



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## **A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**

### **Lesson 15.5 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)**

#### **The Resurrection of the Dead**

There are two kinds of resurrection from the dead. The first kind of resurrection takes place when the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, brings a person out of spiritual deadness in sins into a new life of faith in Christ and produces the works of love that proceed from faith in Christ. This kind of spiritual resurrection is the same thing as conversion or quickening. We have already discussed this kind of resurrection in chapter 7.

The other kind of resurrection is a literal resurrection of dead bodies from their earthly graves to a new physical life. This is the kind of resurrection that we will now study in greater detail. Both kinds of resurrection were mentioned by Jesus in a lengthy discussion He had with His opponents after He healed a paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda on a Sabbath day. Jesus said: **“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:24-29).

The first two underlined phrases in the above paragraph have to do with spiritual resurrection (conversion). The last phrase speaks of the bodily resurrection of all the dead on the last day. Like His Father, Jesus has life in Himself, and thus He can do both kinds of resurrection. He can raise people from spiritual death to spiritual life through His Word; He can also raise people from physical (temporal) death and bring them back to life through His Word.

For this very reason Jesus said to Lazarus’ sister Martha: **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die”** (John 11:25-26). Jesus is the resurrection because He will most certainly raise all believers from the dead on the last day. Jesus is the life because those who believe in Him have passed from spiritual death to spiritual life and will not die at all in a spiritual sense. Jesus said: **“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand”** (John 10:28).

The apostle Paul also spoke of these two kinds of resurrections. He wrote to the Colossians: **“You were raised with Him (Christ) through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him”** (Colossians 2:12-13). This is the spiritual resurrection (conversion). Again Paul says in Colossians 3:1: **“You were raised with Christ.”** Christ calls out to the spiritually dead: **“Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light”** (Ephesians 5:14). But Paul also wrote an entire chapter in his first letter to the Corinthians concerning the physical resurrection of the dead on the last day (1 Corinthians 15).

Those who consider themselves wise in this world have always maintained that a literal resurrection of dead people from their graves is unbelievable, incredible, and impossible. The sophisticated

Sadducees in Jesus' time are spoken of as those **"who say there is no resurrection"** (Matthew 22:23), and their story about the woman with the seven husbands was an attempt to ridicule the very idea of a resurrection. But Jesus gave them this answer: **"You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God"** (Matthew 22:29). He then proceeded to prove the resurrection from the book of Exodus, one of the portions of Scripture that the Sadducees supposedly accepted as authentic. The Sadducees as a group were not converted, however, for in the days of the apostle Paul the Sadducees are still described as those who **"say that there is no resurrection"** (Acts 23:8).

The inquisitive Athenians wanted to know what the apostle Paul meant by his talk about **"Jesus and the resurrection"** (Acts 17:18). They invited him to explain himself, and they listened to what he had to say until he said: God **"has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead"** (Acts 17:31). **"When they heard of the resurrection, some mocked"** (Acts 17:32), and the others had heard enough; they did not permit Paul to continue speaking.

When Paul defended himself before King Agrippa and other important people, he at one point cried out: **"Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?"** (Acts 26:8). From the believer's point of view, it is not incredible at all, for think of what God did in the beginning. He created all things out of nothing. Since He was able to create all things out of nothing, surely He is able to bring back to life something that once had life. But instead of believing that God created all things and that He will raise the dead, people are more ready to believe truly incredible ideas, for example, that everything evolved by itself without a creator or designer over billions of years of time, or that when people die, their soul goes into another human being or into an animal for another reincarnation, and that this happens innumerable times. There is no rational proof for such theories, and yet millions of people believe them. Paul says that such people **"suppress the truth. ... For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse"** (Romans 1:18-20). As it is reasonable to believe that a powerful supreme being created the universe in the beginning, so it is reasonable to believe that such a powerful Creator can restore to life those whom He has allowed to die.

The Christians in Corinth believed that Christ had risen from the dead, but some of them were saying **"that there is no resurrection of the dead"** on the last day (1 Corinthians 15:12). Paul pointed out that Christ's resurrection from the dead and our final resurrection from the dead are either both true or both false. And if they are false, Christianity is nothing but lies and nonsense, and Christians are the biggest fools on earth. **"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable"** (1 Corinthians 15:19). To those who wonder how God can actually do such a thing as raise the dead, Paul points out how God continually gives life to seeds that are buried in the ground. Who can explain this or duplicate it? But it happens all the time, because God has chosen to bring new life into the world in this way. **"So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption"** (1 Corinthians 15:42).

The bodily resurrection of the dead is taught in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus pointed out to the Sadducees that the Lord's statement to Moses in Exodus 3:6 that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob implies a resurrection of the dead, for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, and yet God is their God. God is not a God of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:26-27).

Job certainly believed in a bodily resurrection when in his misery he affirmed: **"I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another"** (Job 19:25-27). The prophet Isaiah said: **"Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise"** (Isaiah 26:19). As the spokesman for God, the prophet Hosea said: **"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction"** (Hosea 13:14).

It is clear that most of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus, including the Pharisees (Acts 23:6), believed in a bodily resurrection. For when her brother Lazarus died, Martha told Jesus: **"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"** (John 11:24). On this point Jesus and His apostles were not teaching anything new. Jesus did point out that life after resurrection would be different from life now. He said: **"The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection"** (Luke 20:34-36).

In his preaching the apostle Paul emphasized the resurrection of the dead, even as he proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection are joined together. The one is proof of the other. **"He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus"** (2 Corinthians 4:14). When he was brought before the Jewish council, Paul declared: **"I am a Pharisee ...; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"** (Acts 23:6). He made the same claim when he was brought before Governor Felix: **"I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust"** (Acts 24:15).

Somehow the believers in Thessalonica had the notion that if a person did not stay alive until the visible return of Christ, they would miss out on the glories of that day. The apostle Paul corrected that false idea with these comforting words: **"I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words"** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

In these words the apostle Paul spoke about the bodily resurrection of those who sleep in Jesus, that is, those who die as believers in Jesus. When Jesus returns, those who sleep in Jesus will rise from the dead to be with Jesus. They will not miss out on anything but even precede the believers who are still alive on that day. For the dead in Christ will rise first, and then the living believers will be taken up to be with them and their Lord forever.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul reviewed at length the teaching of the resurrection of the dead, because there were some among them who dismissed or at least doubted the bodily resurrection of the dead. The entire fifteenth chapter is devoted to the doctrine of the resurrection. The emphasis is on the resurrection of believers in Jesus. Christ's resurrection is called **"the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"** (1 Corinthians 15:20). **"Each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming"** (1 Corinthians 15:23). Notice that the resurrection will take place when Jesus returns visibly, not before then. The resurrection will take place at the end of the world, not before then. **"The last enemy that will be destroyed is death"** (1 Corinthians 15:26).

The Corinthians were interested in what kind of body the believers would have in the resurrection. It is the same person who died that rises from the dead. There is an identity of person. Job believed that he himself would see God. But the resurrected body will be greatly different from the body that is buried. When one plants a kernel of corn, it is not the kernel of corn that springs out of the ground, but a plant that eventually brings forth many kernels. Paul says: **"God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body"** (1 Corinthians 15:38). **"So also is the resurrection of the dead"** (1 Corinthians 15:42).

Notice the changes between the buried body and the risen body. **“The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, 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”** (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). **“As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man”** (1 Corinthians 15:49). In a similar way Paul wrote to the Philippians: **“We ... eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself”** (Philippians 3:20-21). Surely this will not be too difficult for our omnipotent Lord. We can get some idea of what our resurrection bodies will be like by considering what Jesus’ body was like after His resurrection.

Paul maintains that a change from a natural body to a spiritual body is absolutely necessary, for **“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does corruption inherit incorruption”** (1 Corinthians 15:50). Our earthly bodies, corrupt, dishonorable, weak, are not fit for eternal life. That is why the resurrection body must be different from the bodies we have now. The same thing is true of the believers who are living on the last day. Their bodies will have to be changed also. So Paul says: **“We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed”** (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

Since Paul was writing his letters to believers in Christ, it is natural that he would emphasize the resurrection of believers to eternal life. But in the presence of Governor Felix, an unbeliever, he said: **“There will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust”** (Acts 24:15). Jesus said: **“The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:28-29). Besides the resurrection to life, there is also a resurrection to condemnation.

We need to be clear about Jesus’ words concerning those who have done good and those who have done evil, lest we conclude that people earn their resurrection to life by their good deeds, and that eternal salvation is a reward for our good works. Jesus Himself clearly taught about final salvation and condemnation in these plain words to His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:15-16). This plain statement about believers and unbelievers is repeated many times by Jesus, as well as by His prophets and apostles. Therefore, we have to understand Jesus’ words about those who have done good and those who have done evil in the light of His many other words about faith and unbelief. We must understand that the only ones who can do good in the eyes of God are those who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin – those put their trust in the Good News about who He is and what He has done. As it is written: **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (Hebrews 11:6). The sheep on Jesus’ right hand in the judgment are His believers who hear His voice and follow Him. They will rise to eternal life. All the others will rise also, but only to be condemned. We shall study the final separation in more detail in the following lesson on the Day of Judgment.

Paul pointed out the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection to the Corinthians. **“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise”** (1 Corinthians 15:13-15).

## Questions

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1. What two kinds of resurrection was Jesus talking about in John 5?
2. Why did Jesus call Himself the resurrection and the life?
3. How did Jesus respond to the question of the Sadducees?
4. How did the Athenians react when Paul mentioned the resurrection?
5. Why should those believe in creation have no problem in believing in the resurrection?
6. In what way will our resurrection bodies be different?
7. How did Paul comfort those who thought dead believers would miss out on the coming glory?
8. How does the sowing of seeds help us understand the resurrection?
9. What will happen to living believers in Christ when Christ returns?
10. How many persons will rise from the dead on the last day?
11. In what two groups will those who rise from the dead be found?
12. Which persons will rise from the dead for condemnation?
13. Who are the persons who do good in the sight of God?
14. Why is it so important to believe in the resurrection of the dead?