

INTRODUCTION

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION— THE WORLD'S ONLY HOPE

Imagine that an intelligent alien comes from somewhere in space to visit our planet and spend a few years touring the globe. The purpose of his visit is to learn about us, to research our history and to make observations about the state of life on the earth. But also imagine that the alien's human guides deliberately withhold from him all contact with Christians, all information about Christianity and all data on Christian history. What would this alien observe, and what would he conclude from his observations?

He would tour America and Western Europe and see cultures in decline and fragmented societies in which people pursue their own self-interests. He would witness people saturating themselves in pleasure and entertainment while ignoring the human needs and growing poverty around them, failing to maintain good relationships and sinking deeper and deeper into immorality. He would see grand mansions in gated communities with inhabitants overlooking massive slums dominated by hopelessness, poverty and squalor. He would see a rising crime rate and growing dishonesty in all strata of society. He would see rampant drug use and homicides in every city.

Traveling to Africa, the alien would tour countries where masses of starving people, including children, die every day while their national leaders get rich on corruption and greed. He would find whole nations in which young people are being wiped out by disease epidemics, particularly AIDS. In the Middle East, he would see murderous repression of religions, oppression and torture of women, and infighting among tribal leaders in cultures saturated with incredible oil wealth.

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In the Far East, he would find more government tyranny, repression and mass genocide. In India, he would find abject poverty and hopelessness imposed by a cruel caste system preventing upward movement.

In studying the past history of our planet, our alien visitor would quickly detect a repeating cycle in world history: nations being born; growing with idealistic hope; developing great laws, art and wellbeing for their citizens; and then deteriorating as wealth led to selfish fragmentation, corruption and decline, until the society finally collapses into ruin. He would see this pattern repeated over and over in all the great civilizations of the past and present—Egypt, Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Byzantines, England and America. He would see continual wars, great and small, costing the lives of uncountable people and devastating societies for generations to come. He would see repeated epidemics of disease spreading across continents and wiping out huge percentages of the population. He would see hate and mass genocide repeated over and over in tyrants such as Stalin, Hitler and African tribal leaders.

No doubt our visiting alien would see no hope for this planet. He would perceive a corrupting flaw in the human heart that would cause these dismal patterns to repeat over and over until humans either destroyed themselves or the sun grew cold. He would board his craft and return to his own planet, shaking his head at the fatal hopelessness of our world.

Actually, we did not have to invite an alien here to demonstrate the hopelessness of our planet without Christianity. We did it solely for the dramatic effect. We could as easily have looked at the world through the eyes of the many unbelievers who also see the hurt, destruction and tragedies of life on earth as a dead-end cycle of meaningless existence. For example, consider this comment posted by an unbelieving girl on an Internet atheist website:

I'm confused . . . I always believed science would be the cure-all for my problems, but I don't know if I can keep living without eternal life. I guess I'll just have to find a way myself to make it through this meaningless existence. I just wish I knew of someone who could show me the path to eternal life. If science can't pro-

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vide the answers, though, then who or what can!? *sigh* Doesn't it seem like there is a higher power that gives our lives purpose? Well, science says there isn't, so there isn't.¹

There you have the whole problem in a nutshell. If life as one sees it now on this misery-riddled planet is all there is, then existence is indeed meaningless and one must, as this girl says it, "find a way myself." She realizes there is one thing that would make everything meaningful: eternal life. She once expected science to find a way for humans to live forever, but she has come to realize that it cannot. She wishes there was some kind of higher power that would assure her of eternal life, for only blissful life without end would make this present troubled existence meaningful.

Many have found solace in this troubled world by dreaming of ideal societies where peace and goodwill reign, where life is filled with meaning, pain and death do not exist and the future extends forever. We all know their names—Atlantis, Arcadia, Utopia, El Dorado and even Camelot, where for one brief shining moment everything is exactly as it should be. But in the minds of the hopeless many, all such dreams are mere wishful thinking. No such perfect society exists. Even the story of Camelot, which may have been true, shows the futility of such dreams.

In the story of Camelot, King Arthur and his counselor Merlin begin a new kingdom based on honoring one another, helping the poor, rescuing the imprisoned, lifting up the downtrodden, administering justice and mercy, and existing in peace and harmony. But soon after the kingdom is established, the fatal flaws emerge: lust, the one weakness in the noble Lancelot; and spite and envy, the cancer in the heart of the outcast Mordred. Thus Camelot falls, eaten from the center by these fatal flaws, giving us a cameo picture of every civilization that has ever existed or ever will exist on this present earth.

Humankind's Last Great Hope

At one point in history, there was a band of believers who trusted in someone they fervently believed would truly change the world for good. A handful of devout Jewish people thought a man named Jesus was the Messiah—the deliverer who would break their oppressive bondage

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under the Romans and set up a permanent and truly godly kingdom on earth. Their prophet Isaiah had prophesied in the ancient Jewish writings that the Messiah would come and restore all things to a paradise, where there would be no more fighting, oppression, fear or death (see Isa. 11; 35). The entire earth would once again be a pristine garden, where everyone would live together in peace forever.

Imagine the terrible mental and emotional state of that small group of disciples as they stood watching the Messiah, their deliverer, breathing his last agonized breath, hung to die as a common criminal on a Roman cross. Here was the miracle worker who had shown that he could command nature, heal sickness, raise the dead and produce food with a word or gesture. They had given up everything to follow him. Here was the King they had believed would reestablish the kingdom of Israel. But now here he was, nailed up on a cross. Dying. And dying with him were all the hopes they had placed in him. They must have felt like the poor girl we quoted above. Life seemed meaningless. Everything was hopeless. There seemed to be no way out of their absurd existence, no pathway to an ideal, eternal life.

But far more than the fate of the disciples or even the fate of Israel hung on the cross that day. The fate of the entire human race and their hope of a bright tomorrow and of a life after death hung there with Christ. He was humanity's last hope. For the man who was dying on that cross was the one God had promised would come and lead all of humanity out of its pain and misery into an eternal life of bliss. But now, with his death, it seemed that all hope was gone. Eternal life was a mere dream. Death would reign forever. The hope of the promised Messiah to free humanity from the chains of darkness seemed dashed. The supposed Savior was dead, and any hope of deliverance was buried with him.

The World's Greatest Surprise

Mary Magdalene was a woman who was loyal to Christ to the end. He had exorcised seven demons from her, and from that moment on she followed him gratefully and wholeheartedly. She supported his ministry financially and believed he was the one whom God had chosen to bring eternal peace to the world. She had stayed beneath the cross and witnessed the

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unjust and cruel execution of her master, and now her life was in utter turmoil. She was one of Jesus' most devoted followers, and seeing him disgraced brought her tremendous anguish.

After the Roman soldiers determined that Jesus was dead, they took him down from the cross and gave his body to a wealthy Jewish official to be buried in a new tomb. Mary left the dismal scene determined to visit his tomb after the burial was completed. Early Sunday morning she went to the tomb, and there she experienced another setback. Not only had Jesus been unjustly killed, but also to her alarm, the tomb was open and his body was gone. Fearing that someone had stolen the body, she ran to Peter and John, two of Jesus' disciples, telling them what she had seen. In utter disbelief, the two men quickly ran to the tomb to check out her story for themselves.

When they arrived, they saw the collapsed shell of the graveclothes still intact, but the body was nowhere to be found. Frightened and confused, the two disciples returned home. But Mary lingered behind. She peered back in the tomb for one last look, and what she saw startled her: two men, robed in bright white, sat inside the tomb.

"Why are you crying?" the angels asked her.

"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).

Turning around, she then saw something even more remarkable: Jesus was standing right before her, alive! But strangely, rather than recognizing him, she mistook him for a gardener. We may never know why she did not recognize him. Perhaps her eyes were filled with tears. Maybe it was still dark. Perhaps she didn't even look in his face. Or perhaps God simply prevented her from understanding who he was. Jesus asked her the same question the angels had asked:

"Dear woman, why are you crying?"

Still clueless as to whom she was speaking, she said softly, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him" (John 20:15). Mary was clearly confused and distraught. She loved Jesus dearly and wanted to pay her final dues.

But then in a moment of remarkable tenderness Jesus called her by name: "Mary!" he said.

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“Teacher!” she cried as she suddenly recognized him. She rushed to him, embracing him in ecstatic joy (see John 20:16).

Jesus stood before Mary alive, healthy and well because death could not hold the promised Messiah. God resurrected him to fulfill his mission and bring eternal life to a sick and dying world.

Why the Resurrection of Christ Is Crucial

When Christ was on the cross, it seemed that all had been lost. Death had won. But after three days in a rich man’s tomb, Jesus appeared alive again. The news was so shocking the disciples refused to believe it until he presented himself to them personally and let them touch his wounds with their own hands. Then Jesus made an amazing claim to his disciples: In the future they too would have resurrected bodies like his. Bodies that would never deteriorate, age or perish. They would realize the one great hope that would bring meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence. They would have new life without death or pain in the presence of a loving God forever.

That is the great hope Christianity offers to a hopeless world—an afterlife with God, free of pain and suffering, and filled with boundless joy. This, as we will explain more fully later, is exactly how the Bible describes heaven. Heaven is a place of unimaginable blessing. It is a place of ecstasy and fulfillment. When we reach heaven we will all say, “This is what we were made for!” The Bible refers to the afterlife with anticipation and joy. Christians eagerly look forward to the day when all tears will be wiped away. This belief in heaven is not a mere pie-in-the-sky idea designed to make us feel good in a hopeless world, like Utopia, Arcadia or El Dorado; it is a belief built on rock-solid evidence. We will explore this evidence in the third section of this book.

When we consider our present pain and struggles in light of eternal life in heaven, we will be able to transcend our seemingly hopeless circumstances. As Mother Teresa boldly said, “From heaven the most miserable earthly life will look like one bad night in an inconvenient hotel!” We can be encouraged by the words Jesus uttered when his death was glaring at him from right around the corner: “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome

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the world” (John 16:33). It is helpful to remember during difficult trials that our own resurrection is right around the corner.

The Promise of the Resurrection

“But,” you may ask, “what does Christ’s resurrection mean to me? So he claims to have been raised from the dead. That’s astounding, if true, but ultimately, so what? What does the death and resurrection of a man two thousand years ago have to do with me right now in the twenty-first century?”

The promise of the resurrection is this: What happened to Christ can happen for us. Like him, we will die, but his resurrection is a promise that death is not the end. His resurrection is the prototype for our own. He blazed the trail through death to eternal life, and he tells us that we can follow in his footsteps with his hand leading us the entire way. The resurrection gives us hope for a glorious, pain-free, death-free future. The dreams of paradise, Arcadia, Utopia, El Dorado and Camelot can be realized in all their imagined perfection. Our most outlandish dreams of peace, love and harmony can be fulfilled.

We know that this chapter leaves you with all kinds of questions about the meaning of the resurrection. Why was it necessary? Why is this world so messed up in the first place? If the resurrection is supposed to solve problems of the world, why do we still contend with pain, trouble and death? What about all my personal hopes? Will they be lost when I die and find myself in heaven? Will my relationships be broken forever? And what about heaven? Based on what you’ve heard about it, you may not really be too keen on going there. Is it really like the popular pictures and descriptions of it? Will I really be me in heaven, or will I be absorbed into God and lose my own conscious self? And the really big questions: How can I be sure that all this is true? How can I know with certainty that the resurrection really occurred? How can I know this isn’t just another wishful dream?

We encourage you to read on. The purpose of this book is to help you find the answers to these crucial, all-important questions.