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Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

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Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

WE are to discuss this morning a subject of peculiar importance to the whole of Christendom; for it is generally admitted that the resurrection of Jesus is central to the Christian faith, the cornerstone of the whole Christian structure. At least, faith in a future life for the millions of Christians is founded on the New Testament record of the most stupendous of all miracles, namely: that the veritable body of Jesus rose from the tomb after he had been pronounced dead; and having thus risen appeared to his disciples, talked with them, gave them directions, and then ascended to heaven in the self-same body he had worn throughout the thirty years of his earthly life. It is this miracle and the inference of personal immortality which believing Christians draw from it that the Easter festival annually celebrates. The alleged physical resurrection of Jesus—this is the Christian foundation for faith in a future life. In the words of Paul, Jesus having risen from the dead became the first fruits of them that slept. But the difficulty here is that what the Christians offer as proof of immortality is itself in need of being proved.

Before I come to the question of whether or not it can be proved, I want to point out the fallacy of this argument. Even were it granted that Jesus did rise physically from the grave, it would not follow that all believing Christians were immortal. According to their view it was the son of God who thus rose from the dead, and we are not war-

ranted in inferring the immortality of ordinary human beings from the experience of one who was supernatural. According to Christians, Jesus differed from all other persons. It would therefore be illogical to infer from the resurrection of so unique a person the immortality of lesser souls. On the other hand, if Jesus be considered a purely human being, does his resurrection prove the immortality of his followers? Not at all. Within thirty-six hours after his death he is believed to have come back to life; but his followers do not come back to life within thirty-six days after death. We know something of the processes of dissolution of the human body after life has ceased, and can see therefore that there is no connection between coming back to life within a few hours and within a few centuries after death. Consequently, whether we take the divine or the human view of Jesus, the alleged miracle of his resurrection furnishes no adequate foundation for the faith in a future life.

Now I shall discuss as well as I can in the brief space at my disposal this question of the resurrection of Jesus. First, we shall examine the evidence on which is based the historicity of the resurrection, then we shall look at some of the arguments advanced in its favor, and finally we shall seek the origin of the resurrection stories which grew up in the first century of the Christian era.

I

First, then, let us examine the evidence. The question of miracles involves two elements—the fact and the theory. It is only after the fact has been sufficiently established that the cause can come into question. It is absurd to explain facts either by natural processes or by the will of God until we are certain that these facts were actual occurrences. If my little boy took *Alice in Wonderland* too seriously and asked me to explain why the sea is boiling hot, I would be compelled to disappoint his curiosity. We must first be sure that the sea is boiling hot. Therefore, I do not agree with Hume that since we have established the reign of universal law, we need not bother with the evidence concerning miracles—they could not happen and that is all there is to it. The scientist who undertakes to demonstrate the

impossibility of miracles on that basis forgets that his thought processes function within a set of principles which his adversary will not accept. All that he can really show is that his principles fit in better with his experience than do those of his adversaries. The final conflict is between the primitive view of the world and the scientific view. The best than can be done is to stress the logical side and then make the contrast between the two views of the world as distinct as possible. Whether a person does or does not believe in miracles depends ultimately upon the view of the world which he happens to hold. And this mental outlook is the result of his training and his psychological make-up. In short, I cannot prove that there are no fairies, but I can show that there is no good evidence for belief in their existence. So I cannot prove that no man ever rose from the dead, but I can show that there is no good evidence for believing that any one ever did.

And let it be recognized that the question of Jesus' resurrection, like that of any other miracle, is purely a question of fact, an event of history; and as such it must be treated as every other question of fact or history is treated—in the light of the evidence that can be amassed in support of it. I emphasize this fact because people frequently tell me that they accept the resurrection of Jesus as a matter of faith, which signifies an unusual confusion of terms. Faith does not touch the question at all. You might as well talk about faith in the battle of Gettysburg or in the surrender of Lee as of faith in the resurrection of Jesus. The authenticity of all events in history must be decided by the evidence, and the same standards of evidence, external and internal, must be brought to bear upon all. And the more wonderful and strange any alleged event, the greater the amount of evidence required to establish its occurrence. The physical resurrection of one actually dead will require an extraordinary amount of evidence to warrant belief in it, because it is the most stupendous of all recorded events and the most contrary to normal human experience. The New Testament reports such an event in the life of Jesus. What evidence is there to support the belief in it?

When we examine and analyze the resurrection stories,

we note first that not one of the gospels presents us with a first-hand report of what is recorded, not one of them gives us the testimony of an eye-witness as to what happened. The earliest of these reports was written about forty years after Jesus' death. I need not give reasons for this statement because it is generally accepted by all Christian scholars. And in the second place, the so-called triple-tradition—the story of the life of Jesus in which the three synoptic gospels agree and considered by most people the basis for historical fact—contains no account of a miraculous return to life, for the resurrection stories at the end of the gospel of Mark were not a part of the original record. There are many reasons for this statement, into which I cannot at present enter. Suffice it to say now that in the Revised Version of the New Testament they are placed in brackets and in the margin we are expressly told that these concluding verses of the gospel "are omitted in the two oldest Greek manuscripts" and that "other authorities have a different ending to the gospel."

A third point to be noted at the outset relates to the fact, and this is true of all the incidents in his life, that the account given in the earliest gospel grows with the telling, taking on more and more of the wonderful in the later gospels. The simple frank story of what followed the crucifixion as told in Mark's gospel, is enlarged upon and exaggerated in each of the succeeding narratives. For instance, in Mark three women find the empty tomb; in Matthew three women find the empty tomb and the risen Lord: while in Luke the women and the disciples see the empty tomb and the risen Lord. Again, in Mark the women find a man at the tomb who tells them that the Lord is risen; in Matthew this man has been transformed into an angel; and in Luke we find there were two angels. In Mark, Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee apparently in the form of a spirit; but in the later gospels he makes a number of appearances and in bodily form, even eating and drinking and allowing himself to be touched. Of course, it is quite possible that the same event would be differently described by different authors, but when we realize that the tale increases in wonder in proportion to the lateness of the record it is quite significant.

Thus having dispensed with several fundamental facts, let us examine these different stories and see wherein they differ and to what extent they contradict one another. Turn to the account in the oldest gospel, Mark, of the closing scene in Jesus' life. We are told that he was crucified at nine o'clock and pronounced dead at three. Before sunset Joseph of Arimathea obtained the body and placed it in a rock-hewn tomb. Thirty-six hours later three women visited the tomb and found it empty. A young man, seated at the entrance, told them that the Lord whom they sought, was risen and if they would go to Galilee they would find him there, and they departed trembling with fear and said not a word to anyone about their experience. No explanation is given of the disappearance of the body, nothing but the opinion of a young man as to what had transpired. That is all that is found in the original gospel. In the portion that was added later we find the account of several appearances—to Mary Magdalene, to two disciples, and later to the eleven disciples, after which he ascended to heaven in bodily form.

If you turn now to the narratives in Matthew and in Luke, you will find that they differ in eight particulars as to what transpired at the tomb. They differ as to who the women at the tomb were, as to the time at which they came to it, as to the relation of the stone to the tomb, as to the number of angels present there, as to who saw Jesus there, as to what the women reported they saw, as to whom they reported it, and as to the appearances of Jesus there. Again it is entirely possible that the same event might be described differently by eye-witnesses, but they ought not to differ, and contradict each other in regard to such essential facts as these just cited. And that is by no means all, for if you now compare the reports of all three gospels with one another you will find that the points of difference increase from eight to twelve.

Without going into minute detail, let me remind you of a few of these differences in the three different narratives. Mark tells us that the women came to the tomb about sunrise; Luke reports that it was at early dawn; while Matthew says it was about half a day later. Again Mark re-

lates "they said nothing to any man"; whereas Luke reports, "they told the eleven disciples everything"; while Matthew has no record of this at all. According to Luke they entered the tomb; according to Matthew they did not enter it; Mark makes no mention of the matter. Mark reports a man at the tomb, Matthew an angel, Luke two angels. Mark and Matthew tell us that the eleven were to go to Galilee to see Jesus, whereas Luke says they saw him at Jerusalem. In Mark's version it was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome, who came to the tomb; in Matthew's story it was the two Marys only who came; while in Luke's it was the two Marys and Joanna. Mark and Luke agree that the stone had been rolled away when the women arrived, but Matthew tells us it was rolled back in the presence of the women by an angel. Luke alone relates an appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the road to Emaus on the resurrection day, Luke alone tells of an appearance to Peter on the evening of the same day, only Luke reports the appearance to the eleven on the same evening, and only he gives an account of the risen Jesus asking the disciples to touch him and eating material food in their presence. Finally, Matthew states that Jesus' first appearance was to the women, while Luke assures us that it was to two of the disciples, and Mark makes Mary Magdalene the one to whom Jesus first appeared after the resurrection.

If now you should proceed with your analysis of the evidence and compare the accounts furnished by all four of the gospels you will find twenty-one points of difference instead of twelve. I have not time to enter upon a discussion of these, except to say that there is but one point common to all four writers, and that is the statement that the tomb was empty. Aside from this there are contradictions on every hand, and the most that we can deduce from it is that the tomb was empty, and that somebody said that somebody saw Jesus, somewhere and at some time after he had been entombed. In short, I think you will agree with me that the testimony in support of belief in the resurrection of Jesus as presented in the gospels is insufficient to warrant acceptance of the belief.

I should like to point out also a few of the difficulties that appear in the separate gospels themselves, at least give you a couple of examples. For instance, in the gospel of Luke we are told of his sudden appearance from nowhere as though he were a kind of apparition, and then the disciples are convinced of his physical presence by feeling his hands and feet and watching him partake of food. This material body can hardly be reconciled with his sudden appearance and disappearance, and is much better understood in terms of legend than in terms of history. Again no account gives anything definite as to the when or how of the resurrection, indeed in the gospel of Matthew, there is no room left for the event, for it naturally cannot have occurred before the opening of the tomb; but if it happened after that, then it must have been witnessed by the women, as well as the coming down of the angel and the rolling away of the stone. But they would not have needed to be told by the angel about the resurrection if they had themselves just witnessed it. And thus if I had time I could point out many such difficulties, which are evidence of the fact that these later gospels are not original writing, but only secondary elaborations of the earlier source in which the imported embellishments do not harmonize with the original. And so one is forced to the conclusion that these narratives are largely if not entirely legendary and grew up gradually during the first century as the result of a belief which came to be accepted through oral tradition.

II

A great many Christian scholars will go this far with me; they will admit that the gospel testimony is worthless, but insist that there is other evidence which is convincing. A certain contemporary of Jesus wrote some letters in which he shows a firm belief in the resurrection. His name was Paul. Surely this man must have known what he was writing about. Let us turn therefore to the testimony of Paul. To my mind the fact that Paul was a contemporary only adds to our perplexity, for everything he reports is only hearsay, not being present at any of the appearances; and we find that he knows nothing about a physical resurrection, but only about belief in the resurrection from the

dead—an entirely different thing which I shall explain in a moment. In Corinth this belief was denied. Paul defends it by relating a succession of post-mortem appearances of Jesus—first to Peter, then to the twelve, after that to five hundred brethren, and last of all to Paul himself. Yet in this enumeration Paul makes no mention of the reports of the women at the tomb nor of the appearances there, nor of that on the road to Emaus, nor of Jesus eating fish in the company of his disciples. Paul knew nothing of an empty tomb nor of the visit of the women. Yet Paul was for fifteen days the guest of Peter in Jerusalem. Surely the latter would have told him of these significant appearances and Paul would not have failed to make use of them in his discussion with the Corinthians, had he ever heard of them. Nay more, had the empty tomb been reported to Paul, his whole argument in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians would have been vitiated. Hence we conclude that these details given in the gospels of Matthew and Luke originated later than the time of Peter and Paul, who knew nothing of them.

Then note this strange fact. Paul no doubt used all the evidence he had, which fixes the post-mortem appearances of Jesus known at this time, and they were to Peter, to the twelve, to the five hundred, and to James; and yet the gospel writers have overlooked all these appearances. How could they disregard the report of Paul and accept that of certain women who said they had seen an angel and had found an empty tomb? This question can be answered only by assuming what is no doubt a fact, that the narratives of a bodily resurrection eventually displaced the statements of Paul, who had experienced a vision of Jesus and knew only a "resurrection of the dead," and who construed the appearance of Jesus to others to be of the same nature as the appearance he had beheld. And what was the nature of this appearance? You will remember that he regretted that he had never seen Jesus in the flesh, also that he never claimed to have seen Jesus in the period between the resurrection and the ascension. He claims to have seen Jesus only on the way to Damascus in the year 34 A. D., and then it was in a vision. And considerable

light is thrown upon this experience when we note that in the second letter to the Corinthians, he himself states that he was accustomed to seeing visions and experiencing various kinds of psychic states. And of particular importance is the fact that he nowhere makes a distinction between the way in which he saw Jesus and the way in which others saw him. The natural inference is that in his mind there was no difference between his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and the several appearances of Jesus to others of which he speaks. Paul therefore does not testify to any physical resurrection of Jesus; but only to a vision which he had in the year 34 A. D., nor does he anywhere speak of any such resurrection.

Now this is all the evidence there is for this stupendous miracle—these contradictory statements in the gospels and these irreconcilable references of Paul. In all the other literature of the world there is nothing that is not based upon these simple accounts. What value are we justified in attaching to this testimony? Suppose the case were that of proving some one guilty of murder today and the state produced four witnesses, three of whom could give no account of themselves and related only confused and irreconcilable stories, while the testimony of the fourth contradicted that of the other three at every crucial point, what would the verdict be? Well, this is exactly the kind of evidence we have been dealing with here. We do not know who wrote these gospels nor how nor when they were written; and after reading them we do not know who, if anybody, saw Jesus after his death, nor how he was seen nor when nor where.

III

There are several defenses offered by those who believe in the resurrection, which it is worthwhile to note here. Many an apologist of Christianity pins his faith on the fact that Paul was a contemporary of Jesus, and that he showed in his letters a firm belief in the resurrection. The evidence of this one man is considered sufficient to substantiate a miracle which is contrary to all human experience; but we must remember, what I have already intimated, that everything Paul reports, except his later vision of Jesus, was hearsay.

The statement that Jesus was seen by five hundred, for instance, is of little value because he omits to mention what steps he took to ascertain the accuracy of his information—who the individuals were, what the various impressions made upon them were, and so forth. This appearance is not reported anywhere else, and that Paul heard such a report does not prove that the report is true, or if true that the five hundred had clear and unmistakable evidence of Jesus' presence. And of course no one doubts that Paul believed in the "resurrection from the dead" before he was converted to Christianity; but this does not add anything as evidence to a physical resurrection—especially when we realize that in his day the resurrection of any great prophet was accepted as a normal event. Of all old world legends, the death and resurrection of divinely born saviours was the most widespread. I have not time to go into this matter of comparative mythology to substantiate that statement, but most of you are familiar with the evidence.

Besides Paul is by no means the only one who has thought he had direct communication with his saviour. Look for instance at the experience of George Fox or of Swedenborg. These men were firmly convinced that they had conversed with spirits and had seen the Lord. So was Martin Luther perfectly convinced that he had seen the Devil when he threw his ink pot at him. So was Evan Roberts convinced that he had seen the saviour. So have many good Christians been convinced from time to time that they have seen Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, or angels. Thousands and thousands of heathen as well as Christians have had visions of their saviours; but such experiences can scarcely be brought forward seriously as a proof of the existence of the divinities believed to have been seen. Such experiences should be studied scientifically, and willing as many people are to explain such phenomena by the simple theory of spirits, the best scientific opinion is that such apparitions are due to causes that are purely psychological.

Another argument for considering the resurrection a historical fact is that the gospel narrative is located within historic times; but so are the narratives of King Arthur and William Tell and Robin Hood; but historians are silent

about all these narratives, sacred and profane alike. There was probably a real King Arthur, however different from the hero of mythology; and probably a real Robin Hood, however now enlarged and disguised by the accretion of legend. Similarly there was probably a real Jesus, but the marvellous event of his resurrection is unrecorded by any of the celebrated historians of the period.

The final argument is that the resurrection is of a piece with the whole character and claims of Christianity; and even, had we no New Testament at all, we would be obliged to postulate something very like the resurrection or the belief in it, in order to account for Christianity. This, I think, is true and leads me to the final section of my address in which I shall seek to account for the belief in the resurrection and the origin of the resurrection stories.

IV

I must first make the distinction to which I referred a moment ago—between the ideas of physical resurrection and the resurrection from the dead. It was believed among the Hebrews that after death all human souls descended into Hades—the underworld. The Hebrews called it Sheol, but I use the Greek word, "Hades," because it is better known. This Hades was divided into two parts, called Paradise and Gehenna, which were separated by a gulf across which one could look. The former was the habitation of good souls, and the latter of bad souls. In addition to this, it was believed that all the good souls in Paradise would have the privilege of returning to earth when the messianic kingdom was established. This doctrine was taught especially by Paul. Read again that fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, the one always read at Christian funerals. Read it in the light of this doctrine, and that which has heretofore been unintelligible to you, will become clear. Read also the first epistle to the Thessalonians, where this idea is taught in detail, and you will realize that the word "resurrection" as used in the time of Jesus signified a return of the soul from Hades and not a rising of the body from the grave. In addition, it was a well confirmed belief that certain great men like Moses and Elijah had returned from

Hades. Was it not likely therefore that Jesus who in the minds of the disciples was greater than any of these should also return? And this thought was confirmed by passages of scripture supposed to refer to the messiah, such as "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades, nor suffer the holy one to see corruption." If, as they believed, this referred to the messiah; and if as they believed Jesus was the messiah, then the conclusion was obvious. And by many similar quotations from scripture did the disciples confirm their belief in his return. So, not only did they believe in the deathlessness of such an exalted personality and his ability to escape from Hades, but centuries before the sacred scriptures had predicted his return.

Again, in the legends of all saints and martyrs it is a common feature that the saint shortly after his death appears in dreams and waking hours and bids his people be of good cheer, adding words of consolation and instruction. The longing love loses itself completely in memories and the precious image of the departed presents itself so vividly that in a supreme moment of ecstatic enthusiasm, faith believes itself face to face with the actual person. With this general psychological experience in addition to their natural belief in the deathlessness of such an exalted personality and to the prophecies of the Old Testament which foretold his return from Hades, it needed only a rumor, a suggestion that someone had seen Jesus to start the legend of a physical resurrection. Once started it would grow rapidly with repetition, taking on a variety of statements, each vested with more marvellous detail, precisely as we have seen was the case with these narratives. Thus the story of a bodily resurrection from the tomb was the natural outgrowth of the well-established belief in the spiritual resurrection from Hades or "from the dead" as it was called.

And it is significant that Peter is said to be the first person to have seen Jesus after the crucifixion, partly because of the traditional character of Peter as an impulsive and excitable person; but still more because of the visit of Paul to Peter in Jerusalem. There is scarcely any doubt that Paul told Peter of his experiences on the way to Damascus, and this story would stimulate the consciousness of a similar

vision of Jesus in the susceptible Peter. Thus Peter's belief in a physical resurrection of Jesus was the consequence rather than the cause of his conviction that he still lived. Following other analogies, it is easy to understand that this experience of inspired vision did not confine itself to Peter, but repeated itself soon for the other disciples and finally for whole assemblages of believers. It is a well-known fact of experience that there is a contagion in the conditions of excited psychical life, especially of religious enthusiasm and ecstasy and that such conditions overpower entire assemblages. Many succumb to the suggestion of individuals to such an extent that they actually repeat the experience; others less susceptible imagine at least that they see and hear the thing suggested; while even dull and sober participants are frequently so carried away by the enthusiasm of the crowd that faith furnishes what their own vision fails to supply.

Thus the historical basis of the disciples' belief in a resurrection is to be found in the ecstatic visionary experiences emanating from an individual and soon convincing all. In these experiences they believed that they saw the crucified master alive and raised to heavenly glory, whence he would come eventually to establish his kingdom, and this belief brought about a resurrection of faith in the disciples themselves. Immediately following his death, they were in despair, but now they realized that his mission did not end with his supposed death, and that it was their business to carry on as disciples. So we find the birth of Christianity in the revival of faith and hope in the hearts of these disciples, based upon certain ecstatic experiences following the death of Jesus; and from this was gradually and eventually evolved the legend of a physical resurrection. I do not for a moment deny that Jesus was seen upon several occasions after his execution. The only question is the character of these appearances. Were they actual or were they hallucinations? This is a problem that belongs not to Biblical criticism nor to theological tradition, but to psychical research. The real controversy over the resurrection of Jesus among scholars is not one concerning a stupendous miracle of which the accounts are hopelessly contradictory and useless, but concerning the character of the appearances of

Jesus to Paul and to the disciples. And the thing to be remembered is that these appearances, whatever their nature may have been, attest the power of Jesus over his disciples and the converted Paul. He took so deep a hold upon these people that a vision of him was the most natural and inevitable of all experiences, while the legend of his physical reappearance after death and an empty tomb were the inevitable result of the vision.

Feeling that this discussion has been somewhat involved, and that I may not have been able to make myself clear at certain points, let me sum up in a few words the results of our deliberations. 1. The evidence at our disposal is inadequate to support belief in a physical resurrection. No authentic historian of the time mentions the occurrence, while the only records we have are hopelessly irreconcilable and give evidence of a legendary character. 2. Paul, whose letters give us the earliest reference to a resurrection, used that word in its commonly accepted meaning at that time, namely, the return of a soul from Hades. 3. The source of the belief that Jesus still lived is to be found in a combination of Paul's belief in the resurrection of the dead and of his vision of Jesus on the way to Damascus. 4. This incident related to Peter suggested a similar experience with him, which in turn spread among other believers. 5. The belief in a physical resurrection grew out of these psychic experiences, and was the result rather than the cause of the belief that he still lived. 6. The accounts in the gospels which are comparatively late reflect the natural legendary growth from this simple fact. 7. Christianity was not the result therefore of a physical resurrection of Jesus, but rather of a resurrection of faith and courage in the hearts of the disciples, of which the supposed resurrection of Jesus was a natural result. The process no doubt was something like this. The exalted idea which the disciples held of Jesus' personality gave rise to the conviction that he could not possibly be confined in Hades, but must have risen—a conviction reinforced by reference to history, prophecy and the Psalms. From this conviction there followed so-called appearances of Jesus to Peter and the other disciples, which transformed them from despairing disciples to zealous apos-

tles of the doctrine that Jesus was alive in heaven and would soon come to complete his mission. And from these circumstances, the legends of a physical resurrection were eventually shaped, as we find them in the gospels, the sources of which are not far to seek and the allegorical sense of each not difficult to understand.

And now at the end one word of application. I am not accustomed to delivering critical lectures on Easter Day, and I would feel that this address were a failure if I did not give you at least a word of inspiration and encouragement. And symbolical as this word may be, it contains the heart of the Easter message. When stripped of all legend and miracle we have here to deal with an eternal and universal fact. The spiritual experience of these men who first preached Jesus was an experience of the risen Christ which holds good now, and which is the very life blood of our relationship to the eternal truth. I once delivered to you a series of addresses on Humanism, during the course of which I discussed "The Human Christ." I spoke here of the eternal principle of the Christ, meaning of course not Jesus, but the true or ideal humanity in every person. That is the real meaning of the word "Christ," and it is applied to Jesus only by those who believe that he represented this true and ideal humanity.

It was the rising of this Christ as personified in Jesus in a small group of devoted disciples that gave Christianity to the world, and it is the rising of that same Christ in brave men and women now that gives the world the great hope of a better day. You cannot believe too strongly in the rising of that Christ in the human heart today. Every man and woman should believe it whether he pause to give it doctrinal form or not. It is the one central hope for our poor wayward race. What the world needs above all else in order to be delivered from all the things that are holding it in bondage is the resurrection of Christ, of the true and ideal humanity in every man and woman. We believe today essentially what the first Christians believed about the need of the kingdom of God—the heaven on earth. We want exactly the same thing that they wanted, although history has now taught us that it will not come like a thun-

der-clap with the return of Jesus. We know that the only way it can possibly come is by making every man a Christ, a true and ideal man. Let this Christ rise in victory over all the forces of harm and hate, and this world would be heaven, for heaven is only the perfect expression of justice and good will. Apparently simple, and yet judging from the history of mankind extremely difficult! Hundreds of men and women have given everything for it, and yet it seems no nearer realization today. Jesus lived and died for it as he saw it. Thousands since his day have lived and died for it as they saw it. Those who believe in it and love it must go on doing the same until it becomes a fact.

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by

JOHN H. DIETRICH

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