

## **BIG WORDS Series: Resurrection**

In this series on “Big Words” of the Bible, I have taught on doctrinal words like justification and redemption and regeneration. Today I want us to look at an extremely important word that, I think, is very misunderstood in today’s world, the word “resurrection”.

When you hear the word used in ordinary conversation, it usually means something that looked to be dead has been revived. Like an actor who had made a big name through some great films and then had been featured in some big busts and looked to be a has-been. When he makes a comeback with two or three box office hits, people say that his career has been resurrected. I didn’t know there was such a thing as a TV show called “Resurrection” until I started to research for this sermon, but, apparently, if you die in mid-America and then, many years later, you show up alive somewhere in China, you’ve experienced your own personal resurrection -- and you get two seasons out of it.

The simple meaning of this word is “rising from the dead”. But the way it is used in the Bible is something more. Lazarus was raised from the dead, the widow of Nain’s son was raised from the dead, Jairus’ daughter was raised from the dead, but the word “resurrection” was not used to describe those events.

“Resurrection” is used to describe two specific events in the New Testament. The obvious one is the resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion. The second is the final resurrection, the time when all of us will be raised from death with new and immortal bodies that won’t grow old or be susceptible to sickness or pain. Every use of the word “resurrection” in the New Testament is describing one of those two events. They don’t describe coming “back from” death, but, instead, describe “going through” death and on into eternal life. This is the uniqueness of resurrection and of the hope that is given to all who have faith in Jesus.

Lazarus was raised from death by Jesus and later died. The widow of Nain’s son and Jairus’ daughter, both raised by Jesus, we hope outlived their parents, but both passed on from this life. They are waiting for the final resurrection. But Jesus did not die again. He went through death and into life that never ends, and we’ll see this in the texts we look at today.

Right at the beginning of the book of Acts, the disciples decided that Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus to His death and then taken his own life, had to be replaced. They chose between two men who had been with them throughout Jesus’ ministry, from the time He was baptized by John until He ascended to heaven. And then Peter adds, “For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.” This was the foundation, the authority the church had for its mission to the world: that Jesus Christ had died, was buried and was raised from the dead. Those who were to lead the church forward in proclaiming its message needed to be eye-witnesses of Jesus’ ministry and of His resurrection.

In Peter's first sermon, on the Day of Pentecost, he quotes from King David's Psalm 16, including these lines:

*Because You will not abandon me to the grave*

*Nor will You let Your holy one see decay* (Ps.16:10)

And then he explains that David was a prophet and was looking forward to the day when one of his descendants, God's anointed king, would be raised from the dead and would not go through the process of decay that is the normal fate of mortal humans. And then Peter says this:

*God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.* (Acts 2:32)

Again we see the importance to the first followers of Christ to establish that Jesus has been raised from the dead and to establish it on the testimony of eyewitnesses.

In Acts 4 we come across a theological conflict that we saw earlier in the Gospels. There were two main parties in the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews: Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees were made up of the ruling families, the old guard, if you will, that had been in control of Jewish politics for centuries. The Pharisees were the new and rising power whose authority was based on the high esteem with which they were regarded by the common folk. They were seen as the true followers of Moses, zealous in their interpretation and application of the Old Testament laws. One of the clear differences between the two groups was that the Pharisees believed in a final resurrection of the dead which would be followed by the judgment, while the Sadducees believed that when you died, there was nothing that followed.

In Acts 4, then, we see the priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees arresting Peter and John for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. They had a problem with anyone teaching that there was a resurrection, and especially that God had raised a man they had sentenced to death for blasphemy, for claiming to be God. Then again, at the end of this chapter, we see that the apostles, despite the threats against them from the Sadducees, continued to testify to the *resurrection* of the Lord Jesus (v. 33) ... not to the *raising* of Lazarus, which had recently taken place in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. Okay, I'm hammering that point a little hard this week, but I just want it to be clear.

A couple of quick notes on Jesus' resurrection before we turn to the doctrine of resurrection that includes us.

1. Paul, in Romans 1:4, declares that Jesus has been "declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead." And in his letter to the believers in Philippi, he says that he wants to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, along with being able to share in Christ' sufferings (3:10). The power of the resurrection is incredible, because it marks the defeat of our greatest and most feared enemy - death itself. Some people may appear to cheat death, at least for a time, but no one beats death. And here is Paul saying that he would like to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, the power that is greater than death, the power that leads to eternal life.

Another comment on the power that was displayed in Jesus' resurrection comes from Peter's first sermon in Acts 2 -- here is verse 24:

*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.*

Death is seen as agony, and we know it has great power - but it didn't, couldn't have enough power to hold Jesus.

2. The second point comes out of the beginning of Peter's first letter, verse 3:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade -- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

(vv.3-5)

This passage illuminates the substance of Christian hope. While others may hope for something better in the afterlife or may not have any hope for an afterlife, we are brought into a living hope, a hope that is born in us - "new birth into a living hope". And our hope is not a vague thing, like "I'm hoping for something better than this world", but we are told it's an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade and that it is being kept in heaven for us. The victory of Jesus' resurrection then becomes our victory, our confident hope, our inheritance, and our destiny, without fault and without fail.

The other main use of the word "resurrection" in the New Testament refers to the belief that, at some unknown date in the future, those who have died will be raised to life, first to face the final judgment and then, for those who have put their hope in Jesus, to enter into the life God has promised.

Let's look at Paul's explanation of this from 1 Corinthians 15. He begins by summarizing the core of the Gospel: that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and was raised on the third day, appearing to many people on different occasions.

He then responds to the idea that is apparently being circulated around Corinth that there is no resurrection, that there will be no life after death. And his argument here is that if there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised and we should all be miserable -- but continues on to say that Jesus was, in fact, raised from the dead. V. 20:

*But 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 our own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the Kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

When Paul uses the term 'firstfruits' he is using a word that comes from the sacrificial

system of the Old Testament. It is used to describe the first in a series - for example, the first crop of a greater harvest that is yet to come - or it can mean the best. Either way, it's clear that there is more to come, a further harvest that will be brought in later. And so Jesus' resurrection is an indication to us, Paul is saying, that we, too, will experience this resurrection to eternal life.

In Romans 8, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as the first fruits of what God is going to give us - our adoption as His children and the redemption of our physical bodies. And James, in his letter, refers to Christians in general as a kind of firstfruits of all that God has created. That means that as we are given new life in Christ and as we are promised a resurrection body, that's just the beginning - all of creation will experience God's redeeming, healing power. This is also hinted at in the book of Revelation.

This idea of Jesus' resurrection being the firstfruits of the final resurrection of the dead is carried further in the passage from 1 Corinthians that we just read. Paul notes that death itself came to the human race through the sin of Adam and that eternal life will come to all through the resurrection of Jesus -- Jesus' resurrection breaks the barrier, paves the way for death's ultimate defeat -- and we experience that victory when Jesus returns. This image of firstfruits isn't over yet, though, as we see later in chapter 15:

*But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. (15:35-37)*

And then a few verses later . . .

*So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. (15:42-44; 48,49)*

What do we learn about "THE resurrection" from this part of Paul's letter?

1. Our bodies, the ones we know so well, the ones that strangely seem to get weaker and more easily damaged after 60, 70, 80 years, these bodies are not what we will make our home in in the resurrection. These are the seeds that are planted and die and from which come new life.
2. What comes, the new body that we will have, is called "imperishable", "glorious", "powerful" and "spiritual".
3. The bodies we have now are especially suited for life on this earth; the bodies that we will have are designed for the life to come, for heaven.
4. God's goal in all of this was that we be conformed to the image of Christ -- in other words, that we will look like Jesus -- and the passage ends with the phrase "so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven."

When the early church spoke of “the resurrection”, they would usually have in mind the return of Christ and the raising to new life in new bodies of all those who love the Lord. For example, in 2 Timothy 2:17, Paul identifies two men as false teachers and writes about them:

*(They) have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2:18)*

This obviously doesn't refer to Jesus' resurrection, which had already taken place, but to the resurrection of the last days which believers were anticipating. Teaching that this event had already taken place is similar to someone saying today that the rapture has happened and we've all been “left behind”!

Hebrews 6 has an interesting reference to resurrection as the writer mentions a series of things which are sort of Christianity 100 items, basic knowledge that everyone should have:

*Let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instructions about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. (6:1,2)*

To paraphrase: the writer is saying that all the believers of the day knew they needed to trust God and that gifts of the Spirit and commissioning to leadership could be given through the laying on of hands, and that someday Christ would return and the dead would be raised to new and eternal life through the power of God. Basic stuff; let's not keep revisiting these old themes but move on to deeper issues of the Christian life.

One final mention of the resurrection of believers comes from Revelation 20, where the souls of martyrs were brought to life in order to reign with Christ for 1000 years. John refers to this event as the “first resurrection”, indicating that the second, more inclusive, resurrection would take place after this thousand-year reign. As the text goes on, it is clear that Revelation teaches that all people will experience resurrection, believers and unbelievers, too. Following the resurrection comes the judgment and at that point there is a separation and the people of this world will go in different directions depending on the ruling of the just Judge.

So, let's summarize what we learn about resurrection in the New Testament.

1. Resurrection is not coming back from death, it is going forward through death to a new and ideal life.
2. The core of Christian teaching from the very beginning was based on the testimony of many witnesses that Jesus Christ had died, was buried and then was raised from death on the third day and that He had gone to be with His Father in heaven. The resurrection, then, is the pivotal point in human history, the game-changer.
3. The Bible promises that we will follow Jesus through death and into a new and resurrected body, one that will not grow old or weak, which will never experience death

and in which we will forever praise our God and King.

At the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, his wife made a powerful statement against everything that he had stood for and ruled over in the atheistic regime of that communist state. As the soldiers touched the lid to close his coffin, she reached down and made the sign of the cross on his chest. As Gary Thomas tells the story, “There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong.” She hoped that there was a resurrection yet to come and that the One who conquered death might have mercy on her late husband. What a powerful picture.

Twenty years earlier, the former queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands passed from this life to the next. At her request and contrary to the accepted protocol, the funeral was conducted completely in white, as her husband’s had been 28 years earlier, to express their confident belief that earthly death was the beginning of eternal life. One grieving wife clinging to a faint hope, another couple boldly expressing their confidence in the promises of God.

The reason we meet to worship on a Sunday is because Sunday is the day of resurrection. It is the day Jesus won the victory over death that we will also participate in, some day. It is the reason for our hope, and it is reason enough to ask people to dress in white for our funerals. Not everyone shares this hope, of course, and I want to close with some “last words” from some famous people through the years, some that reflect our hope and some that seem lost and empty.

Julian the Apostate was emperor of Rome from 361-363, the last non-Christian to rule the empire. He attempted to revive traditional Roman religious practices and diminish the influence of Christianity. After being wounded in battle and just before his death, his last words were, “You have won, O Galilean.”

*I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.* Leonardo da Vinci (died in 1519)

*I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark* (Thomas Hobbes, writer, d. 1679)

*It is very beautiful over there* (Thomas Edison, 1931)

As he neared death, the wife of renowned chemical scientist Michael Faraday asked him if he had ever given thought to what his occupation would be in the next life: *“I shall be with Christ, and that is enough.”*