

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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Our Resurrection Promise

by Galen Peterson



The Garden Tomb in Jerusalem

My mom died not too long ago. Like so many others, I have come to understand the sorrow that goes with losing a close loved one. But I also know that one day I will be reunited with her in Paradise. How can I have that confidence? The answer rests in the promise that we have of our future resurrection in *Olam habah*—"the world to come."

The concept of the resurrection of body and soul is found throughout the Bible, either through the use of the term itself or related terms like "rise again" and "live again." It is also implied in some passages like Gen. 22 when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, yet was confident that the boy would return with him.

In ancient Hebraic thought, there was no distinction between body and soul. In fact there is no

Hebrew word for body, only a word for "flesh"—*basar*. All humans were considered to be a unity of flesh and soul.

And since the finality of the death of the body would be in conflict with the immortality of the soul, this unity would be vulnerable. So that is where the resurrection comes in. Even though the soul would be separated from the body in death, a day would come when our bodies will rise again to be reunited with our souls, thus restoring this unity.

For that reason, most Jews of biblical days were strong believers in the concept of resurrection. This was true among the dominant Jewish faction in Second Temple, the Pharisees. On the other hand, their counterparts, the Sadducees, denied the validity of the resurrection. Eventually the theology of the Pharisees won out,

and belief in the resurrection among Jews continued on until modern times.

So Orthodox Jews have long lived their lives with a future resurrection in mind. That means saving parts of the body like finger nail clippings, hair and internal organs that have been removed, such as the appendix. These items are then buried with the body in anticipation of the later resurrection.

But since Orthodoxy is very much in the minority today, belief in a physical resurrection of one's body after dying is no longer common. An example of this transformation is the way that the long-standing traditional Jewish prayer called the *Amidah* is now said. Whereas it once included a line reflecting the Orthodox belief in the resurrection saying, "You O Lord are might forever, you revive

the dead,” today’s *Gates of Prayer Siddur* (Reform prayer book) now reads “Blessed be the Lord, the Source of Life.” Thus there has been an intentional shifting from an emphasis on the hereafter to the here and now.

In fact more Jewish people today believe in reincarnation than in the resurrection. For some people, it is a common folk belief that is illustrated in a movie that came out a couple of months ago called “The Lovely Bones.” It tells the story of a 14 year-old girl named Susie who dies and goes to heaven.

Being a product of Hollywood, in this movie heaven is whatever you imagine it to be for yourself. So for Susie, heaven is a place of pure teen life and pop culture where spirits frolic about, judgment-free and God is totally absent. Susie also goes back and forth between heaven and earth where she temporarily indwells another person’s body.

You might say that this movie is creative and fanciful, and it taps in to the idyllic wishes of many people. But like many products of Hollywood, it is just an illusion, and without any reason to believe it could be true. It ignores common sense questions like, “If heaven exists, who made it? And “Why is the Creator of heaven absent?” It seems that logic really doesn’t matter when you write the script of a movie or share pop beliefs such as this.

For others, reincarnation is not just a dream, but a justified belief. Like Susie in the movie, it is said by some people that souls can return to life on earth by residing in completely different bodies. This emphasis has been popularized by a growing interest in the New Age movement among Jews, as well as a heightened

interest in *Kabbalah*—Jewish mysticism. Although *Kabbalah* appears to be Orthodox Judaism on the outside, it advocates most aspects of New Age beliefs, including reincarnation.

The *Zohar*, the spiritual book of *Kabbalah*, was written during the Middle Ages in the 13th century. Here is what the *Zohar* has to say about reincarnation:



Jewish tombs on the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem in anticipation of the resurrection at the coming of Messiah

“As long as a person is unsuccessful in his purpose in this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, uproots him and replants him over and over again.” (Zohar I 186b)

This holy book goes on to describe how many chances a soul gets to be reincarnated and if a soul can be reincarnated as an animal or even plants and minerals. Thanks in part to celebrity devotees like Madonna, *Kabbalah* has gained much renewed interest in recent years.

The problem with these beliefs, like other contemporary religions that suddenly appear on the world scene, is that they are in direct conflict with the original holy book—the Bible. Scripture makes no allowance for souls to return to earth and to start all over

again, whether as another human being or a dachshund or a turnip or the rocks in your garden. The writer to the Hebrews affirms, “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Resurrection, on the other hand, is a very biblical concept. In biblical times the people of Israel believed in a coming day of

resurrection associated with the arrival of the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah foretold:

*Your dead will live; their corpses will rise.
You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,
For your dew is as the dew of the dawn,
And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.*
(Is. 26:19).

But unlike reincarnation, which is just recycling here on earth, biblical resurrection is for the purpose of reuniting our bodies with our souls which have gone before us to be with the Lord. And unlike the belief systems that have sprung up in more recent times like *Kabbalah*, the promise of resurrection goes back to the solid foundation of the Bible.

Reasons why we can count on our future resurrection

God is all-powerful

The ancient Jewish sages wrote extensively on their belief in the resurrection because of God's omnipotence. They believed that if God could create the universe *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing") He could easily cause our bodies to be reunited with our souls. The Bible tells us:

Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being
(Gen. 2:7).

A story is told about a group of scientists who were sitting around discussing which one of them was going to approach God and tell Him that they didn't need Him anymore. Finally, one of the scientists volunteered and went to tell God that He was no longer needed.

The scientist said to God, "A bunch of us have been thinking and I've come to tell you that we really don't need You anymore. I mean, we've been coming up with great theories and ideas, we've cloned sheep, and we're on the verge of cloning humans. So as You can see, we really don't need You."

God nodded understandingly and replied, "I see. Well, no hard feelings. But before you go, let's have a contest."

The scientist answered, "Great, I'm all for it. What kind of contest?"

"A man-making contest."

"Sure! No problem. We'll figure it out," the scientist exclaimed.

He then bent down, picked up a handful of dirt and said, "Okay, I'm ready!"

And God responded: "No, no. First you go get your own dirt."

Now if God can create a human being from the dust of the earth once already, can we not expect Him to do it repeatedly for all of us? Is it any more of a miracle to do it for many persons than just one person? Whether it be the dust of our bones or the dust of our ashes, the Almighty God of the Universe can do whatever He wants with the very molecules that He created in the first place.

God is without limits in terms of power and sovereignty. So we can either think about the impossibilities of things like the resurrection from our limited human perspective, or the certainties from God's omnipotent perspective.

People have already risen from the dead

- In 1 Kings 17:17-24 Elijah the prophet called out to God and a dead child was given life again.
- In 2 Kings 4:17-37 the prophet Elisha did the same thing.
- In John 11:1-45 Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus declared His purpose for working this miracle by saying: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it" (Jn. 11:4). Indeed the glory of God was revealed when Lazarus was brought back to life.

The resurrection has been prophesied by prophets with perfect records

Earlier we considered what

Isaiah had to say about the resurrection. The record of Isaiah was perfect when it came to prophecy, whether it had to do with the captivity and restoration of Israel or the coming and ministry of the Messiah. For that reason we can also count on the surety of his prophecy regarding the resurrection of the dead.

The same could be said for Daniel, who foretold in great detail what would transpire on earth, from the rise and fall of kingdoms to the exact timing of the coming of Messiah and also his death. So when Daniel speaks on the resurrection, we ought to pay close attention.

Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.
(Dan. 12:1-2)

The resurrection of humanity is secured by the resurrection of Messiah

When Jesus declared to Martha that He intended to raise Lazarus from the dead, she wasn't thinking about Him doing it right then. She responded by saying, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn. 11:24). This was a reflection of the Jewish belief of that day about their ultimate resurrection in the day of the Messiah.

But what she didn't realize

was that the same Messianic resurrection power was present right in front of her. The same one who will bring about the resurrection of humanity in the Last Day was fully capable of resurrecting her brother at that moment, and also resurrecting himself from the grave about one week later. It's all about the omnipotent power of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus declared:

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die."

This, then, is the key to our own resurrection. Here is what Paul writes about the subject:

"But now Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Messiah all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Messiah the first fruits, after that those who are Messiah's at His coming." (1 Cor. 15:20-23)

The same way that Lazarus was called forth from the dead will be our expectation as believers. Paul goes on to say:

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality." (1 Cor. 15:52-53)

The good news is that our resurrection bodies will be perfected, just as our souls will have been perfected, never to perish, never to sin again. And never separated from the presence of the Lord and each other. That is our great promise, one that is backed by the name and the power of the One who defeated death by His own resurrection.

When Jesus made his declaration to Martha about being the "resurrection and the life," He concluded His statement with this question: "Do you believe this?" (Jn. 11:25). That is the same question that all of us need to answer on our own.

I trust that we can give the same answer as Martha when she said: "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world" (Jn. 11:27). According to v. 45 the same was true for many other Jews who also believed because of the

demonstration of the resurrection power of Jesus.

This is the kind of belief that is not based on fanciful dreams or religious systems that have come on the scene more recently. It is a belief that stands the test of time, affirmed in the only truly original and effectual source—the Word of God.

The resurrection is indeed a very Jewish belief. And it is one that gives us the only promise for the World to Come that we can count on in this world today.

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