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C H A P T E R O N E



WHEN TERROR FLED

They carry their dead as if in triumph!"

That's what the pagans observed about the Christians as plagues swept the Roman Empire. When Emperor Marcus Aurelius spoke of caravans of wagons filled with bodies making their way through the streets of Roman cities, it was the Christians who distinguished themselves from the world around them. Indeed, some historians believe that Christianity might not have become the dominant religion of Rome were it not for these massive epidemics that gave believers the opportunity to prove the triumph of the Christian faith.

If you were a pagan and a plague swept your city,



killing a third of the population, you would have to confess your ignorance regarding the meaning of such horrors. Then you would flee, trying at all costs to save your own life. When your relatives died, you would bury them without the slightest assurance that you would be reunited with them again.

But Christians accepted these tragedies differently. William McNeill writes of the Christians, "Even a shattered remnant of survivors who had somehow made it through war or pestilence or both could find warm, immediate healing and consolation in the vision of a heavenly existence for those missing relatives and friends. . . . Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed."¹

"A system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles"! Not only did the Christians accept the death of their friends with a note of triumph, but they were willing to risk their own lives to help others. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, seems almost to have welcomed the great epidemic of his time. Writing in A.D. 251, he claimed that only non-Christians had anything to fear from the plague:

How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly,



searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted. . . . Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that *we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death* [italics added].²

How should believers respond to those who have died? Cyprian continued:

Our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way; that as travelers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longed for, not lamented . . . and that no occasion should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living.³

What pagan could cease grieving, knowing that his relatives were living in heaven? Such was the confidence of the early Christians that multitudes of pagans embraced the Christian faith.



DYING WITHIN GOD'S WILL

If you think such peace in the face of death died along with the early Christians, let me give you a contemporary example of someone who faced death with the calm assurance that he was dying within the will and plan of God.

James Montgomery Boice, pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia, was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Speaking to his congregation a few weeks before he died, he answered these questions for his congregation.

Should they pray for a miracle?

Well, you are free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles—and He certainly can—is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So, although miracles happen, they are rare by definition. . . . I think it is more profitable to pray for wisdom for the doctors. . . . above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. God was most glorified in the death of Jesus Christ; He did not deliver Jesus from the cross, though He could have.⁴

How should they interpret his impending death?

If I were to reflect theologically, there are two important things to remember. One is the sovereignty



of God. . . . We have talked about this often. When challenges like this come into our lives, they are not accidental. It's not as if God somehow forgot what was going on and something had slipped by. . . . But it's possible to conceive that God is sovereign and yet indifferent. God's in charge, but He doesn't care. But God is not only in charge, God is also good. Everything He does is good. The will of God is pleasing and perfect. It is perfect to Him; therefore it should be perfect to us. If God does something in your life, would you change it? If you'd change it, you'd make it worse. So, that's the way we want to accept it and move forward. And who knows what God will do.⁵

Looking back, we know what God did: James Montgomery Boice died on June 15, 2000.

“ONE FORSAKEN GRAVE”

Why can Christians face death with the calm assurance that heaven awaits? The answer, of course, is because of the resurrection of Christ. The tomb that had been provided by Joseph of Arimathea was “forsaken” by Jesus of Nazareth. This fact motivated the poet Alice Meynell to write:

No planet knows that this earth of ours . . .



*Bears, as its chief treasure, one
Forsaken grave.* ⁶

This forsaken grave lies at the heart of the Christian faith. If Jesus did not rise, Christianity collapses like a house of cards. Vance Havner, a preacher of a past generation, said perceptively, "If the resurrection of Jesus is myth, then I am *mythtaken*, *mythstified* and *mytherable*."

Why is the physical resurrection of Christ so important to our faith? First, the Resurrection fulfills Jesus' prediction that this is the final sign He would give to the world (Matthew 12:40; 16:21). Reason requires that if Christ is God, He could not stay in the tomb indefinitely.

Second, Jesus' resurrection is proof of our own final resurrection. Strictly speaking, Christ is the only person in history who was resurrected. Lazarus was simply resuscitated; he had to die again. Christ was resurrected with a new, indestructible body, a prototype of the body we shall receive. This is the hinge on which the door of Christianity swings; our faith rests on the fact of a forsaken tomb. He was raised, so we shall be also.

TRYING TO EXPLAIN THE EMPTY TOMB

Some people are unhappy about belief in the Resurrection. Hours after Jesus was buried, Pilate



conspired with the chief priests and Pharisees to keep Christ in the tomb. For fear that someone might come and steal the body and claim a resurrection, Pilate gave orders: "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how" (Matthew 27:65 NASB). What did Pilate have in mind when he told the leaders, "Make it as secure as you know how"? Someone has suggested that either he was laughing at the priests for their folly—imagine setting a guard to watch a dead man!—or, more likely, he was mocking them for their fears. *Do your worst! And if he is a man his body shall be kept safely in the tomb, but if he is God, he shall rise in spite of your best efforts!*

And along with a guard, they rolled that stone over the mouth of the cave to make sure it was sealed. But evidently they did not make it secure enough, for on the first day of the week the women discovered that the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. An angel of the Lord came from heaven and rolled back the stone and sat on it. "His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:3–4 NASB). God is not intimidated by huge stones.

Alternative theories have been suggested to account for the empty tomb. Some have said that Jesus only fainted on the cross, and the cool tomb revived Him. But the Roman soldiers made sure



that a man was dead before he was taken from a cross. Also, it is improbable that a wounded victim would have been able to push the heavy stone away and elude the guards. And would such a bruised, dazed Teacher be able to inspire His disciples to die for Him?

Some insist that Christ's enemies stole His body, but if that were so it would have been produced by them to stifle the disciples' preaching on the Resurrection. Against all credulity, some have speculated that the disciples themselves stole the body to fake a resurrection. But would they have been willing to die for a Christ they knew was dead?

We do well to listen to the words of J. V. Langmead Casserley in his 1951 lectures at King's College, London. He said that the attempts to explain away the empty tomb demonstrate that "the assertion of the Resurrection is like a knife pointed at the throat of the irreligious man, and an irreligious man whose religion is threatened will fight for his own creation, his most precious possession, like a tigress fighting for her cubs."⁷

FIRST-CENTURY EVIDENCE

Yet we must still answer the question: What compelling historical proof do we have that Christ has, in fact, been raised from the dead? Read again the words of the apostle Paul:



For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. . . . If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. . . . And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15: 3–8; 13–14, 17)

Paul is adamant in his argument: A man who claimed to be God was put to death and was raised to prove that His claims were valid. And if it were proven that the grave still contains His body, we will stop preaching and humbly admit we have been misled.

What is more, Paul says to the people in the first century, "If you don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead, just ask some of the people who saw Him after His resurrection, because many of these people are still alive! Check it out!" Here is hard-headed evidence that God invaded our world.

Perhaps you, dear reader, want to keep Christ



neatly contained in His own corner, in His tomb. But Jesus cannot be contained! He intrudes into our lives when we least expect Him. He is not put off by our attempts to keep Him at arm's length. Post your guards! Secure your stone! Make your seal! You shall confront Christ either in this life or the next.

WHAT GIVES LIFE MEANING

The Resurrection is the one fact that explains other facts and gives meaning to our lives in the midst of a decaying culture. Jesus Himself was subject to death, but in being raised with a new resurrection body, He has turned a floodlight on the center of our dingy existence. Here at last we have answers to the truly important questions of life.

First, there is no place that we must go that He has not been; He has gone before us, in death and resurrection. He does not expect us to enter a dark room that He Himself has not first entered. Our Lord goes ahead of us and promises us that we shall "see him as he is." W. Frank Harrington, the late pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, wrote that if you study the Bible you could make the case that God is a "Go-Ahead-God." He points out that when the Israelites faced the trackless wilderness, God went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, and by night He stayed beside them with a flaming fire.



Through times of joy and suffering, through times of uncertainty and fear, God is always ahead of us. God, in fact, had gone ahead of the women rushing to the tomb, for when they arrived, the stone had already been rolled away for them. God is always going before us, to make our paths straight. And when death comes to us, as most assuredly it will, we will know that we are not traveling where Jesus has not Himself been. Death is nothing less than an encounter with God in the presence of the One who came to save us.

In fact, as believers, we shall gain by death. We shall be free from the physical and psychological trauma of this life and joined in fellowship with Jesus and our friends. Tomorrow with its heart-aches no longer need be dreaded.

Because He lives I can face tomorrow;

Because He lives all fear is gone;

Because I know He holds the future.

And life is worth the living just because He lives.⁸

Second, we who stand beside this forsaken tomb are asked to carry a message of hope to the world. The angel who was sitting within the empty tomb calmed the fears of the women and then said, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going



ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'” (Mark 16:7).

“Tell His disciples and *Peter*.” Why is Peter named? He had denied his Lord three times and felt disqualified for future usefulness and blessing. He had sworn that he didn't know Jesus after boasting that he, above all, would stay with Jesus no matter the cost. This is a message of grace to Peter, a message of grace that all of us need to hear. We speak our message to a fallen world filled with many questions and few answers. We need a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, a message of justice and eternal life. The forsaken tomb gives us the right to proclaim hope to a hopeless world.

W. Frank Harrington tells the story of a new bus driver who was not familiar with his church. It was his first Sunday, and he was in animated conversation with a woman on the bus. When he drove in, he noticed a huge cross draped in purple for the beginning of Lent. The woman said, “Right in the middle of the conversation he just forgot about me and said, ‘My God, somebody big must have died!’” He was thinking about one of those little white crosses put up along the roadside when someone is killed. Well, yes, somebody big did die! And this somebody big came back to life!⁹

Was Aristotle right when he said, “Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end”? For him it meant the end of achievement, growth, companionship,



love, and consciousness. Bernard Shaw said that man needs at least three hundred years to do justice to his accumulated experience and to understand his world. The poet John Keats in his early twenties was aware of his own genius but lamented, "I have fears that I may cease to be before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain."¹⁰

Tom Condran, a seminary classmate of mine, was diagnosed with cancer several years ago. A few weeks before he died, he called on the phone and I took notes of his final words to me. In a forced whisper he said, "These are good days. Nothing has taken away my peace and joy. When I found out that I had cancer, I feared that I would not be able to live up to the sermons I preached. But God has not allowed me to waver. The finish line is in sight. Good-bye, Erwin, I'll see you in heaven."

The forsaken tomb is an affirmation that life continues after death. God does not waste the human personality; He does not create our mind and aspirations only to have them cast aside through a stroke, heart disease, or cancer. Through Christ we have eternal life of such quality that our physical existence is but a stepping-stone to our future eternal fulfillment.

When the stone was rolled away from Christ's tomb, the terror of death fled.