

The Third Resurrection: What Is Its Value?

by: Darryl Henson

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We generally think of the third resurrection as totally negative--if we pause to think of it at all! Does it benefit anyone? What is its purpose? Why must such a horrible event have to occur?

I Corinthians 15:23 describes an order of resurrections: "But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming." Revelation 20:5-6 picks up the thread:

This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

As Christians, we focus on this first resurrection; it is our hope and prayer to be raised from the dead or changed at the return of Christ (I Corinthians 15:50-52; I Thessalonians 4:17). If we are converted now and our judgment is now, other resurrections have no personal impact on us.

The next resurrection in God's order is the second resurrection. Though not specifically named as such in the Bible, it is described in numerous places. John alludes to it in Revelation 20:5: "But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished." Thus, it occurs at the end of the Millennium. Ezekiel describes it as a physical resurrection for all those who have lived through the ages and not had a full opportunity at salvation (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Revelation 20:11 calls it the Great White Throne Judgment, when the dead are raised to be "judged according to their works" (verse 12).

Verses 13-15 describe the final or third resurrection in this order of resurrections:

The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

Jude shows that some in his day had rejected God and, after dying, would be awaiting the Lake of Fire at the final judgment (verses 7-13). This final judgment, also called "the second death," is on those of all time periods who have rejected God and will not repent.

The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16 portrays "a great gulf fixed" between those made immortal after their period of judgment and those awaiting their fate in the third resurrection (verse 26). That great gulf is eternal life. When those

incorrigibles from all ages are resurrected at the third resurrection, they will have no hope for salvation. They are doomed to the Lake of Fire, the second death, and cannot cross the great gulf into immortality.

How Many Times to Die?

Hebrews 9:27 says that all men are appointed to die once. Considering this, some have asked: How can one die a second death? How many times can one die?

First, baptism is symbolic of death (Romans 6:2-11) and so is "dying daily," as Paul describes the sacrifices of the Christian life (I Corinthians 15:31). Paul mentions this latter death in the context of the resurrection chapter to emphasize our need to crucify the old self daily and renew or resurrect the inner man as symbols of actual death and resurrection (see II Corinthians 4:16-17). In this sense we die every day of our lives.

When speaking of great embarrassments, many have used the phrase, "I died a thousand deaths." That is just what God expects of us if we are to reach maturity of thought and conduct! Each of these deaths is just as difficult and excruciating as the one before, and thus Paul describes them as crucifixions (Galatians 5:24). These play a major role in overcoming, and it is never easy.

Apart from symbolism, the general rule is that we each die physically at least once and then await the resurrection to eternal life. But some few humans have already died twice! Lazarus, Dorcas, Eutychus, those who came out of their graves when Christ died and others were physically resurrected and physically died again.

It is conceivable that some few might even die three times! If those who were resurrected physically were converted and accepted for the Kingdom, they will be resurrected when Christ returns--changed "in the twinkling of an eye" into immortal spirit beings (I Corinthians 15:52). If they were not called and converted--not yet having had an opportunity for salvation--they will come up in the second resurrection to be alive a third time. At the end of that life they will then be either changed to spirit or die in the Lake of Fire, a third death.

Why, then, does Revelation 20:14 call the Lake of Fire "the second death"? The emphasis is on the fact that it is a PERMANENT death. Once a person experiences the second death, no hope remains for another resurrection. However, for a few it could represent a third physical death.

The point is that all of us are appointed to die at least once! Even those "blessed and holy" individuals who are alive and changed at Christ's return will go through a kind of death. As Paul writes, "For this corruptible [body] must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (I Corinthians 15:53).

Why Raise an Incorrigible?

What purpose does the third resurrection serve? Why would God raise those who have rejected Him from all time periods--who have already died--and make them die again? Is it because He is vengeful, harsh and cruel?

God has every right to avenge himself on those who despise His offer of salvation, His way of life and His Kingdom. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Jude 7 compares Sodom and Gomorrah with the Lake of Fire as an example of His vengeance. Make no mistake, God is not pleased with those who reject His wonderful gifts!

Unlike man, God is not vengeful in a hateful sense; He does not punish men just for the sake of it. Torture is not His way. Under the Old Testament administration of death sentences, a person either lived or died, but he was not tortured. Punishment may have been brutal, but it was swift and just. The same holds true of those who merit the Lake of Fire. He will not punish them unmercifully and forever. They will be burned and forgotten. He does "torture" us in fiery trials, tribulations and chastenings, but He does this to purify us in mercy, not in terms of eternal judgment.

Fairness is the issue: As Christians we must face dying daily, crucifying the self. God holds us accountable for everything we say and do (Ecclesiastes 11:9; Matthew 12:36). WE are now facing Christ in our judgment (II Corinthians 6:1-2; I Peter 4:17). God will judge others in their order. What of those who may have rejected God and are in an unpardonable condition for which they cannot seem to repent, as was Esau? Can they commit suicide or die a natural death, never to be judged? Would that be fair to the rest of us?

Undoubtedly, some would opt for a quick suicide and eternal blackness if they thought that could avoid having to reap the consequences of their evil lives. Satan and the world would love to have us believe there is no responsibility and accountability--that we are all "victims" in one way or another. This is simply not true! The Scripture says clearly that all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ to answer for their lives (Romans 14:10, II Corinthians 5:10). To be fair, God's justice must be applied to all in equal measure. To allow the wicked to go without punishment would not be fair to those who struggled and fought to avoid such a fate. Everyone will be held accountable, good or bad.

The third resurrection has real value! Abject terror of that judgment should help to keep us on the track! Life is difficult, trials are hard, discouragement and self-pity are often overwhelming. But we know that the second death awaits those who will not repent. The Lake of Fire is a powerful deterrent for us while we still have opportunity to overcome!

Even in the horror of having to destroy those few who will not repent and submit under any circumstances, God uses their future deaths as a powerful motivation for us to remain close to Him. It is not the main reason, as God is not the author of "fear religion" in an over-all sense. He draws us with love (Hosea 11:1-4), but, on the other hand, fear of Him--both awe and terror--is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

God works with people in the way that will produce the best results. Jude writes: "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (verses 22-23). Some respond to kindness, but others must be scared witless before they begin to move in the right direction.

Still others--hopefully just a few--will never respond, and these are the ones who will experience the third resurrection, a necessary event to fulfill God's perfect justice. Their evil, incorrigible lives, in one sense, will serve a "good" purpose by being examples for others to avoid emulating.