

Our Hope is in the Resurrection

It is appropriate that we conclude the Old Testament portion of our Bible Study for Married Couples with a set of reflections on the resurrection in the Easter season. Sometimes we are so familiar with the story that we don't pause to examine or reflect on how truly radical and revolutionary is the claim that He is risen, and the tomb is empty!

We begin with what precisely the Scriptures meant by "resurrection." It did not mean simple resuscitation of a dead person or some sort of spiritual, disembodied, ghostly existence. Rather, resurrection meant that our dead physical bodies would no longer be dead. We would come out of our tombs; our bodies would be transformed, and we would never die again. The Jews at the time of Jesus believed that the general resurrection for all the righteous would happen at the end of the present evil age. God would act in a definitive way to set the world to rights. He would defeat his enemies, establish his kingdom, and transform all of creation.

The Jewish and Christian understanding of the afterlife involves two stages. First, there is a period of time between the death of a righteous person and the resurrection of the body. The most we can say about that time is that the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, or that they are alive in a state of peaceful rest with God, waiting for the general resurrection at the end of the present evil age. They are part of the great communion of saints, and their intercession for us is powerful. The second stage is what we commonly call "resurrection from the dead": our bodies will be reunited with our souls, but now in a perfected, glorious form, and after the Final Judgment, we will be united with God and with those who have loved him in this life, seeing his face and experiencing untold and unimaginable joys forever and ever and ever! Resurrection, then, is "life after" life after death!

Remember that the Jews expected that at the end of the present evil age, there would be a general resurrection. From a Jewish standpoint, then, one of the more unusual elements of the Easter story is not resurrection of the body, but the resurrection of only one person. This new way of thinking about resurrection is at the heart of our claim that Jesus is Lord and Christ.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND AND EXPECTATIONS

The doctrine of the resurrection developed late in the history of Israel. We know that the belief in resurrection was not universal at Jesus' time. For example, the Sadducees did not accept it. The first unambiguous expressions of a belief in resurrection don't show up until sometime around the Maccabean revolt (167–165 BC). However, that does not mean there weren't hints and beliefs that prepared the way. The prophets proclaimed that the Creator God who had made a covenant with Abraham, Moses, and David would be faithful to that covenant even when his people weren't. They believed he would act in dramatic and unmistakable ways to set things to right. The prophets used startling metaphors and images to describe what that great day would be like: God's people coming out of tombs, dry bones coming back to life, curing the incurable wound, establishing an unbreakable

covenant, etc. Then, gradually, what began as a metaphor for something spectacular became an expression of what would really happen. And one day, on a real day right in the middle of history, it actually happened. One man was resurrected—and that changed the course of human history.

WHY IS RESURRECTION IMPORTANT FOR US TODAY?

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes said, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity and a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14). The short version of his fairly pessimistic book is this: It does not matter what we do in this life because there is no afterlife, and there is one fate for all creatures, and all the good things we build will go to someone else when we die (see Ecclesiastes 2:16–21; 9:1–6).

From one perspective, he is correct. There are today some remnants left of the great Roman aqueduct systems and roads—but for the most part they are ruins. Most human achievements are surpassed at one time or another. It would appear that most of what we do is destined for the junk heap or to be forgotten. That would mean that our labor really is in vain. What led St. Paul to a very different conclusion? What led him to say “our labor is **not** in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58)? Simply put, the Resurrection of Jesus.

I remember a time in my life when I essentially agreed with Ecclesiastes and thought that what I did was important because it was my bus ticket to heaven. I was not thinking necessarily that I would earn my ticket by my own efforts. I knew I needed God—but in the confusing muddle that was my thought process, escaping this evil world was what it was all about. I thought that there would be an end to the space–time continuum. The world would end, and I would be out of here.

I remember when I finally grasped that the Resurrection of Jesus was the resurrection of his real body. I was wondering why Jesus, and by extension we, would need a real body, if we were merely destined to play harps on clouds, or some such thing.

As I came to understand more about the resurrection, I found that it was a dangerous idea with real-life political ramifications. This idea put the fire in the belly of the revolutionaries who resisted Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian king, in the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BC and the Jewish revolutionaries who resisted Rome at the time of Jesus. Belief in the resurrection was the hope and belief that the Creator God would act; he would restore their bodies and their lives someday, even if they lost them now. This hope drove them to do remarkable and great things for the Lord, even to sacrifice their lives.

Jesus’ Resurrection gave his followers a taste of what was to come: death was not the last word. But it also transformed the way his followers lived here and now. Hope for the future also changed their present reality, as it had done for the martyrs and revolutionaries before them. Jesus’ followers lived a different way because they too were filled with hope and purpose, not escape and evasion; there was no bus ticket, and they didn’t want one. The early Christians invested in this world, in this life. Why? Because they were convinced

that the Creator God loved this world he had created and intended to rescue not only us, but the world as well.

WHY IS RESURRECTION IMPORTANT FOR OUR MARRIAGE?

In the sixth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul expressed concern about the behavior of certain Corinthian Christians. They were behaving badly at the elaborate dinners to which they had been invited, especially around the time of major religious and sporting events. These dinners would have involved copious amounts of food, wine, and sexual favors provided by the host for his guests. There was also the ever-present danger of the pagan cults of Aphrodite, Dionysus/Bacchus, Apollo, Isis, and Serapis. Idolatry and the sacred prostitution associated with these pagan cults was an integral part of civic life and culture. Even celebrating a relative's birthday, marriage, or graduation could be an occasion for participating in idolatry and sexual immorality.

One can easily imagine some of the Christians wanting to fit in with their neighbors or relatives and being attracted to this kind of behavior. It is equally possible to imagine that they were not sure how to get out of difficult situations without offending a patron, friend, or relative. Once trapped or lured into these situations, some of them appear to have adopted the slogans of the local philosophers as a way to justify their behavior. The excuse would be something like, "It does not matter what we do with our body, because our real self is our soul, and that remains untouched by whatever happens to the body." Paul quotes them this way: "Food for the belly and the belly for food and God will do away with both!" (1 Corinthians 6:13). The same line of reasoning would have justified visiting the prostitutes at the pagan shrines or partaking in the after-dinner entertainment at the fancy banquets. Here too, they might rationalize that the body is not really "them." Or they might have put it like this: "Casual sex was made for the body and the body for casual sex, and since God will destroy both and I will live on, I can do what I want with my body."

They could do anything they wanted with their body because the body really didn't matter; it was not really them. (Sound familiar?) Paul said to these people: NO! God will raise your body because without it you will not be human—even in the afterlife. What you do with your body matters, because it is inseparable from YOU! What your body does, you do.

During this argument in I Corinthians 6, Paul goes on to quote Genesis 2:24: "The two will become one flesh." For Paul, that is proof that what we do with our body matters. It matters because God intends the physical act of intercourse to create and to express the unity of two persons. The two persons really do become one! Intercourse with a prostitute creates an actual unity, where there ought not to be one. And because we are one with Christ in Baptism, we have now involved Christ himself in our sin, for he is one with us! How important then that we be one person, united with Christ, saying with our bodies as with our whole selves that we are his and his alone.

The Resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of our bodies demonstrate that our physical bodies are indeed good, and that without them, we are not fully human persons.

Our marriages are concrete signs of the total and complete unity of persons that will one day be the unity of Christ and his bride the Church. Marriage in Christ involves the unity of two people, body and soul.

What we do with our bodies matters. Our love as married men and women expresses, in a way no other human relationship can, the spousal love of God for his people. Our spousal love, because it involves our whole person, is fruitful, faithful, and forever. God's love for us is the same. Alleluia!

We conclude volume one of our Bible Study for Married Couples with the following Old Testament passages and two Easter readings. Enjoy!

Hosea 6:1–6

Isaiah 5:1–2; Amos 9:13–15

Isaiah 25:6–9

Ezekiel 37:1–4, 7–14

Isaiah 65:17–25

Daniel 12:1–3

2 Maccabees 7:13–14, 20–23

Wisdom 3:1–8

Matthew 28:8–15

Luke 24:13–23, 27–32