

Raise the Dead

This is a daunting instruction. It goes completely against our experience, which is that where there is life there's hope, but death marks the point of no return. It seems foolish. How can we raise dead people back to life?

Scripture says, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:26)." Of all Jesus' commands, this is the hardest, because there is no possibility of us doing this in our own strength. With earlier subjects, we can use our natural ability up to a point. We can make an effort of will to love one another. Even when healing the sick, the mere act of listening and taking the person seriously will do some good, even if there appear to be no other results from our prayer.

But you cannot help a dead person at all in your own strength; raising a dead person is an entirely supernatural act.

We can easily see how far today's church practice ignores Christ's instruction. As a minister, I was expected to conduct funerals. Whether or not I knew the person when living, to date, I have never seen the dead body. The first time I encounter the person after they have died is when they are in the coffin, at the service. Further, no one has ever asked me to attempt to pray a dead person back to life. I don't think it would occur to them to do so. On a few occasions, it has occurred to me to want to pray over a dead person I am burying, but I have not yet had the courage to ask for the opportunity. I can imagine the reaction from the relatives if I did.

All this contrasts with Jesus' teaching. He raised at least three people himself (Luke 7:11-17, 8:51-56; John 11:38-44), and expected his followers to do the same (Matt 10:8). When John the Baptist sent to ask if he was the Messiah, Jesus referred to the dead being raised in his reply, in a way which suggested that this was an expected sign of God's intervention in the coming kingdom of God (Luke 7:22). On another occasion, a man asked to join Jesus as a disciple after first burying his father. Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:60)".

The impression we are left with is that conducting funerals is not an activity for believers but for unbelievers. In contrast, if we take the gospel seriously, then the call for the Christian church is not to bury dead people but to raise them.

At first hearing, this sounds too much. Let us consider some of the obstacles to our doing this. Firstly there are the thought patterns inside us. Most readers brought up in the Western world will have thoughts at this point that the proposal to raise the dead is madness. Our instinct will be to want to put the book down, or even throw it in the bin. Everything about our outlook on the world is challenged by this demand, and we need to face up to all the opposition there is inside ourselves as a first step.

Then there are the attitudes of others. Won't I be thought crazy if I ask for an opportunity to pray for a dead person to revive? Perhaps it is better not to advertise the intention, but simply to ask for the chance to be alone with the dead person for a while, in order to pray. However, people might still think this request somewhat strange.

There is also the practical difficulty of gaining access to dead people. In former times, when someone died, they would often be laid out in their home, for friends and relatives to come and see them for the last time. Nowadays, this seldom happens, to my knowledge. It has become the practice to whisk dead people away, and keep them out of sight, almost as if there is something embarrassing about death.

I remember once witnessing a death in public. This happened soon after I had begun to realise that Jesus' commands were to be taken seriously, and that as a result, we were called to be involved in raising the dead. This seemed very exciting to me at first, and I upset some people in my enthusiastic talk. So maybe the Lord allowed me to witness a death to sober me up a bit.

We were driving along an urban dual carriageway, with a speed limit of forty miles an hour, when I saw someone lying on the road by a bus-stop. I put the hazard lights on, and slowed to a halt. My wife stayed in the car, and I got out, and approached what turned out to be the husband standing dazed by the roadside, and his wife lying unconscious on the road. Both were over 80, I

judged. He seemed very confused. There were already a few bystanders; one said that an ambulance had been called.

I introduced myself as a Christian minister, and tried to comfort the man. Someone else had spread a garment over the woman to keep her warm. I put my arm round the man, said a prayer for them both, and assured him that everything would be alright. The ambulance arrived within two or three minutes. Only once did I glance down at the woman, and was alarmed to see that her face was an unnatural blue colour. The ambulance men put an oxygen mask on her, but soon took it off again, quickly lifted her on to a stretcher, and both she and her husband were soon inside the ambulance.

When they had gone, and I had climbed into our car, my wife who had watched everything from the car said that she was sure the woman had died. I believed her. Witnessing this event gave me a most strange feeling, which lasted most of the day. I realised that the whole business of praying for a dead person would be very tricky, especially if it was someone I knew. There would be a lot of emotion around, mine as well as other people's.

Apart from its upsetting nature, what struck me about the whole episode was the speed with which everything happened. There must have been about six or seven minutes between the moment when the woman collapsed, and the ambulance drove off with the couple. If we had been a few minutes earlier or later, we would have driven past the spot without knowing anything about it. Society's attitude to removing dead people from sight is another obstacle to Christians following our Lord's instruction in attempting to raise the dead.

So how can we get started in this area? It seems to me that we need to begin with a clear grasp of the forces at work in and around us that will prevent us from starting. Perhaps this opposition that we have identified is there for a reason. Someone being raised from death through prayer to Jesus would have a major evangelistic effect. I heard a story second hand that when someone was raised from death in Africa within the last few years, ten thousand people turned to the Lord. This would hardly be surprising. Satan does not want that sort of happening; he is surely well pleased with churches that make no effort to follow Jesus in this area.

To help overcome our unbelief, we can read about people raised from the dead. There are the stories in Scripture (1 Kings 17:17-24, 2 Kgs 4:8-37, Acts 9:36-43, 20:7-12). There are also recent accounts to turn to. Chapter 29 of *Come Holy Spirit* (D. Pytches, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1985) gives a number of accounts of dead people being raised, from around the world. The British preacher Smith Wigglesworth is said to have raised fourteen people from death; there are several books about him (Pytches, p232). I once heard a tape of a talk given by David Watson at St. John's College Nottingham, in which he referred to someone in South Germany who had done research which showed that in each century since Jesus, there were instances of people raised from death by believer's prayers. I don't know whether this research was ever published.

Clearly, we need to be right with God to engage in this kind of work. He has said, "I will not share my glory with another (Isa 42:8)"; so if there is the slightest trace of pride about us, God will not trust us with working miracles, it seems to me, lest we end up saying "look at me!" rather than "look at Him". There is no hint of pride in any of the biblical accounts of people being raised.

For many of us, pride is a real problem. It may well be that God will lead us along a thoroughly thorny, unpleasant path in order to remove it. So, if you want to be used by him, prepare for difficulties along the way. This was the experience of all the men God used in the Bible, eg Ezekiel (3:24-27, 24:15-18) and Paul (Acts 14:19-20, 1 Cor 11:21-33).

A raising from death is clearly a mighty act. A helpful insight into works of power can be seen in Jesus' explanation of why he could cast out a particular demon, but the disciples could not. When they asked him about it, he said "This kind can come out only by prayer (Mark 9:28-29)." We could take this to mean that Jesus' prayer somehow had a greater intensity behind it, or was superior to that of the disciples in some way. But this would be not far from saying that his technique was better than theirs; he knew the right phrases, or had the right knack.

Rather than putting Jesus on some kind of pedestal of superior praying power, it seems preferable to understand his words as referring to the quality of his relationship with his heavenly

father. It was this life of prayer that made the difference. He was so close to God that he could see what he was doing, and hear what he was saying (John 5:19, 8:28-29). So many believers, if we are honest, do not live particularly close to God at all, for much of the time. We seldom hear his voice clearly. It is as if clouds, or fog and mist, blot out the sun. Sufficient light still filters through for us to be able to live by, and we get used to existence in gloomy conditions. It isn't until we take a journey by plane, and soar above the clouds, that we realise just how much we have got used to being under the weather down here.

This interpretation of Jesus' remark about prayer in Mark 9 does justice to the context. The scene in the valley follows that account of the transfiguration on the mountain top (Mark 9:2-12). There, in prayer, Jesus had been so close to God and so filled with his Spirit, that his clothing became radiant. It is as if a glimpse of the private reality of his closeness to God was revealed to Peter, James and John for a moment, before it was shrouded again. There were no clouds between Jesus and the Father.

God confirmed this with his words "This is my son whom I love; listen to him (Mark 9:7)." Jesus gives us the authentic will of God in his teaching. And as if to underline the importance of people being released from all that holds them captive in God's eyes, the account leads straight into the story of the powerful deliverance. Both what was done, and how it was done, flow out of the close relationship between Jesus and the Father. It seems helpful to connect the two incidents.

If we are going to have any impact in the realm of the miraculous, we too need to be people who have a good relationship with God. We can begin to appreciate how the material we will discuss in part six is vital for us to be effective in carrying out Jesus' commands. We cannot obey in our own strength alone. We are lost if do not have Jesus with us every step of the way. Nowhere is this clearer than in thoughts about raising the dead, where just getting started is beyond our reach, unless God helps us.