A Biblical Overview of Death & Resurrection

An important book by Cornelius Plantinga, a theologian and seminary professor, is entitled *Not The Way It’s Supposed to be*. The idea is that the world is not the way it’s supposed to be. The world has been corrupted by human sin, and this was never God’s intention.

God created the world perfect. It was to reflect the life of Heaven, i.e. it was to be Heaven on Earth. The world was to be a place of sustained unbroken joy, happiness, peace, and love. There was to be no sickness, no pain, no depression, no stress, no alienation between people, no rejection or feeling rejected. Most importantly, there was to be no spiritual or physical death.

But that is not the way the world is. The 20th century was possibly the most barbaric in history. We are evolving technology, but you could make a strong case that we are devolving morally and spiritually. Think back on the last 100 years. WWI, beginning in 1914, cost between 10-20 million lives. It was labeled, “the war to end all wars.”

In 1917 the Communist party seized power in Russia. 7 million died in the Russian Revolution. Stalin forcibly starved to death another 20 million Ukrainians during the depression. On top of this the death camps in Siberia overflowed with suffering political prisoners.

Then WWII broke out in 1939. By August of 1945 50 million died. This included the extermination of 6 million Jews, another 20 million Russians. It ended with the horror of atomic bombs falling on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In 1948 Mao Tse Tung seized power in China. During the next 30 years 80 million Chinese died in Mao’s political oppressions.

Worldwide abortion has reached epic proportions. The population has actually begun to decrease in Russia, Japan and Western Europe. It is estimated that a billion babies have been aborted in the last fifty years. I have not mentioned yet the African AIDS plague or the African genocides, nor modern terrorism.

We Americans live in the Disney Land of the world. We have unprecedented wealth, freedom, security, and opportunity. Yet it is estimated that
even here between 30 and 40 million Americans drown their fears and anxieties Prozac, Zoloft or Paxil.

The point is simply this: Something is desperately wrong! On Easter Sunday we celebrate good news. God has a solution. Christ rose from the dead. When he arose a New Creation Began. That New Creation is our only ultimate hope.

Today we are going to do a biblical overview of death and resurrection. Resurrection is the restoration of life. I want to look at death and resurrection through the lens of a Christian Worldview—Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

Here is my main point; Christ’s resurrection was the beginning of a New Creation.

I. Creation (Potential for Immortality)

God created Adam and Eve with immortality. It was both spiritual and physical.

Genesis 2:7 — 7 then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

However, our immortality/life is not inherent in us. It is not automatic. It exists only because God continues to sustain our life.

The penalty for sin was the loss of immortality, both spiritual and physical, i.e. the penalty was the loss of life.

(Genesis 2:17) "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

The death God threatened was first spiritual and then physical

Spiritual death is the cessation of communion with God.

Physical death is a byproduct of spiritual death.

Death spread from Adam to everything God put under his dominion—the earth.

II. Fall (Spiritual and Physical death)

Death took place when Adam sinned.
First spiritual death occurred. Sin cut Adam and Eve off from their relationship with God. In Paul's words, “they became dead in their trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1-4). The immediate fruit was guilt and insecurity toward God.

Genesis 3:10 —And he [Adam] said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

The process of physical death began immediately. It was a byproduct of spiritual death. But, because God is merciful, Gen 5:4 tells us that Adam didn’t experience physical death for another 930 years.

However, as the effect of sin accumulated and intensified, life expectancies got shorter and shorter with each generation. By the time we get to the first century the average life expectancy was under 30 years.

The judgment that was death included disease, aging, and physical deformities. Death has also affected that which is man’s inheritance, the earth. Because of sin we have war, plague, famine, Hurricanes, Tsunamis, Earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

Isaiah 24:4–6 —The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. 5 The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. 6 Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.

Because God is merciful and gracious, he was not content to leave humanity and the physical creation in a state of death and decay.

III. Redemption (Death defeated, life restored)

We all know that Jesus died and rose from the dead to save us from the guilt and penalty of sin. However, something bigger was happening. He was not only saving us from the guilt of sin, (restoring our relationship to God the Father), he was also inaugurating a cosmic transformation in the material universe. His resurrection began a New Creation.

Christians first experience their first taste of the New Creation through the miracle of New Birth.

The full experience of the New Creation will occur at the resurrection of our bodies on the Last Day, culminating in immortality in human bodies, in a New
Heavens and a New Earth—an earth restored to God’s original intention discussed above.

A. PROPHETS PREDICTED THE NEW CREATION

Paul tells us that “The last enemy to be defeated is death” (1Cor 15). Since death is God’s enemy, immediately after the Fall, God set in motion a plan to swallow up death with Life.

Through the prophets God announced his plan to restore the earth. On that Day death will be abolished forever.

(Isaiah 25:6–7) "The Lord of hosts will... swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever."

(Isaiah 26:19) "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."

(Ezekiel 37:12–14) "Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord."

(Daniel 12:2) "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Despite these prophecies, Many Jews (the Sadducees) did not believe in an after life.

Despite these prophecies, and despite the fact that Jesus predicted it three times, even Jesus’ disciples did not believe that he would rise from the dead.

B. FULFILLMENT

The New Creation began when Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus died on the cross on a Friday afternoon. He died to fulfill God’s justice. We have sinned. Remember, the penalty for sin is death. That means we all deserve to die. Jesus came to die in our place. He came to satisfy the demands of God’s justice. His death cleared the deck of justice’s clear demands. He died that we might live.
He was buried Friday evening. His corpse lay in the tomb all day Saturday. But death couldn’t retain its grip on Christ. Why? Death is a judgment for sin, but Jesus was sinless. It was cosmic injustice for Jesus to remain dead, and God loves justice. Therefore, to demonstrate his love for justice, the Father raised his Son from the dead.

Matthew 28:1–7 —1 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”

Jesus walked out of the tomb alive. His body was completely new, whole, immortal, immune from the ravages of Sin. Jesus raised himself by his own power.

John 10:17 —For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

Christ death began a New Creation. When Jesus rose from the dead the cosmos convulsed. The tide of sin and death, that had been going out since Adam’s Fall, halted, reversed its course, and began to come in again. Life began to overturn death. That process has begun. However, it will not reach consummation until the resurrection of the living and the dead on the last day.

Jesus resurrection will bring physical life to everyone—both to those who believe and those who don’t. It will be spiritual life only to those who believe.

John 5:25–29 —25 “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live…. 28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Jesus resurrection means that all men and women will live forever. On the basis of his resurrection, we will all be raised—some to “joy inexpressible and full of glory,” some to “weeping, wailing, and the gnashing of teeth.”
IV. Application

According to a recent Harris Poll, 84% of Americans believe that they will continue to exist after the death of their bodies. That is not just wishful thinking. Something deep inside of us testifies to this truth. We all know intuitively that this life is not the end. If it is, then there is no accounting. There is no ultimate justice. Without ultimate justice—the administration of rewards and punishments—life is meaningless, morality is meaningless, good and evil are meaningless, doing the right thing is irrelevant. There is no difference between Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler. As Paul said, if there is no resurrection let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.

The truth about the afterlife is what most people suspect intuitively. There is a resurrection. We will all live forever. Our future is full of hope. God will satisfy our deepest yearnings for happiness.

If the Bible is correct, no human life will ever cease to exist. This has big implications. I want to briefly trace out two.

1st Christ’s Resurrection is the basis for our hope. If Jesus is raised, no matter how bad your circumstances, you have grounds for hope. If what we have said about Creation, Fall, and redemption is true, life is not the way it is supposed to be. It is twisted and tormented by sin. We have a health care problem because we are sinners. We get sick, we age, and we die.

Because we are sinners we get depressed. Because we are sinners relationships get alienated. In our troubles God wants us to remember 2 Cor 4:16-18—

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

The Heavenly Man contains the true story of a Chinese Christian couple who, shortly after their marriage, were imprisoned by the Communists for their Christianity. They were separated from each other in prison. Thirty years later, in his old age, the husband was released. He found out that his wife had died years before in prison. How could he go on? What was his motive? He saw his life in
light of the future. He believed Paul’s words. “This light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

2nd Christ’s Resurrection means that we will all stand before Christ in judgment. God will reassemble our bodies and resurrect them. We will stand before Christ’s judgment seat in physical bodies. What makes Heaven so wonderful is that it is in the body. What makes Hell so horrible is that it also is in the body.

We will be raised for judgment. Christ will be your judge. This is bad news for unbelievers. The One who suffered infinite pains in his body for your redemption, and the One whom you spent your life pushing away, ignoring, ridiculing, and rejecting will now be your Judge.

If you have not embraced the gospel, you are God’s enemy. God is angry with you. He doesn’t want it to be that way. He has paid an infinite price to reconcile you to himself, to make peace with you, to be your friend.

But, if you die unreconciled, if you die his enemy, he will treat you as an enemy. He will give you what you deserve. You will hate the doctrine of the Resurrection. Why? Because you will be staring down the barrel of eternal suffering in a physical body with no hope of rescue. Your inheritance will be utter despair. You will beg Christ to undo your resurrection life, to destroy you and let you cease to exist.

But, if you are a Christian, the One whom you believed in and loved will be your Judge. The One who died for you and loves you with an everlasting love will be your Judge. The One has been interceding for you 24x7 at the Father’s right hand, your friend, the one who, despite your sins, is on your side—he will be your Judge.

It will be his joy to say “well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master” (Matt. 25:23). You will experience “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8), and you will experience that joy in a physical body. You will live forever in New Heavens and a New Earth, a world recreated by God, with all the effects of sin removed, in the world that God initially intended, a world without death, without aging, without disease, without broken relationship, or the convulsions of a renegade creations.

Revelation 21:3–4 —3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,
and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Christ’s resurrection means that there will be a resurrection of the dead, a judgment, and a New Cosmos. All of this will be the end of the beginning, and the beginning of all that we were really made for.

Keller: “At the end of the final book of the Bible, we see the very opposite of what other religions predict. We do not see the illusion of the world melt away nor do we see spiritual souls escaping the physical world into heaven. Rather, we see heaven descending into our world to unite with it and purify it of all its brokenness and imperfection. It will be a ‘New heavens and new earth’...The whole world will be healed as it is drawn into the fullness of God’s glory. Evil will be destroyed and all the potentialities in creation, latent until that moment, will explode into fullness and beauty. Compared to what we will be then we are now mere vegetables."¹

Christians get these blessings not by performing, but by believing the gospel and expressing that faith by repenting from all known sin.

In Summary, Things are not the way they are supposed to be. God created the world perfect, but sin brought death, conflict, war, pain, and suffering.

Through the prophets God announced hope—a future age of immortality in a New Creation.

Jesus resurrection began that New Creation. Everyone who has experienced New Birth has begun to experience the life of the world to come.

Its full consummation awaits the Last Day.

V. HomeGroup Study Questions

Creation: Read Gen 2:7, and 17. What was the status of Adam’s physical and spiritual life at Creation?

Fall: Read Gen 3:7-13, Eph 2:1-4 and Isa. 24:4-6. How do these texts fill in the details of what God meant by “On the day you eat of it you will die?”

Redemption: Read Ezek 37:12-14, Dan 12:2, Matt 28:1-7, Rev 21:3-4. What do these texts tell us about Christ’s Resurrection?

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God*, (New York: Dutton, 2008), pg 222-23
Review the six applications from your sermon notes. Which do you need to implement today? Why?