

# Theology Matters: Resurrection

## Session 2: Resurrection in the Gospels and Acts

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### Resurrection in the Gospels

Nobody expected a would-be Messiah to die. The Messiah was supposed to defeat Israel's enemies, not be killed by them. Thus nobody expected a would-be Messiah to rise again from the dead. The most they could hope was that he would be raised at the final judgment.

With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that on the few occasions when Jesus speaks explicitly about his own death and resurrection, the disciples' reactions are less than enthusiastic:

**'And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.'** (Mark 8:31-32)

**'They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.'** (Mark 9:32)

**'As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.'** (Matt 17:22-23)

**'After the transfiguration Jesus told them 'to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean' (Mark 9:9-10)**

**Question:** Why were they so confused? What would they have made of Jesus' claims?

At his trial false witnesses quote Jesus as saying **'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days'** (Matthew 26:61; 27:40; Mark 15:29). John tells us that Jesus, actually **'was speaking about the temple of his body'** and that **'when, therefore, he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken'** (John 2:21-22).

There are a few other general references in the Gospels, which seem to affirm the standard Pharisaic view of bodily resurrection: Herod's fear that John the Baptist has been resurrected as Jesus, or that he is Elijah (Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9) and the absurd questioning of the Sadducees (Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 20), as well as the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:38-42) and the comment about the wheat falling to the ground and then bearing fruit (John 12:24).

Another key passage is John 11, the raising of Lazarus:

**'Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe**

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**this?’ She said to him ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.’ (John 11:21-27)**

There is also a particularly puzzling passage at the crucifixion of Jesus:

**‘And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.’ (Matthew 27:51-53)**

There certainly appears to be some kind of allusion intended to Ezekiel 37:

**‘Behold I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land.’ (Ezekiel 37:12-14)**

Scholars typically offer two approaches to this passage:

1. Matthew **made up the story**, either as apocalyptic imagery which he never intended to be taken literally, or as a story designed to encapsulate and ‘fulfil’ a number of prophetic texts, such as Ezekiel 37, Isaiah 26, Daniel 12 and so on.
2. Matthew is **aware of accounts of strange occurrences and so retells them**, without dwelling on them too much, in such a way as to allow the biblically alert reader a hint that this is the real return from exile and the dawning of the new age that they should have been expecting.

**Question:** Which approach do you think is most plausible and why?

Here are four questions I have about this passage:

1. **Who were the bodies that were raised?**
2. **Does their raising mean that the general resurrection has happened?**
3. **Are the corpses still alive today?**
4. **How therefore should we interpret it?**

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### Resurrection and the Early Church

The resurrection of Jesus was an enormous innovation, with huge theological consequences. The early church must have spent a lot of time rethinking their theology in the light of the resurrection. Let's consider just three things that the resurrection tells us about Jesus:

#### **1. He was the Son of God**

The title 'Son of God' doesn't mean second person of the trinity: It was often used for Israel as a whole (See Exodus 4:22-23 and Jeremiah 31:20) or its King in particular (See 2 Sam 7:14) and in neither case is Israel or the King intended to be seen as divine or part of the trinity.

**'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up from your offspring after you, one who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.'** (2 Samuel 7:12-14)

**'[The Gospel was] promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.'** (Romans 1:2-4)

#### **2. He was Lord of the World**

As they reflected on the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, they would remember that the OT passages spoke of the Messiah not just ruling over Israel, but over *all* the nations.

**'YHWH said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you, ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Now therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve YHWH with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.'** (Psalm 2:7-12)

**'Give the king your justice O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! [...] may he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth [...] May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed.'** (Psalm 72:1, 8, 17)

**'Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.'** (Isaiah 42:1)

#### **3. He was God himself**

The early Christians, declaring that Jesus was the world's true Lord, used the greek word *kyrios*, which was the word that Jews used throughout the Greek Old Testament to translate YHWH.

Isaiah 45 fiercely declares the uniqueness and oneness of God:

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**'I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall confess to God."' (Isaiah 45:22-23)**

**'God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'** (Phil 2:9-11)

Compare too:

- Psalm 34:8 and 1 Peter 2:3
- Joel 2:32 and Tomans 10:13

### **Resurrection in the Book of Acts**

The resurrection of Jesus is a key feature in the preaching of the gospel in the book of Acts.

- Acts 2:22-32
- Acts 3:11-26
- Acts 17:16-34
- Acts 23:1-22

**Question:** How much does the resurrection feature in our preaching of the gospel? If it doesn't, why not? And what are the consequences of failing to preach the resurrection of Jesus?

**'It would be seriously unbalanced to proclaim either the cross without the resurrection (as I am afraid Anselm did) or the resurrection without the cross (as do those who present Jesus as a living Lord rather than as an atoning Saviour.) It is therefore healthy to maintain an indissoluble link between them. [...] "There can be no salvation from sin unless there is a living Saviour: this explains the emphasis laid by the apostle on the resurrection. But the living One can be a Saviour only because he has died: this explains the emphasis laid on the cross. The Christian believes in a living Lord, or he could not believe at all; but he believes in a living Lord who died an atoning death, for no other can hold the faith of a soul under the doom of sin." To sum up, the gospel includes both the death and resurrection of Jesus, since nothing would have been accomplished by his death if he had not been raised from it. Yet the gospel emphasises the cross, since it was there that the victory was accomplished.'**

**(John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p238-239)**