

Shall We Meet Our Loved Ones Again?

D.L. Moody:

This is one of the grandest chapters in the writings of Paul. It is especially grand to those who have lost friends. No sooner do loved ones pass away than the question arises, Shall we meet them again?

Paul answers this question and gives a consolation we can find so clearly stated nowhere else.

What a consolation to know, as we lay our friends away, that we shall meet them again in a little while!

As I go into a cemetery, I like to think of the time when the dead shall rise from their graves. We read part of this chapter in what we call the "burial service." I think it is an unfortunate expression. Paul never talked of "burial." He said the body was sown in corruption, sown in weakness, sown in dishonour, sown a natural body.

If I bury a bushel of wheat, I never expect to see it again, but if I sow it, I expect results. Thank God, our friends are not buried; they are only sown! I like the Saxon name for the cemetery -- GOD'S ACRE.

The Gospel preached by the apostles rested upon four pillars: the atoning death of Christ, His burial and resurrection, His ascension, His coming again. These four doctrines were preached by all the apostles, and by them the Gospel must stand or fall.

In the opening verses of I Corinthians 15, we get a clear statement from Paul that the doctrine of the resurrection is a part of the Gospel. He defines the Gospel as meaning that Christ died for our sins, but not that only -- He was buried and rose again the third day. Then he summons witnesses to prove the resurrection:

"He was seen of Cephas [Simon Peter] then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time."

Now that is pretty clear testimony, strong enough to satisfy a candid inquirer. But the Greeks had no belief in the possibility of the resurrection, and these converts at Corinth had been reared in that unbelief. So Paul puts the question:

"Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

It was one of the false doctrines that had crept into the church at Corinth, because no orthodox Jew would ever think of questioning it.

To deny the resurrection is to say that we will never see more of the loved ones whose bodies have been committed to the clay. If Christ has not risen, this life is the only one, and we are as the brutes.

How cruel it is to have anyone love you if this be true! How horrible that they should let the tendrils of your heart twine around them, if, when they are torn away in death, it is to be the end. I would rather hate than love if I thought there will be no resurrection, because then I would feel no pangs at losing the hated thing.

Oh, the cruelty of unbelief! It takes away our brightest hopes.

"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

IMMORTALITY

Mankind has natural "yearnings after the infinite." Among the most primitive peoples philosophers have detected what has been well called "an appetite for the infinite," which belies the teaching that death ends all.

It is one of the points of difference between man and beast. Birds of the air and beasts of the field are much the same today as they were in Eden. They eat, sleep and pass their lives from sun to sun in unvarying monotony. Their desires and needs are the same.

But man is always changing. His desires are always enlarging. His mind is always planning ahead. No sooner does he reach one goal than he presses towards the next. Not even death itself can arrest him. A well-known

infidel once said, "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is not death, but the belief of man in his own immortality."

This presentiment of a future life has been beautifully illustrated by the feeling which grows within the bird when winter approaches, impelling it to travel towards the south -- "an impulse mysterious and undefined, but irresistible and unerring"; or to "the longing of southern plants, taken to a northern climate and planted in a northern soil. They grow there, but they are always failing of their flowers. The poor, exiled shrub dreams of a splendid blossom which it has never seen, but which it is dimly conscious that it ought somehow to produce. It feels the flower which it has not strength to make in the half-chilled but still genuine juices of its southern nature. That is the way in which the thought of a future life haunts us all."

Philosophers have many facts to prove this universal reaching forward to the life beyond the grave. It is supposed that many funeral rites and ceremonies, for instance, are due to it. If the body is once more to be occupied by its spirit, it at once suggests itself that it must be protected from harm. Accordingly we find that graves are concealed lest enemies should dig up the remains and dishonour them.

Livingstone tells how a Bechuana chief was buried in his own cattle pen, then the cattle were driven about for some hours until all trace of the grave was obliterated.

But the body must be protected not alone from ill-usage, but also, as far as possible, from decay; and the process of embalming is an endeavour in this direction.

Sometimes, indeed, resurrection would be undesirable, and so we find that dead bodies are thrown into the water to drown the spirit.

Modern Egyptians turn the body round and round, it is said, to make the spirit giddy and therefore unable to retrace its steps.

Certain aboriginal Australians take off the nails of the hands lest the reanimated corpse should scratch its way out of its narrow cell.

When the conception of a second life as a continuation of the present life is held, we find the custom of burying inanimate things, such as weapons and instruments. The dead man will require everything beyond -- as he did this side -- death.

Not alone inanimate things, but animals are killed in order that their ghosts may accompany the ghost of the dead man. The Bedouins slaughter his camels over the grave of their dead comrade: indispensable in this world, it will be the same in the next.

From this, one step leads to the immolation of human beings. Wives follow their husbands; slaves are slain that they may continue to serve their masters. In the words of a poet:

They that in barbarian burials killed the slave and slew the wife
Felt within themselves the sacred passion of the second life.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE RESURRECTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We only catch glimpses of the doctrine of the resurrection now and then in the Old Testament, but the saints of those days evidently believed in it.

Nearly two thousand years before Christ, Abraham rehearsed His sacrifice when on Mt. Moriah he obeyed God's call to offer up Isaac. Referring to this, Paul writes: "Accounting that God was able to raise [Isaac] up, even from the dead: from whence also he received him in a figure."

Five hundred years later we find God saying unto His servant Moses, "I kill, and I make alive."

Isaiah wrote, "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces." Again, "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they rise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead."

Ezekiel's vivid description of the resurrection of dry bones, setting forth in prophecy the restoration of Israel, is another evidence.

When David lost his child, he said he could not call the little one back to him, but that he would go and be with the child. At other times he wrote, "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness." And, "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me."

The Patriarch Job comforted himself with the same glorious hope in the hour of his deep sorrow. He who had asked, "What is my strength that I should hope? and what is mine end that I should prolong my life?" said, "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another:"

Job must have firmly believed that his body was to be raised to life again, hereafter, but not on earth, for he said again,

"There is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stalk thereof die in the ground; Yet through the scent of water. it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up: So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake nor be raised out of their sleep."

In Hosea the Lord declares: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction."

In the last chapter of Daniel we have another glimpse of the same truth:

"They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." And his book closes with these words:

"Go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days."

And typically, too, resurrection was set forth in the Old Testament. By the firstfruits offered the day after the passover-sabbath as a pledge of the whole harvest, the children of Israel were taught in type of the Messiah who should be "the firstfruits of them that slept."

Someone has said that the very first employment of Israel in Canaan was preparing the type of the Saviour's resurrection, and their first religious act was holding up that type of a risen Saviour.

AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

But what was referred to only at long intervals in the Old Testament became in the New Testament a prominent matter of fact and teaching. The word "resurrection" occurs forty-two times in the New Testament. Many times during His ministry did our Lord refer to the resurrection of all the dead.

The sadducees once came to Him with a difficult question about the marriage relation hereafter; and Jesus said,

"As touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

On another occasion Christ said,

"When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just."

When Lazarus died, Jesus spake the consoling words to his sisters: "Thy brother shall rise again."

Martha replied, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus then said unto her, "I am the resurrection and the life."

A SPLENDID GUESS

We see then that the belief in a future life did not begin with Christ.

But though the idea existed before Christianity, it was at best only "a splendid guess." The natural man cannot look across the narrowest grave and see what is beyond. Strain his eyes as he will, he cannot pierce the veil of death. It is ever before him, blighting his hopes, checking his plans, thwarting his purposes, a barrier that nothing can break down.

Ever since sin entered the world, Death has reigned, making the earth one huge graveyard. He has not rested for a moment. In every age and every country, "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return" has been the sentence overhanging mankind. All the generations of men as they pass across the earth do but follow their dead.

Many unexpected things happen to us in this life, but death is not among them. We do not know how or when it will come, but come it will, if the Lord tarry.

We have heard of doctors who have performed wonderful cures, but all their skill and knowledge have been unable to undo the work of Death. In all these six thousand years since Death entered this sin-cursed earth, human means have failed to win back a single trophy from Death. Advancing civilisation, increased education, progress in commerce and art -- none of these things make us superior to the most degraded savages. Death always triumphs in the end. The flow is always in one direction -- onward and never backward.

BROUGHT TO LIGHT BY CHRIST

What was unknown by the wisest men on earth was revealed by Christ. He "abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

"That undiscovered country," spoken of by the poet, "from whose bourn no traveller returns," is not an undiscovered country to the believer. Our Lord explored it. He entered the lists against Death in His own territory and came off more than conqueror.

The sceptre of Death is universal still, but it is broken and shall one day crumble into dust. The Christian need no longer speculate about the future: certainty is reached beside the empty tomb of Christ. "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept." We can see the trace of His returning footprints.

TRIUMPH

And so we can join in the triumphant strain, "Death is swallowed up of victory." The sting of death is sin, and God has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. They which have fallen asleep in Christ have not perished, but we shall one day see them face to face.

What a Gospel of joy and hope we have, compared to that of unbelief!

The heathen sorrowed without hope, wrote Dr. Bonar:

To them death connected itself with no hope, no brightness, no triumph. It was not sunset to them, for that bids us be on the lookout for another sun, as bright as that which set. It was not autumn or winter, for these speak of returning spring and summer. It was not seed cast into rough soil, for that predicts the future tree or flower, more beautiful than the seed. It was pure and simple darkness, all cloud, shadow, desolation.

A shattered pillar, a ship gone to pieces, a race lost, a harp lying on the ground with snapped strings and all its music lost, a flowerbud crushed -- these were the sad utterances of their hopeless grief. The thought that death was the gate of life came not in to cheer the parting and brighten the sepulchre. The truth that the grave was the soil and the body the seed sown by God's own hand to call out the latent life; that the race was not lost, but transferred to another building and another city to be "a pillar in the house of God," that the bud was not crushed, but transplanted for fuller expansion to a kindlier soil and air; that the harp was not broken, but handed to a truer minstrel who will bring out all the rich compass of its hidden music: these were things that had no place in their theology, hardly in their dreams.

AN ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE

Some people claim that the question of a risen Saviour is not essential. Hear what Paul says:

"If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."

I tell you, it is very essential. It is not a mere speculative question that we are dealing with; it is of the greatest practical importance. The resurrection is the keystone of the arch on which our faith is supported.

If Christ has not risen, we must impeach all those witnesses of lying.

If Christ has not risen, we have no proof that the crucifixion of Jesus differed from that of the two thieves who suffered with Him.

If Christ has not risen, it is impossible to admire His atoning death which was accepted. Someone has said that the power of Christ's death to take away sin is always conditioned in the New Testament with the fact of His resurrection.

If Christ has not risen, it is impossible to admire His words and character. He made the resurrection a test-truth of His divinity.

The Jews once asked for a sign, and He answered -- "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" -- referring to the temple of His body.

On another occasion He gave the sign of the Prophet Jonah: "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Paul says, "Declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead."

"If He had not been divine," says one, "the sins of any one of us would have been a gravestone too heavy for Him to throw off; the claims of Jehovah's justice would have been bands of death too strong for Him to burst."

What would Christianity be without the resurrection? It would descend to the level of any of the other religious systems of the world. If Christ never rose from the dead, how do His words differ from those of Plato? Other men besides Christ have lived beautiful lives and have left behind them beautiful precepts to guide their followers. We should have to class Christ with these.

"HOW ARE THE DEAD RAISED? AND WITH WHAT BODY DO THEY COME?"

Turning back to the chapter, we find that Paul next deals with the question of how the dead can be raised and with what body they come. He says,

"Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God" -- and all things are possible with God -- "giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory.

"So also," continues Paul, "is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual The first man is of the earth, earthy. the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly."

We see the truth of Paul's illustration in the world around us. The analogy of nature does not indeed furnish a proof of the resurrection, but it affords illustrations of many things that are just as hard to explain -- yet we do not deny the facts.

Shall We Meet Our Loved Ones Again?

Take a little black flower seed and sow it. After it has been planted some time, dig it up. If it is whole, you know that it has no life; but if it has begun to decay, you know that life and fruitfulness will follow. There will be a resurrected life, and out of that little black seed will come a beautiful fragrant flower.

Here is a disgusting grub, crawling along the ground. By and by old age overtakes it, and it begins to spin its own shroud, to make its own sepulchre, and it lies as if in death. Look again, it has shuffled off its shroud, it has burst its sepulchre open, and it comes forth a beautiful butterfly, with different form and habits.

So with our bodies. They die, but God will give us glorified bodies in their stead. This is the law of the new creation as well as of the old: light after darkness; life after death; fruitfulness and glory after corruption and decay.

Thank God, we are to gain by death. We are to have something that death cannot touch. When this earthly body is raised, all the present imperfection will be gone. Jacob will leave his lameness. Paul will have no thorn in the flesh. We shall enter a life that deserves the name of life, happy, glorious, everlasting -- the body once more united to the soul, no longer mortal, subject to pain and disease and death, but glorified, incorruptible, "fashioned like unto his glorious body," everything that hinders the spiritual life left behind. We are exiles now, but then we who are faithful shall stand before the throne of God, joint heirs with Christ, kings and priests, citizens of that heavenly country.

A bright young girl of fifteen was suddenly cast upon a bed of suffering, completely paralyzed on one side, and nearly blind. She heard the family doctor say to her parents as they stood by the bedside, "She has seen her best days, poor child!"

"No, doctor," she exclaimed, "my best days are yet to come, when I shall see the King in His beauty."

OUR HOPE

That is our hope. We shall not sink into annihilation. Christ rose from the dead to give us a pledge of our own rising. The resurrection is the great antidote for death. Nothing else can take its place. Riches, genius, worldly pleasures or pursuits, none can bring us consolation in the dying hour.

"All my possessions for a moment of time," cried Queen Elizabeth when dying.

"I have provided in the course of my life for everything except death, and now, alas! I am to die unprepared" were the last words of Cardinal Borgia.

Compare with these the last words of one of the early disciples: "I am weary. I will now go to sleep. Good night!" He had the sure hope of awaking in a brighter land.

At the Battle of Inkerman a soldier was just able to crawl to his tent after he was struck down. When found, he was lying upon his face, his open Bible before him, his hand glued fast to the page by his life blood which covered it.

When his hand was lifted, the letters of the printed page were clearly traced upon it; and with the ever-living promise in and on his hand, they laid him in a soldier's grave. The words were: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

I want a religion that can comfort even in death, that can unite me with my loved ones. Oh, what gloom and darkness would settle upon this world if it were not for the glorious doctrine of the resurrection! Thank God, the glorious morning will soon break. For a little while God asks us to be the watchtower, faithful to Him and waiting for the summons. Soon our Lord will come to receive His own, whether they be living or dead.