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Resurrection Throughout the Old Testament

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Happy Easter!

Transcript

Seeing the prominence and indeed centrality of the doctrine and the fact of the resurrection within the New Testament, many people might feel that it comes somewhat out of the blue. Where is resurrection in the Old Testament? Perhaps some will refer to passages like Ezekiel chapter 37, with its prophecy concerning the Valley of Dry Bones, or maybe the final chapter of the Book of Daniel. Nevertheless, such arguments can seem fairly slight, and perhaps even more so under closer examination.

The best place to begin when considering the doctrine of resurrection in the Old Testament is with the New Testament's own statements concerning it. For instance, in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verses 42 to 49. So is it with the resurrection of the dead.

What is sown is perishable. What is raised is imperishable. 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Thus it is written, The first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the natural, and then the spiritual.

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust. The second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust.

And as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. Along similar lines, in John chapter 12, verse 24, Jesus says, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a

grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

An important thing to notice about both of these passages is that within them, death seems to feature less as a state that exists on account of evil and sin within the world than it does as a necessary phase of transition. You must die to the old if you are going to be raised to something new and greater. We see something similar in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 1-4.

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent we groan, being burdened, not that we would be unclothed, but that we might be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Within this statement, death is a necessary divesting of our mortal bodies, so that we might enjoy greater, more glorious bodies. So, what might this teach us about the doctrine of resurrection in the Old Testament? The most important thing is that it suggests that death need not be considered as a necessarily bad thing. Death can be good if it is a form of death to an old state, to rise again to something more glorious.

Following from this, there is the possibility of a doctrine of resurrection apart from sin, and prior to the Fall. For instance, in Genesis chapter 2, Adam is placed into a death-like sleep. During this sleep, flesh and bone is taken from his side and fashioned into a woman, who is brought to him, and the two can become one flesh.

What takes place is a sort of death to an old state, and a rising again to a more glorious state. Adam, when he has one made from his side who stands over against him, is a new sort of person. In the original creation, there are all sorts of indications that the creation is not yet complete, it's not yet attained to its full state of glory.

It's good, but it's not perfect or mature. The Lord establishes the creation, but there is a lot of work yet to be done. In Paul's reading in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, there is a movement from the first man to the second man, from the man of earth to the man of heaven.

Man was created in the image of God, and man's destiny is to be caught up in the one who is the image of God, transformed into his likeness. And this transformation is so complete that it requires a sort of death and resurrection, a divesting of the old flesh, and a taking on of a new glorified form. The problem is that after the fall, death is not a passage to something more glorious.

Death is a divesting of the flesh without any more glorious body to assume. In Genesis

chapters 2 and 3, there is a parallel between the womb and the tomb, between the earth and the woman. This is something that we see elsewhere in biblical poetry.

Job says, Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked will I return there. In Psalm 139, the psalmist describes himself as knit together in the lowest parts of the earth. In Proverbs chapter 30 verses 15 and 16 we read, Three things are never satisfied, four never say enough, Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says enough.

Sheol, the grave, is like a barren womb. One of the first inklings of the doctrine of resurrection that we have in the Old Testament is the Lord's opening of barren wombs. He opens the barren wombs of women, one day He will open the barren womb of the earth.

In Hebrews chapter 11 verses 11 and 12, the writer says, By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. The Lord does not merely open the womb of Sarah in the book of Genesis, He also opens the womb of Rebekah, of Rachel, and then in the book of 1 Samuel, the womb of Hannah.

Hannah, recognizing the significance of this, says in her song in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 6, The Lord kills and brings to life, He brings down to Sheol and raises up. Within the opening of her barren womb, she sees hints of resurrection. Hints of resurrection in the context of birth can also be seen in the book of Ruth.

Ruth is a book that begins in the shadow of death, with great famine, and then with the deaths of Elimelech, Malon, and Chilion, and then also the mourning of Naomi. The book however ends with joy and new life, new life that looks forward to the raising up of David as the one who will be the king over the people. The connection of the theme of resurrection with the raising up of the promised seed is another strong one in scripture.

Again the author of Hebrews sees this in Hebrews chapter 11 verses 17 to 19, By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, Through Isaac shall your offspring be named. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. Such a connection between God's promise of the seed and God's raising up from the dead can be seen more explicitly in the story of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4, She is promised a child in much the same way as Sarah, but when that child dies, she goes to the prophet and calls for the life of her son back.

Confident in the Lord's promise and goodness, she receives the child back. The child is

raised from the dead. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter makes use of Psalm 16 verses 9 to 10, a psalm of David concerning the Lord's deliverance, Therefore my heart is glad and my whole being rejoices, my flesh also dwells secure, for you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy ones see corruption.

As the apostle Peter points out, David the king died and was buried, yet the flesh of David is a more expansive concept. It includes his heirs, it includes his dynasty. The Lord's commitment to the dynasty of David can be seen in places like Isaiah, where the Lord will raise up the seed of David like a root out of dry ground.

David has become like a stump cut down so low that it's down to Jesse, and out of that root of Jesse will arise a branch that will be the true heir of David, the one in whom the Lord's purpose will be fulfilled. Another image of resurrection. At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph calls upon his brothers and descendants to bring up his bones with them when they leave the land of Egypt.

Joseph is forgotten by the pharaohs, but the Lord remembers his people, and when they leave the land of Egypt, they take up the bones of Joseph with them, as we read in Exodus chapter 13 verse 19. At the very end of the book of Joshua, when they've divided the land and they're about to settle within it, we read in the final verses, As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Joseph's story is a story of death and resurrection. He was placed into a pit. All of the signs in a passage that is very reminiscent of the story of the binding of Isaac were that he was going to die, and yet the Lord spared him, and he was raised up from that pit, and raised up from another pit still, when he was thrown into the dungeon, which is also referred to using the same word for pit.

When he finally reveals himself to his brothers, they can barely believe that he's alive. And when his father receives the news, his father's heart, which has gone down to Sheol in mourning for his loved son, is revived, and Jacob himself receives a sort of new life. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is a story of raising up from the grave.

It's also a birth narrative, Israel like a groaning woman struggling to be delivered, and the Lord hearing and remembering his people, and bringing them forth, through the bloody doors of the Passover, through the separated waters of the Red Sea in the narrow passage, and through to new life and existence as a new nation on the other side. Israel is delivered through the very maw of the Abyss, which swallows up the Egyptians. They pass through the deep, an image of death itself, while the Egyptians sink down like a stone.

The story of return from exile is another resurrection narrative. Such return can be referred to in things like the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones in the Book of Ezekiel in chapter 37. Then there are statements about the return of the people, and their reviving from the grave of exile in places like Azar chapter 26, verse 19, which gives the image of resurrection very powerfully.

Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy. For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

The prophet Jonah is cast into the deep, into the Abyss itself, but there he is swallowed up by a big fish, and later vomited out on the third day. Jesus refers to this as a symbol of his resurrection, and we also see in the context that it's a symbol of exile and return. In Jeremiah chapter 51, verse 34, we read, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has devoured me, he has crushed me, he has made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me like a monster, he has filled his stomach with my delicacies, he has rinsed me out.

The image here is like that of Jonah, the great sea monster that has swallowed up the people of God. And yet what do we read a few verses later in verse 44? And I will punish Bel in Babylon, and take out of his mouth what he has swallowed. The nation shall no longer flow to him, the wall of Babylon has fallen.

Babylon will vomit up the exiles, and they will return to the land, like life from the dead. Another image of this return is found in the story of Daniel chapter 6, where Daniel is in the lion's den. In that story, which occurs in the first year of King Darius, Daniel is delivered from seemingly certain death, and it isn't hard to see in Daniel's experience an image of the entire nation.

The entire nation has been in the den of lions, the lions being the Babylonians, we should remember that Babylon is elsewhere in the book, compared to a lion. The story of Daniel's deliverance from the lion's den also anticipates the story of Jesus' resurrection in many ways. A stone was laid on the mouth of the den, like a stone was laid over Jesus' tomb and sealed.

At break of day, the king goes in haste to the den, much as the visitors to the tomb do on the first Easter Sunday. Daniel is found to have been delivered because he was blameless, and Christ, in his resurrection, is vindicated. In all of these Old Testament stories, we have anticipations of resurrection.

So when the resurrection of Christ occurs, it gives full triumphant and climactic expression to themes that should by now be familiar to us from many parts of the Old Testament. Whether it's being divested of an old form of flesh to take on a more glorious one, whether it's the opening up of barren wombs, whether it's the raising up of the seed, whether it's deliverance from the death of Egypt, or return from the deep of exile, the Lord throughout has been in the business of resurrection, preparing his people for a

greater resurrection to come that will draw together all of these themes and express them on a much higher level. As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord today, we should do so with a sense of recognition, that all the promises and purposes of the Lord throughout the Old Testament converge upon this point, a point in which their greater intent is finally revealed.

Happy Easter!