the later movements of this same symphony, Mahler answers his own questions with surprising accuracy. His answer is the same one that has been revealed to God's people. The answer, in one word, is "Resurrection".

And what an answer it is! What a promise!

In this article, I would like to examine the beliefs of God's church concerning the resurrection of the dead (putting the accent on "the First Resurrection") and to compare our beliefs and doctrines with those of some other religions.

Beliefs of Some Other Religions

Generally speaking, the churches of this world rarely address the subject of the resurrection.

My brother and I attended a Church of England congregation regularly from as early as I can remember, right through into our mid-teen years. Although we heard lots there about "going to heaven when we die," I cannot remember being taught even one word of biblical truth about the literal return of Jesus Christ to this earth, nor about a literal resurrection of the dead here on earth.

Some of our young people in the church of God might take this wonderful knowledge for granted. Many of them have never heard otherwise. But for me, and for most "first generation Christians," the gospel of the Kingdom of God, the return of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of the dead, when it was first revealed to us, added up to the most fantastic good news we had ever heard.

There was a time, though, when most of the professing Christian world knew at least something about the resurrection. Each Sunday, millions recite a Creed (a repeated prayer containing a summary of that denomination's beliefs), which includes the words: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting." Even as recently as 1894, Gustav Mahler knew about the resurrection and, as his second symphony reveals, understood many details about it.

However, accurate knowledge and belief about the resurrection has been diminished and almost lost, buried in fables about immortal souls going "up there" to a heaven of puffy white clouds, or "down there" to the eternal torments of a fiery, ever-burning hell. The plain Bible-inspired truth about the end of this age is mocked by an increasingly decadent world full of people who reject any idea of the possibility of God's intervention in world affairs. It is a surprising fact that the leaders and members of many of the world's mainstream churches are among those who reject God's intervention. And they do so formally every Sunday. At the end of the reading or singing of many of their psalms and other prayers, these same millions of worshippers repeat the following doxology:

As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be; world without end. Amen.

Such a statement does not allow for the intervention of Almighty God into the affairs of the world. Such a statement does not allow for the return of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

Pagan belief in a resurrection dates way back to thousands of years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Traces of the doctrine are found with the ancient Persians in Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. One wonders whether or not these ancient peoples perhaps learnt their spark of truth, directly or indirectly, from those who really did understand God's teaching on the subject. Unfortunately they, like many since, mixed the truth with the erroneous teaching of an immortal soul and the doctrine that they would spend their after-lives in some nether world. The Greeks further developed these beliefs into the concepts of an immortal soul, Elysium and Hades - the latter two being the ancient Greek versions of Heaven and Hell.

In their zeal to have as many people as possible accept and convert to their brand of Christianity, the young Roman church allowed some of these pagan beliefs to be folded in with the remnant of truth they still possessed. Although doctrines concerning the resurrection and the afterlife were advanced by Augustine, Jerome, Tertullian and Origen, there was considerable disagreement among these four men as to whether the resurrected body would be composed of flesh or of spirit. As time went on, error increased in the churches of the world. More and more true knowledge was lost. The plain truth of the resurrections was clouded by such man-made myths as those of the Beatific Vision, Purgatory and Limbo.

With the Reformation throughout western Europe, the Dissolution of the English monasteries and the establishment of the Church of England by King Henry VIII, and the later fragmentation of the Roman and Protestant churches into many denominations, there came a wide variation of interpretations and beliefs. We have come to the point now where the belief in the actual return of Jesus Christ and a literal resurrection has been almost totally superseded by "spiritual" explanations such as these:

1. The Kingdom of God will come to each individual or will be set up in our hearts,
2. The resurrection is the steady, upward progress of mankind,
3. The Kingdom of God is represented by the values of western civilization.

I cannot help wondering if the adherents to the second idea above truly believe that mankind has made much "upward progress" in the past six thousand years, or whether pupils of the third school of thought ever read the newspapers.

Then, of course, there are the admittedly non-Christian religions of the world. Even the non-orthodox Jews have watered down the Old Testament prophecies so that, like the mainstream, professing-Christian world, many no longer believe in the literal coming of the Messiah or of a literal resurrection from the dead. Like the ancient Persians mentioned earlier, many other non-Christian religions at one time apparently had some spark of truth with regards to a resurrection; but had it eroded by time and the influence of Satan. Such beliefs include the concepts of Nirvana and reincarnation as taught by some of the Indian religions.

Beliefs of God's Church

What about us? What do we believe about the resurrection? And what is the origin of our beliefs?

As always, we look to the Bible and we simply believe what it says. When we read the plain and simple scriptures on the subject, we wonder how any church that believes in the inspiration of the Bible could preach otherwise. Why don't they read these scriptures? For the same reason we didn't read them before God opened our minds. Here is the basic doctrine of the church of God concerning the resurrection:

- God the Father resurrected His Son Jesus Christ from the dead,
- That same God will also raise to life again all of the dead,
- For some, that resurrection will be to eternal life; for others it will be to physical life with a later opportunity for eternal life; for some (hopefully few) it will be a resurrection to face the second death.

The Bible reveals three resurrections, which are these:

1. Those who have been baptized members of God's true church and have died in the faith will be raised to eternal, spiritual life at the time of Jesus Christ's return to earth. The bodies of true Christians still alive at that time will be changed from physical to spiritual.
2. Those who died without the opportunity to become members of God's true church will be raised to physical life at the end of the first thousand years of Jesus' rule. They will be taught God's way of life and, if they accept it, they too will be given eternal, spiritual life.
3. Those who, with full knowledge of what they are turning down, absolutely refuse to accept God's way of life will be raised to face their penalty: not an eternal life in a cruel, fiery "hell", but merciful, eternal death.

So simple and yet so incredibly exciting!

What are the main scriptures that support our belief in the resurrection? One would think there were only a few, considering that they seem to be so easily hidden from the many churches of the world who claim to use the same Bible as we do. But there are lots of scriptures that give us information about the resurrections. There are too many to list here; but let us examine just five: two from the Old Testament and three from the New.

But man dies, and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep. Oh that thou wouldest hide me in Sheol (the grave), that thou wouldest conceal me until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man die, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my release should come. (Job 14:10-15 - RSV throughout)

Job was asking the same questions that Gustav Mahler asked thousands of years later: What is death? What happens to a man after death? Surprise, surprise! Job also came up with the same answers that Mahler did. Man does not have an immortal soul. Once he dies, he would remain dead forever... if God did not have other plans.

The vast majority of the dead will remain in their graves until the time of the "Second Resurrection" which will take place at the end of Jesus Christ's thousand-year reign on earth. For a group of people that Jesus referred to as "the elect" (Job will likely be among them), their resurrection will come at the beginning of that Millennium. God will raise them from their resting-places to meet Jesus Christ as He returns to the earth to take over His rightful place as its King. Although he seemed, when he wrote the above scripture, to have a preference for a place in the "Second Resurrection," Job, like others who have remained obedient and loyal to God, will probably witness the apparent flight of the heavens (II Peter 3:10) and the time of the wrath of God (Revelation 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:8-10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:3; 19:15) which, sadly, will be necessary to bring our rebellious peoples into subjection to His happy way of life.

Another Old Testament personality who was blessed to have had the true knowledge of the resurrection revealed to him was the prophet Daniel:

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. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:2-3)

Some of "the many" who are resurrected (those God considers to have true wisdom and worthy to have a part in teaching His way of life to the world and are thus instrumental in turning many to righteousness) will come up in the "First Resurrection" (see Revelation 20:4-6 quoted below) as spirit-born sons of God. These brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ will no longer be limited by physical flesh and blood. They will be like their Elder Brother, composed of spirit:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (I John 3:1-2)

Others who have not known God's way of life will remain at rest until the "Second Resurrection" which will take place at the end of the Millennium (see Revelation 20:5 quoted below). They will be raised to physical life and will be taught God's ways. Having Jesus Christ right here on earth to help them and with Satan imprisoned and powerless, the vast majority will gladly accept God's way of life. Is this an unfair "second chance"? Not at all! Most of the world's billions have never had a "first chance." They have never had the opportunity to know the plain truth of God's way of life.

These and other Old Testament scriptures show us that, thousands of years ago, God revealed His glorious good news of the resurrection to those who believed and obeyed Him.

Many people get confused about the order and nature of the resurrections. Some have even criticized the teaching of multiple resurrections. One of the New Testament scriptures that clarifies these concepts is I Corinthians 15:20-24:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when He delivers the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.

This fifteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is one of the most exciting and inspiring chapters in the whole Bible. As you celebrate the Feast of Trumpets this year, you might benefit from re-reading the whole chapter. The few verses quoted above merely whet one's appetite to read it all. They do, however, clarify the point that God's chosen people will be the first to be resurrected at the time of Jesus Christ's return and that the rest of the dead will come up in a later resurrection.

You and I have often heard church members undergoing trials expressing 'wishes' similar to those of Job: "I wish I hadn't been called in this life... I would have been better off if God hadn't called me until the Second Resurrection!" But there are benefits to having a part in the First Resurrection. What are they? Is there really any reason to desire a place in it? The apostle John seemed to think so:

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4-6)

The benefits of having a part in the First Resurrection are these:

- Death, specifically the second death, will no longer have any power over us; we will have "made it,"
- As priests and co-rulers with Jesus Christ, we will have a part in helping to rebuild this broken world,
- We will have the guarantee of being alive during that fabulous, transitional Millennium.

There we have it - the resurrections! At the blast of the seventh trumpet will come the greatest turning point in the history of the world.

I would like to conclude this article by returning to Mahler's Resurrection Symphony, and quoting an English translation of Mahler's inspiring words to the choral section, which is sung at the close of the work:

Arise!
Yes, you shall arise, my dust, after brief rest.
Eternal life!
Eternal life, He will give, He who called you.
To bloom again you shall be sown.
The Lord of the harvest goes to gather the sheaves of us who died.

O believe, my heart, O believe!
You have lost nothing.
Yours, what you craved.
Yours, what you loved, what you sought.
O believe!
You were not born in vain.
You have not lived and suffered in vain.

What has arisen must pass away.
What has passed away, arise!
Cease to tremble;
Prepare to live!

O all pervading pain, I have escaped you!
O all conquering death, now you are conquered!
With wings I have won for myself, in fervent, loving aspiration,
Shall I soar to the light no eye has ever seen.
I shall die that I may live!

Arise! Yes, you shall rise again, my heart, in an instant.
What you have borne shall bear you to God!

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