

ATTAINING THE RESURRECTION

Problem Texts (8)

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‘. . . that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead’ (Phil. 3:11).

What makes this a ‘problem text’? Perhaps it is the implication (suggested more by the English than by the Greek) that Paul was not sure of participating in the resurrection.

The wider context

Let us put his words in their wider context. Paul’s earliest reference to the subject is in *1 Thess. 4:16*, where he affirms that, at the Lord’s descent from heaven, ‘the dead in Christ will rise first’. He evidently does not expect to be one of them; he speaks rather as if he would be one of those surviving to witness the great event: ‘we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord’, he says (*1 Thess. 4:15*). Similarly, in *1 Cor. 15:52* (four or five years later), he says that at the last trumpet ‘the dead will be raised imperishable, and we (the survivors) shall be changed’. But between the writing of *1* and *2* Corinthians something happened to change his perspective: from then on he speaks as if death before the Lord’s coming is for him an increasing probability, and he includes himself not among the survivors but among those who will be raised: ‘he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you (the survivors) into his presence’ (*2 Cor. 4:14*). It is from this later perspective that *Philippians* is written: his preference, as he contemplates the doubtful outcome of his hearing before Caesar, is not for the Lord to come and take him away from it all but for himself ‘to depart and be with Christ’ (*Phil. 1:23*).

The immediate context

In *Phil. 3:8–11* Paul states the grand ambition of his life—to gain Christ and ‘know him and the power of his resurrection’. This knowledge of Christ was personal; he found in Christ an inexhaustible fulness, so that there was always more of him to know. It involved such a dynamic union with Christ that in his present

mortal existence he experienced the power of Christ’s resurrection—that is, the power of his risen life, which became more vitally real to him the more he entered into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings, ‘always carrying in the body the putting to death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body’ (*2 Cor. 4:10*).

But experiencing the power of Christ’s resurrection here and now was not a substitute for looking forward to the resurrection of the body as the sequel to physical death (although some of Paul’s Corinthian converts perhaps thought so). To this resurrection—resurrection ‘with Jesus’ (*2 Cor. 4:14*)—Paul looked forward in hope. The hope was a sure hope: if the words ‘that if possible I may attain . . .’ imply any uncertainty, the uncertainty lies in the possibility that, even at this late stage in Paul’s career, he might still be alive at the Lord’s return. Although he now views the future from the perspective of one who is more likely than not to pass through death before the Lord’s return, he has received no revelation on this matter.

An ‘out-resurrection’

However, in addition to the implication of ‘that if possible . . .’, some readers have seen significance in the fact that the Greek word for ‘resurrection’ here is *exanastasis*, ‘out-resurrection’ (a compound found here only in the NT). But the resurrection of the dead in Christ is elsewhere spoken of as an ‘out-resurrection’: even if the prefix *ex* does not appear in front of the word, the same particle is used as a preposition after it; it is the resurrection *out of* (or *from among*) the dead. There is no basis in the wording for supposing that that ‘the resurrection from the dead’ in *Phil. 3:11* is a different event from that described (say) in *1 Thess. 4:16*. The resurrection of believers is an ‘out-resurrection’, a resurrection ‘from among’ the dead, because it takes place after the likeness of the resurrection of Christ, who was raised ‘from among’ the dead.

A resurrection of martyrs

There are two other texts which are believed by some to have a bearing on this one. One is *Rev. 20:4–6*, where we certainly find a selective resurrection. Those who are raised in this ‘first resurrection’ (leaving the rest of the dead in their graves for a millennium) are the martyrs and faithful confessors in the tribulation under the ‘beast’. The earlier among them to suffer martyrdom were those whose souls were heard crying out from under the altar at the breaking of the fifth seal (*Rev. 6:9–11*); now their number is complete and all are raised together. The same company is described in *Rev. 15:2* as ‘those who had conquered the beast’; their conquest was achieved, according to *Rev. 12:11*, ‘by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; for they loved not their lives even unto death’. (John gives a strong impression that all who maintain a steadfast confession under that tribulation suffer martyrdom; to survive unscathed is a token of apostasy.) There is nothing in Paul’s language in *Phil. 3:11* to suggest that the resurrection which he hoped to attain was dependent on his being martyred. He knew that he might die as a martyr, but at the time of writing he thought it more likely that he would be acquitted and released.

‘Accounted worthy’

The other text is *Luke 20:35*, where the Lord, in his dispute with Sadducees, speaks of ‘those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead’. From the verb ‘accounted worthy’ a few students have inferred that some of the saved, but not all, merit participation in the first resurrection. But the reference is simply to what, elsewhere in the same Gospel, the Lord calls ‘the resurrection of the just’ (*Luke 14:14*)—their resurrection from among the unjust (cf. *John 5:28, 29*). Worthiness or fitness to share in the resurrection from among the dead is determined by God, who in grace bestows the fitness he requires.