

Resurrection Life

Somerset Maugham, the English novelist (1874-1965), rejected any kind of religious belief, but was still faced with questions about the meaning of life: "If death ends all, if I have neither to hope for good to come nor to fear evil, I must ask myself what I am here for, and how in these circumstances I must conduct myself." When the godly Edward the Confessor (c.1003-66), king of England and founder of Westminster Abbey, was near death, his last words were, "Weep not, I shall not die; and as I leave the land of the dying I trust to see the blessings of the Lord in the land of the living." What a difference between these two Englishmen! One without hope, the other overflowing with hope! King Edward knew that death is not the end of all things.

Our Lord broke the bonds of death! His central miracle was His walk out of the tomb. In the early church, one of the first doctrinal concerns was the question of what happened to those Christians who had died – the answer to the problem of death. The Resurrection of Christ became the great answer of victory for all those who had died. God will overcome the power of death by the resurrection of the body on the last day (1 Cor. 15:20-28). On Good Friday we remember the price Jesus paid for our salvation. On the cross He took our sin, our shame and guilt upon Himself. He died in our stead. Because of the cross, we are not afraid. In the Easter celebration we rejoice in Jesus' resurrection. As He lives so shall we live. Death is our last enemy, which we all have to face if the Lord tarries. But death does not have the last word. It has been defeated. Christians are journeying not to the sunset but to the sunrise. Death is a gateway to eternal life for all who know Jesus Christ. A glorious future awaits the children of God. There won't be any more death nor sorrow. All tears will be wiped away. There will be eternal joy. Nobody will be sick. We will be forever secure. No one will rob us of anything. No more war. All that is sinful, destructive, and mortal won't be anymore. We will live with the living God and with Jesus Christ Who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

We no longer live under slavery to fear of death. We don't need to deceive ourselves with costly amusements that distract us from the truth of our mortality and foster the illusion that we are immortal. We can look in the face of death without fear, because we trust in the Risen Lord. We know that when we die we do not pass out of the living, we pass into the land of the living. Since the first Easter, Jesus' resurrection is our ultimate hope. Jesus Himself refers to this when He says to Martha at the resurrection of Lazarus, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25). What does Jesus mean? What difference does it make to life whether or not we believe in the resurrection? The man who believes in Jesus faces and experiences physical death in the same way as any other man does. The years are not specially suspended for him and his life in this world will not go on forever. The words "I am" are very significant. Jesus does not say, "I raise the dead; I perform the resurrection." Jesus identifies the resurrection with His own person. He is our life. The follower of Jesus possesses life even in this world. This life is called the real, true life (1 Tim. 6:19). The reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead

made all the difference in the world for the early Christians. It empowered the early Christian community with incredible courage in the face of seemingly impossible obstacles and terrifying threats. Why? Because they put their trust not in this broken world but in the risen Christ. Their risen Saviour was with them as they sat together at "the Lord's table" or faced the lions in the Roman Colosseum.

Through Jesus, we enter into a new relationship with life. Life in communion with the living God. Life flourishes because He is with His people. The vitality of the Resurrection serves us from day to day by the difference it makes in our lives. We can deal with suffering, pillage, war and hatred that we hear about daily and still have hope. The resurrection of Christ reveals the ultimate victory over the power of evil. The resurrection life is the real and full life. It is a life for and with God through Jesus Christ, confessing Him, loving Him and His commandments, serving Him in every area of our lives. When we take our Lord's commands as our laws, and when we realize that He is there to help us to live the life He commanded, life takes on new meaning. It is clothed with new beauty, new winsomeness, new strength. We are freed from the frustration which is characteristic of the sin-ridden unforgiven life; we are freed from the futility of the Christless life. Doing His will, we feel protected, satisfied, and fulfilled best by doing what is right.

Outside of Jesus Christ and without faith in Him, no one has life. According to secular standards a person may be well off. Perhaps he is successful in whatever he does. Perhaps he is a man of distinction and has all that his heart desires. Perhaps people idolize him, are envious of him, and praise him for his brilliance. He may have everything, but if he is without Jesus Christ, he has nothing. He is without hope in this world. Our Lord explains this truth in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). The prodigal "squandered his wealth in wild living." He repented of his sin and foolishness and returned home. His father said about him, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again." In other words, those who are without God in this world are alive in the physical sense of the word, but they miss out on the real life. They are spiritually dead. We find the same truth in Matthew 10:39, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." We are placed before a choice – life with God or life with the world. Some don't want to give up what the world has to offer. They don't want to lose their position, name, honour, money and all the other things in which they seek to find meaning in life. They hold on to them with all their might but at the cost of real, true life through faith in Jesus Christ. What is our choice?

Life may be hard. There is plenty of misery in it. We may have to struggle with health problems. We wonder at times why so many godless people prosper while Christians suffer hardship. Yet we are not without hope. As long as we are here on this side of the grave, the risen Lord will enable us to keep going in His service. "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength" (Isa. 40:31).

Johan D. Tangelder
January, 2004