

LIFE TRIUMPHANT

By Steve Zeisler

A recent James Dobson ministry newsletter has a lengthy synopsis of the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It describes a Hollywood version of the life of Christ which is, not surprisingly, blasphemous.

What I found to be most objectionable about the movie was the portrayal of Jesus as an uncertain, easily swayed, insecure emotional failure. The Scriptures, however, present him as an authoritative and powerful figure, one who was in absolute control of himself at all times. Never once did he question himself or his mission.

When the world presents a caricature of Jesus, portraying him as a wimp, to use a modern word, then we need to respond to this by proclaiming to the world the Biblical Christ.

The church of Christ is often similarly ridiculed as a place for simple-minded people who refuse to accept reality; that it is made up of the old and feeble who no longer can face life, or the young and immature who don't know any better yet.

TOUGH-MINDEDNESS

The fifteenth chapter of the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter thoroughly confounds this caricature of the Christian life. I know of no other passage in the Scriptures that is more helpful in a discussion of this issue. Christianity is not the refuge of the easily frightened, the unrealistic, or those who are afraid to ask tough questions.

Listen to these words from verse 12 of 1 Corinthians:

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied.

There is a hard edge to these words. If as Christians we lose the expectation of the resurrection, if humanity is not raised, then Christ is not raised. And, of course, if Christ is not raised, then we are still in our sins, and we are deserving of pity. Sentiment alone will not suffice. These events are either true or untrue. The resurrection of Christ is a fact; it cannot be otherwise.

Paul continues,

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy

that will be abolished is death. For He has put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. And when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all.

NO RESURRECTION

If Christ has not been raised, says Paul, Christians face the direst circumstances-but Jesus has been raised. In these verses there is a glorious progression from one truth to the next: Christ the first fruits, his victory over enemies, his unity with us, our being caught up together with God the Father that God might be all in all. Once again we see no wishy-washy running away, no confused carpenter being forced into a Messianic role that he does not understand and fights against accepting. Rather, we find that Jesus was the Messiah who gave his life for us, a sacrifice that was approved of by God; that he has been raised-and so shall we be raised.

How was it possible then that some of the Corinthians, who were themselves taught by Paul, taught that there was no resurrection from the dead? Now these people were not directly challenging the message of Jesus' empty tomb-he was, perhaps, a special case. What they were saying was that ordinary humanity had no existence after death; that human beings would not be raised with new bodies at the resurrection. Paul writes that it is not possible to hold these two views, however. If humanity is not raised, in other words, then what is the use in believing that Jesus was raised? If we fall into this trap, then we have lost the resurrection of Christ, too.

BODY AND SOUL

So the question remains, why did some in Corinth hold that humans are not raised from the dead? I suggest that two basic and prideful notions are involved. First, there was the long-standing belief in that Greek culture in Plato's philosophy that the soul of man is immortal but not his body. In their view, the physical world served only to limit and imprison the soul. Death was the means of escape for the soul from the limitation it was forced to bear in this physical world. At death, the soul achieved immortality, and the body was needed no longer. This perhaps was one reason some in the Corinthian church denied the resurrection of the body.

This viewpoint, which is mirrored in the thinking of the New Age movement today, progressively denies the dependence of mankind on a personal God who creates and sustains everything. People who do this deny the need for a Savior, and ultimately intend to become godlike on their own merits. Getting rid of one's body therefore is a good thing, because by doing so limitless horizons beckon the once-imprisoned soul to become like God himself. This philosophy, of course, denies any need for a Mediator between God and man, and thus denies the work of Christ. If man can make it by himself, where is the need for repentance and faith?

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Miracles*:

...the resurrection was not regarded simply or chiefly as evidence for the immortality of the soul. On such a view Christ would simply have done what all men do when they die; the only novelty would be that in His case we were allowed to see it happening. But there is not in Scripture the faintest suggestion the resurrection was new evidence for something that had in fact always been happening. The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead is the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the first fruits, the pioneer of life. He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the king of death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the new creation. A new chapter in cosmic history has been opened.

Those who are forever seeking to raise the level of their own consciousness, those who speak of endless reincarnations and vain hopes of expanding their spiritual authority, would deny the resurrection of the body and seek instead to become gods in their own right. This perhaps is the motivation which lay behind the teaching of some in the Corinthian church; and, as we have pointed out, is the same philosophy which

underlies the New Age movement in our own day.

THIS LIFE ONLY

The second reason why some of the Corinthians may have denied the resurrection was that they felt that man had no need for God at all. The elite in every age tend to focus on this world only and pay scant attention for what might happen after death. The elitist Sadducees of the first century, the wealthy intellectuals of their day, denied the resurrection too. This was the basis of their doctrinal split with the Pharisees. They were so enamored of the high standing which they occupied in this life, they had no time for any thought of the after-life.

This is what the modern intellectual elitist would have us do also. He has achieved victory in this life, whether it be in commerce, education, or whatever. Calling on him to focus on anything other than what he has accomplished-on the next life, especially-brings him down to the level of everyone else; and that is something that has no appeal for him. He does not like to be reminded that his accomplishments on this earth give him no advantage in eternity. More than that, he encourages others to do the same, saying that this is all there is; there is no resurrection of the body; there is no after-life. But because of the resurrection of Christ, Paul insists that we too will be resurrected. It is man's destiny to be raised.

LIFE AS A PILGRIMAGE

Before we look into these verses in detail we need to consider some facts that are necessary conclusions of what we have learned so far. First, we need to remember that this life is, in a sense, a warm-up, an 80-year span when we learn the rudiments of walking with God, when we make decisions about what we will become; when we lay a foundation. This life then is merely the title page in a book which will be written in eternity. We are pilgrims on this earth. We are looking for a home, a city that will last forever.

When I played football in college, the thing I hated most about the coming season was the endless practice sessions of August. This was the month when football players said goodbye to their friends on the beach and went back to the college training fields, back to the hard slog of repetitious training exercises, yelling coaches and aching muscles. It was not all bad, of course. We got to participate in the occasional scrimmage; there was a large degree of camaraderie between the participants. But who would want to go through an August like that unless there was a football season coming later?

This is the apostle's perspective on the Christian life. If this is all there is, he is saying, if there is nothing else coming, then Christians are most of all to be pitied. We have lived restricted lives, taken on difficult assignments (albeit with some accomplishments and fellowship along the way), and we are deserving of pity. But no. This life is a warm-up. Our faith in Christ will ensure that we will be raised with him. We will have new bodies ready to interact with our spirits-bodies that will interact with the new creation in a way that will be glorifying and satisfying.

UNION WITH GOD

Secondly, in the resurrection we have a radical connection with Christ. In Jesus, God became man, wedding himself forever to humanity. When Jesus went to heaven, he did not give up his humanity but rather took his humanity-and us-with him. He ascended in a resurrection body; thus the human race will forever be one with deity. I have a friend who had heart transplant surgery at Stanford hospital. In a profound sense, my friend will always be connected to the person whose heart now beats in his body. As long as he lives, this connection between them will remain. Because of the resurrection, the same is true for God and us. Christ has been raised, therefore God and man are forever entwined. There can never again be a separation between us.

And third, we should remember that the history of the cosmos as we know it will end. A day of reckoning is coming. Look at verse 24,

...then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

One of the important jobs parents have is to teach children about deadlines and consequences. When they are very young, we tend to soften the hard edges of an absolute deadline. If you tell your little children that it's time to go to bed, you find yourself shortly saying, "I'm going to count to three and you'd better be in bed by the time I finish." Five minutes later you go through the same routine. But if you are a good parent, the older your children become the less likely you will be to continue doing this. You find yourself saying, rather, "If you don't get your homework done on time, you will pay for the consequences." "If you don't get your application in on time, you won't be able to go on that outing," etc. Anthony Hembrick, the Olympic boxer, was a few moments late for a bout and was declared the loser. There was no second chance. No individual human being, nor the human race all together, has unlimited opportunity to choose. A day of reckoning awaits us. The end will come, and when it does, we are either in Christ or in Adam. There are only two choices.

A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Now let us look more closely at Paul's argument. Verse 12:

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied.

Notice the downward spiral of conclusions in the apostle's words as he proceeds from one degree of terrible recognition to the next. "If Christ is not raised..." The result of each succeeding "if" clause become more serious and frightening. First, he says, our preaching and our faith are both in vain. The whole of the Christian life—preaching, teaching, study, prayer, fellowship—are ridiculous because they are based on make believe. But, even worse, it's blasphemous. If Christ has not been raised, Christians are lying by saying that God raised him. The prophets of Baal, who falsely claimed that they represented God, were slain for their misrepresentation. This claim by Christians, if it is not true, is not just vain, it is blasphemous.

But matters become worse yet: "...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; and you are still in your sins." Vain, blasphemous, eternally guilty. If God has not accepted the sacrifice of Jesus, which the raising of Jesus proclaims, then there is no answer to the problem of sin; we are still in our sins. Beyond that, those who have already fallen asleep in Christ are lost to us forever. They have not gone on to be with the Lord; they have perished. In recent months we have had cause to rejoice in this church as some of the most beloved and faithful members of this congregation have gone to be with Christ. But if Christ has not been raised, their bodies have decayed and that is the end of them.

Lastly, says Paul, if Christ has not been raised, then Christians are pitiable, wretched specimens. If this is just a made-up story, a charade to help people through their threescore and ten years, then we are deserving of pity. We are nothing but fools. I had a schoolmate once, a beautiful girl who was elected a Miss Teenage something or other. By her late twenties she had become a pitiable, sad person. She hoped that winning such a contest would lead to a lifetime of personal success. It failed to deliver. If Christians have set their hopes on an event that never occurred, i.e. the resurrection, then they too are wretched, and pitiable.

ASCENSION

"But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (verse 20). There is an order to these events. The "first fruits" recalls the Old Testament pattern of offering the first portion of the crop to God, thereby signifying that all of it belonged to him. This is how Paul regards the resurrection of Christ. It is the earnest, the promise which is the Christian's hope. We now know that the single human cell created at

conception contains the complete genetic information relating to the child who will be born, a child who will grow and learn and bear the image of God. One single cell is a prediction, a down payment on the dreams, relationships, creativity, etc., of the person. Paul is saying that through the resurrection of Christ, the "first fruits," all Christians who follow him will also be resurrected one day.

My father and mother were friends in junior high school. In college, they became engaged, and after graduating they married. Recently I came to the realization that as my own children are now in junior high and high school, it's conceivable that they have already met their future spouses. An already existing friendship may be the first step of something much more. A family might ensue, grandchildren might be born to us, lives lived in a community, witness for Christ-the process may already have begun, one that will bring a delightful harvest. Christ's resurrection is the announcement that the rest of the story will follow in due time.

Scripture predicts that after the first one, Christ, is raised, he will come again, and that those who are alive at his coming will be caught up with him in the air. We also know that the dead in Christ will be raised to be with him. We know that he will win a victory over the evil one; that death will be destroyed; and that as he takes us with him in his victory, everything will be subject to him, and he will offer himself in subjection to God (we along with him), that God might be all in all.

FOREVER DEPENDENT

If verses 12 through 19 are a descent into wretchedness and pity, then verses 20 through 28 are a glorious ascension. From most to be pitied to most to be envied; lives of blasphemy or vain hope, or those who will inherit with Christ. Those are the options. There is no sentimental middle ground.

The Corinthians had allowed their pride to sway them to believe that men's souls are immortal and do not require resurrection. In saying this, they had planted a seed that proclaimed the possibility of men becoming like God himself. They would no longer be dependent, but be independent of God. Or else they had so grown to love this world that they rejected the resurrection so that they could pay more attention to the payoffs of this world, especially so that the elite could become more elite. One of these two viewpoints had infiltrated the church in Corinth. The New Age movement, the health and wealth gospel, the prosperity preachers of today share the same kind of reasoning-loving ourselves as god or saying that we have no need for God.

But this passage teaches that, for real Christians, Christ is the center of everything. Any teaching that makes the resurrection a lesser thing is a direct attack on the centrality of Christ in Christianity. Christians believe that humanity is forever dependent upon Jesus. He is the first fruits of the resurrection, and our resurrection is in him. Listen to just how central Christ is, in verses 20 and following: "Christ has been raised" (verse 20); "by a man came resurrection of the dead" (v.21); "in Christ shall all be made alive" (v.22); "Christ the first fruits" (v.23); "he delivers up the kingdom" (v.24); "He must reign" (v.25); "He has put all things in subjection under His feet" (v.27). Christ is at the center of everything; and because he and we are raised, he is central to us. Any attack on the resurrection therefore is an attack on the central place which Christ occupies in Christianity.

And because we are raised, he is central to us. That is the most important notion of all. We will always need him. There is nowhere to go without him. Any attack on the resurrection is an attack on the central place of Christ. It divorces those who have believed in him from radical faith in him. So we need to reassert that Jesus has been raised. We will be raised, always creatures, always dependent, gloriously unified with him, caught up into the life of God. Without Christ there is no spirituality, no Christianity, no religion, no knowledge of God.

Lives again our glorious King,
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Dying once he all doth save,
Where thy victory, O grave?

Love's redeeming work is done,
Fought the fight, the battle won.
Death in vain forbids Him rise,
Christ has opened Paradise.

Soar we now where Christ has led,
Foll'wing our exalted Head.
Made like Him, like Him we rise,
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

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