

Dead or Alive?

by Tom Macartney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual resurrection and new birth in the Christian life, and highlights the need for a personal and real relationship with Christ.

Scripture: Luke 15:24, John 3:3, John 5:24, John 6:63, John 10:27, John 11:43, John 18:37, Romans 6:1, Romans 10:17, Ephesians 2:1, Colossians 3:1, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Spiritual Resurrection", "New Birth"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches on the importance of experiencing spiritual resurrection and new birth as the foundation of the Christian life. He emphasizes that true Christians have been raised from the dead and given new life by God, contrasting this with the spiritual deadness and helplessness of those who have not been born of God. Macartney highlights the necessity of God's intervention through the blood of Jesus Christ for forgiveness and the miracle of resurrection and new birth, stressing the vital role of hearing God's word and responding with saving faith. He warns against the misconception that being a Christian is merely about following Christ for personal gain, emphasizing the need for a genuine transformation and a life lived according to God's will.

Transcript

Jesus said: "I solemnly assure you, whoever hears my word, and believes him who sent me, has eternal life. He will not be judged, but has already passed from death to life. The time is coming--has already come--when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live ... the time is coming when all in the grave will hear his voice and come forth."

"No one can see--or enter--the Kingdom of God unless he is born again, of water and the Spirit. The flesh gives birth to flesh, and the Spirit gives birth to spirit ... You must all be born from above."

One of the things we all need is a clearer understanding of the miracle of spiritual resurrection and new birth which marks the beginning of the Christian life and determines its character. It is to be feared that many who consider themselves Christians are not in fact Christians at all, because they have not been raised from the dead and born of God. And many real Christians are making little progress because they are still bound in grave clothes or were born weak.

Today we live in a kind of spiritual fog. On the one hand, the ideas and ways of this world have so invaded the church that it is often hard to see the difference. On the other, we are often confronted with misleading

short-cuts to spiritual power and maturity. Confusion and compromise are everywhere. But why? One of the reasons surely is that we have not really understood what it means to be a Christian.

These verses show us a Christian is one who has experienced God's forgiveness, passed from death to life by spiritual resurrection, and received eternal life by new birth. These two words, resurrection and birth, are crucial to understanding the Christian life. There are two resurrections, one of the body when Christ returns, the other from spiritual death here and now. As we received human life by natural birth, so we must receive divine, eternal life by spiritual birth. A Christian is one who has been raised from the dead and given new life.

Man is in a terrible situation. Because of disobedience he is spiritually dead, cut off from God the source of life. While the full consequences of this are not yet apparent, mankind is now dead in sin and quite helpless. Death is final, it creates an impassable barrier, a sense of infinite distance. This is why God seems so far away, so unreal to man. The road to independence has led first to spiritual death, lost contact and communion with God, then physical death and finally leads to eternal death, banishment from the presence of God. His intervention is our only hope. Only God can bridge the great gulf of sin and death.

Have we understood the seriousness of the situation? We need to be raised from the dead and given new life. It is not a question of our turning over a new religious leaf, but of God doing a miracle in us. No amount of religion, self-help, good intentions or good works can alter the situation. We can do nothing. We are under God's judgment and dying of the cancer of sin. Only a miracle can save us.

Of course many professing Christians do not accept this. They do not see man is dead. They still have high hopes for him and faith in human nature. They think, for example, that man is the victim of circumstances for which he is not responsible, or is getting better, or that what is needed is for us all to try to live like Christians. But they have misunderstood the Bible completely. Man is responsible for his own tragic history. He is not getting better. He is incapable of living like a Christian. He was made in the image of God with a high destiny but is now hopelessly lost.

A true Christian life begins only when God, who intervened long ago by sending His Son, intervenes in our lives now. The Holy Spirit must do a miracle in us. But how does this happen and what does it mean?

To begin with, God had to provide a just basis for dealing with us at all. Only the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, which cleanses from all sin, makes it possible for a holy God to forgive rebels. Only because Christ died may we live. The miracle of our resurrection and new birth depends entirely on this. In this miracle, these verses tell us, there are two factors. First, there is God's speaking to us, "Whoever hears my word ... the voice of the Son of God." Here is God's loving initiative. He speaks to us in the Gospel and offers us pardon, reconciliation, eternal life and fellowship with Himself. However, we must realise it is not enough just to hear the Gospel and agree with it. Mental assent is not the same as saving faith. A real experience only begins with an awareness that God is speaking to you, that God loves you, that Christ died for you. Only a personal, first-hand speaking of God to our hearts will bring about resurrection and new birth. We must, so to speak, hear Him say, "Come forth", as Lazarus did in his tomb. Deep in our hearts we must become aware that the living God is speaking to us. Only a real encounter with God accomplishes anything. This is why so many conversions don't last. People are invited to decide for Christ, or to follow Jesus, but those who are dead can do nothing. Only when He has spoken to us, raised us from the dead and given us new life, energy and resources can we follow. And this is why so many Bible-believing,

professing Christians show no evidence of spiritual life. They lack a vital relationship to Christ and are still spiritually dead. They do not need some new experience, but simply a true beginning.

The second factor is the response of saving faith to God's speaking, "Whoever hears and believes ..." This faith is born in us as we listen to His word, for, "Faith springs out of hearing, and hearing comes through the word of Christ." We do not have the kind of faith that saves. This only comes as we listen and look to Christ. Our part is to listen and say 'Yes'. As Lazarus, dead, buried and bound in grave-clothes, heard and obeyed the life-giving voice of Christ, so must we. The initiative and power are God's entirely. Our efforts accomplish nothing. Our part is to cooperate with Him. And this applies to the whole Christian life. Apart from Christ we can do nothing, but united to Him we have the effortless energy of God as our constant supply.

Now, note the contrast with much present-day thinking. Christ is often presented as a kind of hero to follow, a friend to have, one ready to fit into our lives and help us along, or a Saviour to be had on our terms. According to this view we only need Christ to make our lives brighter and better: Christianity is fun, and to be a Christian is to have the best of both worlds. Actually, we need to be raised from the dead to an entirely new kind of life lived according to God's will.

Many, particularly young people, are being sadly misled by a popular Gospel specially geared to appeal to them. Man is thought to need only a new suit of religious clothes, different aims and new outlets for his latent energies, all to be found following Christ, whereas he can do nothing for God, apart from a miracle. The clear-cut, soul-searching proclamation of the authentic, Christ-centred and exalting Gospel of the New Testament stands in stark contrast to the popularised, watered down and man-centred Gospel so common today. This may secure many camp-followers, pseudo-Christians, but raises no one from the dead.

On the other hand, while rejecting the false, let us beware of that loveless and sterile devotion to biblical truth as such which was the error of the Pharisees. The word of God is spirit and life. We may believe the Bible from cover to cover and still be spiritually dead.

Raised from sin and death, born of God into His family, the true Christian knows forgiveness, new life, joy, peace and victory. The voice that raised him now leads him day by day, for, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life." The Christian life is one of hearing and following the Good Shepherd, through the scriptures, in our hearts where He lives by His Spirit, and within His flock, His church. How simple, yet how profound is true Christianity! First, Christ calls, "Come forth" from the grave of sin and death, then, "Follow Me" in the paths of eternal life. Only those who have come forth can follow. True Christianity is personal and real. Many are the smoke screens for unreality behind which people try to hide the fact that they do not really know the Lord. If we have not heard God speaking to our hearts about our deep need and His loving provision for it, and not had dealings with Him in response, or if we are uncertain of our salvation, then surely it would be wise to assume we are not Christians and not rest until we know we are. While a real Christian may not know when he was born again, he knows that he is spiritually alive, God is real to him. Are we dead or alive? This is the question we must each ask ourselves. It is a question of life or death.

Bible references: Luke 15:24; John 3:3-7; 5:24-29; 6:63; 10:27, 28; 11:43, 44; 18:37; 21:19; Rom. 6:1-14; 10:17; Eph. 2:1-10; Col. 3:1-4; 1 Pet. 1:23-25; 1 John 1:7

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