

The Supernatural Death and Resurrection of Christ

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From the supernatural birth and works of the Redeemer we move on to

The Supernatural Death of Christ

There has been a big move in recent times from that 'New Theology' (so-called) which pronounced the death of Jesus a death just like that of any other martyred hero. We remember hearing a prominent preacher in one of London's most famous churches saying that "many a British soldier had died a more heroic death than Jesus did". Even those who remain in the liberal school of theology have moved much nearer to the conservative position. But still there remain controversies over the supernatural, and there are still reservations as to the supernatural nature of Christ's death. We are not talking about the Crucifixion; that is, the manner in which He was put to death. The Crucifixion and the Crucifix are given their place in the realm of human sentimentality, sympathy and tragedy, and are therefore linked with the human and natural aspect. As far as we can see, the Crucifixion has only one supernatural feature, and that is in its fulfilment of long-before prediction: the prediction of 'hanging upon a tree' (Deuteronomy 21:23). The death of Christ is an entirely different matter.

A cross or a crucifix has often been - and still is - used as a charm, and thought to possess some magic influence or power. It may be regarded as a superstitious emblem, and be worshipped. To it is given (in the imagination of the devotee) a reality as to the bodily sufferings of Christ. By concentrating intensely upon the physical agonies of Jesus it is possible to produce psychic effects in the form of actual pain in body and mind. Something akin to the heresy of transubstantiation (transferring spiritual meaning to material substances) is believed to take place, as in Roman Catholicism it is believed that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus. This is in the realm of mysticism and magic and not in that of the truly Divine supernatural.

The death of Christ is different. It is a spiritual power which affects every spiritual realm. Its ultimate horizon is death itself. It begins by teaching the cause of death, which is sin. It proceeds to touch the results of sin in human life. It brings the believer to spiritual victory in this life and at the end. It ends in the final abolition of death when "death is swallowed up in victory". This is all above nature. Sometimes, in the discretion of God, the death-victory of Christ means actual healing of the human body supernaturally. More generally it means - by faith's appropriation - Divine life in the human body where healing is not effected, but above-natural sustenance and ability make life a continuous miracle.

While the New Testament speaks about "the cross of our Lord Jesus", it means not the wooden gibbet, but the work in the spiritual realm which was done there and then. That work, was wholly supernatural.

The Resurrection of the Redeemer - Supernatural

If we strictly confine this matter to actual resurrection, that is, not resuscitation or any other explanation, the only ground of argument is that of whether or not it actually took place. Resurrection in reality is something outside of the natural realm; it is God's act alone.

There are only two main answers to the question, if question there be. One is the fact and phenomenon of Christianity. There can be no doubt or question that New Testament Christianity had as its foundation the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That accounted for the phenomenal change in the first Apostles and preachers. That gave birth to the Church - "Begotten again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). That was the dynamic of progress; the power of survival; the secret of reproduction when massacre and slaughter were vented upon "those of the Way". It was the undying power which defeated and dethroned great world empires. The theme could extend us to volumes, but when history has borne its witness to this supernatural aspect of the Redeemer, there remains the testimony of present and abiding experience. Amid all the so-much-to-be-deplored features of Christendom's defaultings and contradictions, there goes on in the multitudes of devoted and committed individual believers a living testimony to "the power of his resurrection" in endurance, sustenance, survival, and victory. These are the answer to the argument and the contention. The risen Christ is proving that He is alive by means of the onslaught of death and suffering upon those in whom He lives. Perhaps that explains the mystery of their adversities. Resurrection is always God's vindication of those who suffer for Him, and His seal upon what is of Himself.

Our next consideration will be the supernatural nature of the Church.

The Church: A Supernatural Body

It has often been stated that the Church had its beginning on the Day of Pentecost. We know what is meant by the statement, but it is not true. The Church no more had its beginning on that day than Jesus Christ had His beginning the day or night when He was 'born' at Bethlehem. We are clearly told that the Church - the Elect - began in the councils of God 'before the foundation of the world'. The one difference may be that the Son of God actually existed 'before the world was', while the Church was 'foreknown' and therefore existed in the knowledge of God who is eternal. In this very real sense the Church is eternal and not of time. Says the Apostle, in writing his great Church document, "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world".

This, then, is the first aspect of the supernatural nature of the Church. Pentecost and Jerusalem were the 'Bethlehem' of the Church, the birth into this world and in time. The Spirit of God has taken meticulous and strong measures to make it clear for all time that the birth of the Church, and therefore the nature of the Church, was quite supernatural. All the features of that event were above the natural. "The Holy Spirit sent down from heaven" was inclusive and characteristic. This was not something of men, of this world, or in any sense ordinary. It could not be accounted for on any ground but a breaking in of God and Heaven. This is a wholly spiritual thing answering to Christ's dictum: "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The Spirit of God is not at the command of man, neither in time nor place, but, like the wind, 'bloweth where (and when) it listeth'. The Church - the true Church - never was, and never is, a man-made thing. It is something born, not made.

This principle abides for ever and should govern both the Church universal and local. The local should take its character from the universal. Not man-made, formed, engineered, or manipulated, but the organic product of the One Corn of wheat which fell into the ground and died, and has ever since in the same way been reproducing in every nation. The local church, like the universal, should be a birth, and the work of man is not to create or institute it, but, firstly, to bring Christ there, and when the Holy Spirit has joined men and women to the Lord by inward relatedness, anointed and Spirit-governed men function as instructors, exhorters, pastors, under-shepherds, etc. Because this is all by the anointing and not by human wit and wisdom, the growth of the Church is like its birth, supernatural. The verdict upon every aspect of the true Church should be: 'God did it, not man, fundamentally.' In the beginning spiritually responsible men, who were "filled with the Holy Spirit", fasted and prayed concerning ways, means and persons relating to the Church, thus showing that nothing was left to them, but all had to come continually from Heaven, as at the inception on the Day of Pentecost. The true Church is the embodiment of the absolute sovereign lordship of the exalted Christ, and, therefore, as all hell failed to prevail against Him, so "the gates of hades shall not prevail against it". Its survival and victory will be supernatural to the end.

But here enters the need for discerning and discriminating between the natural and the spiritual, or supernatural, in church matters. This will engage our attention in the next chapter.