

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE RESURRECTION?

The resurrection of the dead is the true hope of life after death; there is no other hope of survival. If we are not raised from the dead we will continue forever in the unconscious state of death.

Some people think that we live forever anyway, because they say we have an immortal soul, but the Bible denies that. It tells us that we are mortal and urges us to find *the way of life*, the only hope of salvation from sin and death. Others believe that we will come back after our death in some different form of existence, being reincarnated. The Bible insists that is not so, for it tells us starkly that:

*“Just as it is **appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement**, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27,28).*

The Lord Jesus Christ is coming again – the “*second time*” – and then we will have just one opportunity to be given immortal life, which is what the gift of life from God is all about. But what will the resurrection be like, who will be there, and what will happen afterwards?

❖ Mortal or Immortal?

We have seen already that mankind is described as “*mortal*,” not “*immortal*.” This is made plain in the Letter to the Romans as it is everywhere in Scripture:

*“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling **mortal man** and birds and animals and reptiles” (Romans 1:23);*

*“Let not sin therefore reign in **your mortal bodies**, to make you obey their passions” (6:12);*

*“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to **your mortal bodies** through his Spirit who dwells in you” (8:11).*

God alone possesses immortality, for He is described as: “*from everlasting to everlasting*” (Psalm 90:2) and as “*the King of ages, **immortal**, invisible, the only God*” (1 Timothy 1:17). Of Almighty God it is said that He:

*“... alone has **immortality**, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen” (1 Timothy 6:16).*

It was a huge gulf that separated God from mankind – He the immortal, invisible, all holy God and mankind mortal and sinful. However close a believer might come to establishing a lasting relationship with his or her Maker, death would end all that. That unconscious state would render a worshipper oblivious of everything. Hezekiah, a faithful king of Judah, once observed as he contemplated his own deliverance from death:

“In love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day” (Isaiah 38:17-19).

❖ The Gulf Bridged

The great news, established by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, is that the gulf has been crossed: a man has risen from the dead to be made immortal by God. That breakthrough has brought hope to all mankind, for what one man has done others might be able to share. Because Jesus lived, died and rose again for mankind, that marvellous event brings hope of immortality to all people who would otherwise perish at death and cease to exist. So immortality suddenly becomes attainable in a way it never has been before, because now there is a real hope of resurrection from the dead. Notice the excitement with which this was proclaimed:

*“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, **who saved us and called us to a holy calling**, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and **which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel**” (2 Timothy 1:8-10).*

The gospel has brought life and immortality to light, says the apostle, and that makes everything else both bearable and purposeful. Understanding what it teaches makes all the difference between

dying without hope and having a real and living hope that will sustain us through anything and everything. Notice that this is the constant teaching of Scripture, as we noted earlier in Romans:

*“When God’s righteous judgement will be revealed ... He will render to each one according to his works: **to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life**” (Romans 2:5-7).*

❖ Preaching the Resurrection

This message of hope spread like wildfire around the first century world. A man had been raised from the dead and, as a result, there was the hope of resurrection from the dead for everyone. If you were to work through the Acts of the Apostles, notebook in hand, to jot down the different occasions when that message was delivered you would find that it was a key teaching of first century believers. Here’s just a sample of such passages:

*“**God raised him up**, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it ... **This Jesus God raised up**, and of that we all are witnesses” (Acts 2:24,32);*

*“You killed the Author of life, whom **God raised from the dead**. To this we are witnesses ... **God, having raised up his servant**, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness” (3:15,26);*

*“They were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus **the resurrection from the dead**” (4:2);*

*“With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to **the resurrection of the Lord Jesus**, and great grace was upon them all” (4:33);*

*“**God raised him** on the third day and made him to appear” (10:40).*

The key thing about the preaching of the resurrection was that it was an event which *had* happened, something that could be checked, and which had been witnessed by a lot of people. Jesus had been crucified: there was no doubt about that – it was a public execution conducted by soldiers who were well-practised at that sort of death. The historic record is careful to note that his corpse had even been pierced by a spear, whereupon water (some watery body fluid) and blood had emerged. The witness who saw that adds this note:

“He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe” (John 19:35).

When the apostle Peter preached about the resurrection in Jerusalem he was only a short distance away from where it had all happened, and those who heard him could go and check things out for themselves. They could examine the tomb, talk to the witnesses and make their own judgement about the authenticity of everything that had happened. That’s why the resurrection was, and is, such a powerful witness to the reality of God’s rescue plan for man. Somebody once called it *“the best attested fact in human history.”* New Testament writings describe what happened in such a way that they stress the fact that it is a remarkable miracle well-attested by the surrounding events.

❖ Logical Reasoning

If you want to follow one of those arguments through for yourself, then read 1 Corinthians chapter 15, which is all about the resurrection. There the apostle first writes about the raising of the Lord Jesus Christ; then he reasons out the logical outcome – what that means for believers in every age. It’s another letter written by the apostle Paul, like Romans, and he sets out step-by-step, as shown on the table shown on the next page. Follow his argument carefully.

1 Corinthians chapter 15 contains an impressive piece of logical deduction in which the inspired apostle looks at the facts calmly and soberly. He concludes that, without the resurrection, he would have no hope of life whatsoever, nor would any who follow Jesus. Indeed, he reasons, they would have wasted their lives following a delusion rather than the truth from God. Contrast that reasoning with the muddled thinking of people who think you go to heaven at death. For them the resurrection is more of an embarrassment than anything else – the soul and body are combined again for no particular reason, in their scheme of things. But we have seen how wrong that way of thinking is. It is entirely the opposite of what the Bible teaches. As death is an unconscious state, resurrection is vitally necessary. Without it there is just no hope of life after death: we would remain forever unconscious in the grave.

No	Verses in 1 Cor 15	Careful Argument
1	1-2	The gospel needs to be believed if we are to be saved
2	3-4	Christ's death, burial and resurrection was "according to the Scriptures"
3	5-10	There were many witnesses of what happened – more than 500
4	11	The resurrection is a vital part of the gospel to be believed
5	12-19	That Christ was raised is an absolutely vital part of the gospel; if he was not raised then everything we believe is in vain and our sins still count against us
6	20	"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"
7	21-22	Adam brought death, but Christ brought life
8	23-28	Everything will happen in an ordered sequence: Christ first, then his followers, at his coming; then Jesus will reign on earth and conquer all his enemies – death included. Eventually he will hand over the Kingdom to God his Father, that God "may be all in all" (v.28)
9	29-34	If these things are not true, why are people behaving as they are, and why am I in so much trouble because of what I believe and teach?
10	35-58	This is how things are going to work out ... (Here Paul gives a great deal of detail about the state of those who are resurrected and raised to glory)

❖ When will it Happen?

It's time to discover what the Bible says about the timing and detail of the forthcoming resurrection, since it is so important to all of us. Paul has already given an important pointer, which you will have picked up if you have read the whole of 1 Corinthians 15 already. Jesus has been raised as the "firstfruits" of all those who are to be raised "at his coming". Here's a fuller extract:

*"As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then **at his coming** those who belong to Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:22,23).*

When Jesus comes again to earth he is going to raise many of the sleeping dead and call them forth to judgement. Until then all who die are still in the graves – their memories lost, their feelings gone, their identity known in detail only to God, who alone is able to recreate them as they once were. This is one reason why the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ is so important to all those who believe in him and why it will be such a cause of concern to those who choose to reject him. Remember what Paul said early in Romans:

*"Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart **you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed.** He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but **for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.** There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil" (Romans 2:4-9).*

It is the coming of Jesus that will bring all these things to a head; that will separate the “good” from the “evil”, as these passages confirm:

*“An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will **hear his voice** and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement” (John 5:28,29);*

*“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and **I will raise him up on the last day**” (6:39,40);*

*“Jesus said to her, **‘I am the resurrection and the life.** Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (11:25);*

*“God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that **he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead**” (Acts 10:40-42);*

*“Henceforth there is laid up for me **the crown of righteousness**, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me **on that Day**, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8);*

*“Behold, I am coming soon, **bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done**” (Revelation 22:12).*

❖ Detailed Explanations

Two lengthy passages deal with this topic in some detail and recognise that when the Lord Jesus comes there will be some believers alive and others who have fallen asleep in death. Here is the first of them, in full:

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

This is another of those passages where we can use our analytical skills and see just what we are being told. Here are some points that emerge:

- Death is described as “sleep”, because it is an unconscious state in which everything has finished for the time being;
- This passage is written to those who believe the gospel and is about their future expectations; it does not detail everything that will happen to everybody;
- Paul received a specific revelation about this, which he calls “a word from the Lord”;
- Baptized believers who have died – those who are “in Christ” – will rise from the dead first; believers who are still alive will not precede them;
- The Lord Jesus will return on the clouds of heaven and, with a cry of command and the last trumpet, he will raise the sleeping dead;
- The resurrected dead and those baptized believers still alive will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air as a preliminary to their being “ever with the Lord”.

The second such passage is one we have already started to examine – the ‘resurrection chapter’ – 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Here is further detail that Scripture supplies:

“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be

changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (15:50-53).

The added information is that there has to be a process of change and bodily transformation if we are to move from a “*perishable*” condition to one which is “*imperishable*”. Paul says that we must be changed from a “*mortal*” state to an “*immortal*” one. That will happen once the judgement has taken place, for when Jesus comes he is coming to judge the world and to declare people either “good” or “evil”. In this passage the apostle is looking at the end product of the process of resurrection for all those believers who are found faithful and acceptable to Christ.

He does not here consider the fate of those who had stored up wrath for themselves: “*on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgement will be revealed*” (Romans 2:5). We shall need to give their fate a little thought later, but first we need to think about the meaning of judgement for all those who have accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and have become baptized believers. Will they be judged?

❖ **The Judgement Seat of Christ**

If we started to reason this out for ourselves we might come to a lot of different conclusions. But those ideas would only be useful if they were true. We could all imagine that somebody who liked cooking might enjoy an eternity cooking in a heavenly kitchen. Or somebody who was a keen footballer could be pictured playing football forever. The real question is: what does the Bible teach? None of us has personal experience of life after death and the Bible strongly condemns the practice of consulting mediums and the teaching of spiritualism as something we should not do or get involved in.

Instead we should be living in daily awareness of the fact that the time will soon come when we all have to appear before the judgement seat of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what we are told about that coming experience:

“God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14);

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2);

“He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42);

“(God) has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31);

“... on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16);

“Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God” (Romans 14:10);

“Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (1 Corinthians 4:5);

“For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10);

“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:1);

“For it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17).

Collecting together verses like these, which talk about judgement, or the Judgement Seat of Christ, enables us to gather a lot of information from different parts of the Bible. It’s a different technique from that of analysing one part of Scripture, but it yields the same results once we have done the initial work. Cross-references can be helpful in accumulating the passages, and a concordance can assist, but the key thing, once you have collected the information, is to look at what you have and draw proper conclusions from it, like this:

- God will judge the world through the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom He has delegated that task (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:16 etc.);
- That judgement will be both of those living at his return and the resurrected dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1);
- It will take place at the return to earth of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Timothy 4:1);
- The judgement will be righteous and will take account of the innermost thoughts and feelings of our hearts, as well as the things we have said and done (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10);
- Everybody who is accountable to God – who has done either “good” or “evil” in His sight – will appear before the judgement seat of Christ (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 4:17);⁸
- The outcome of the judgement will be that some will receive the gift of everlasting life and others will not (Daniel 12:2; 1 Peter 4:17).

❖ Why a Judgement at all?

You may be wondering why there has to be a judgement at all. Why doesn't God just destroy sin and sinners outright and allow those who are acceptable to Him to become immortal? This isn't how God works, for everything He does is in accordance with His righteous character. He is just and holy, and can never compromise with sin. But He is also determined to show men and women the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil. God's judgement of the world will do that. At present there are people who appear to have “got away with it”; who have done very wrong things but who were never reprimanded for the error of their ways. They just died, like everybody else.

Take the case of those evil men in Jerusalem who tried Jesus on false charges and wrongly condemned him to death. They arranged with the Roman governor to have him executed and then visited him as he hung upon the cross, jeering and sneering. Do you think it right that they should never be held accountable for what they did? In fact we know, because Jesus has told us, that the time will come when they shall be raised to judgement, and we know the outcome:

“He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out” (Luke 13:27,28).

❖ The Basis of Judgement

The basis of their judgement will be that they had every opportunity to learn from and follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived and taught among them, and they not only rejected him, but they arranged to have him crucified. They are to see the risen Lord in all his glory, with those from all ages who acclaim him King and Lord, and then they are to be “cast out”. Elsewhere we are told that the rejected will be cast into “outer darkness” (Matthew 22:13; 25:30).

As the judgement will affect all those who know enough about the purpose of God to be accounted good or evil in His sight, we need to be sure that we know the basis on which *we* could be judged. Imagine being summoned to the judgement seat of Christ and being presented with charges we knew nothing about and which we could then do nothing about! Fortunately, God doesn't work like that either. He always gives due notice to His creation of what His purpose is and what He wants people to do. And He always warns of the consequences of disobedience, whilst encouraging obedience by promising a happy outcome for those who follow His guidance in life.

Judgement will be based on our response to the offer of God as explained in His Word, the Bible. Those who saw the purpose of God at first hand, or who heard Jesus and the apostles preach, and saw the confirmatory signs and wonders, will have less excuse than others.

*“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, **how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will**” (Hebrews 2:1-4).*

That passage has especial relevance to all those who have witnessed miracles, but the first sentence is relevant to people in every age. The basis of judgement will be our response to what God has revealed in His Word and what the Lord Jesus has said and done. Jesus said:

*“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. **The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.** For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” (John 12:46-50).*

Everybody who hears the gospel, and understands it, encounters Jesus as he is portrayed in the Scriptures, and can decide whether or not to follow him. We might listen to his words and take note of what we are being asked to do, or we might decide not to bother. Or we may listen at first, but lose interest later. Whichever way we choose to respond to God’s offer of salvation, we should be aware of the possible consequences of our decision. If called to give account of our actions, we could be in one of these two camps:

*“... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (1) **They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day** (2) **to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed,** because our testimony to you was believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).*

That’s a stark set of alternatives. We could either be classed with those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, or with those who believe, obey, and are counted *“worthy of his calling”*. Once again you will note that it is knowledge of the gospel of salvation that makes us accountable at the coming of Jesus.



We are saved by faith, but that faith is expected to change our actions – hence Paul’s reference to *“every work of faith”* in 2 Thessalonians 1 verse 11. Our thoughts, words and deeds demonstrate the quality and reality of our faith, though none of the things that we do can ever be enough to merit what God has in store for those who love Him.

We will be saved because of God’s grace and mercy to us; but we are still expected to live in a way which shows that we really want to have a part in the world to come.

The key thing is to get our life right with God now; then there will be nothing to worry about. Paul had done that and he was able to look forward with confidence knowing that the coming of Christ would mean the arrival of his reward – the gift of eternal life. Writing to Timothy on the eve of his execution he could say:

“The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Things to Read

-  The resurrection accounts of Jesus make fascinating reading and have convinced many unbelievers over the years that the only thing that fits all the facts is that Jesus must have risen bodily from the tomb. Try John chapter 20 or Luke chapter 24, or both.
-  After ascending to heaven, Jesus wrote seven letters to various groups of believers. Read those letters in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 and then look at the two questions about them detailed below.

Questions to Answer

- 18.1 In the letters that Jesus wrote to the churches in Asia (Revelation chapters 2 and 3) he mentioned seven different rewards that would be available to those who are found acceptable to him when he returns. List those rewards. (Revelation 2:7,11,17,26-28; 3:5,12,20-21)
- 18.2 What do those believers have to do to inherit those rewards, and what are the dangers they have to overcome? (Revelation 2:1-3:22)