

What do you make of resuscitations?!

How is one to understand the apparent resuscitation of a dead person? How does that reconcile with the biblical evidence that upon death, the soul of a Christian goes into the presence of the Lord? Is this really a resurrection?

1. Consult a Dictionary. What is the difference between resuscitation and resurrection?

Resuscitation is a miraculous healing in which a human being is restored to natural life but still subject to natural death. The restored human body needs to be sustained by food (Mark 5:43), and it is governed by its own selfish human nature. It is an event.

The resurrection of a Christian is where a new kind of life arises from the dead in which the body is not susceptible to sickness, aging, decay or death; but, subject to the will and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is not a single event but is a process: the apostle Paul indicates that it begins at the last trumpet (1 Cor 15:42-54) and the apostle John indicates that it is completed with life with a new body (Rev 20:4-6, 11-13).

While the Bible emphasizes the resurrection of a Christian, it does mention that non-Believers are also “resurrected” (John 5:29; Acts 24:15). Little detail is given about the “resurrection” of non-Believers; however, biblical passages refer to a “resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29) and final judgment as “second death” (Rev 20:14).

2. Examine the various biblical passages that report the resuscitation of a dead person. Observe and compare the similarities and differences (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; 13:21; John 11:1-44; Matt 9:23-26; Mark 5:22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:49-56; 7:11-17; Acts 9:36-42; 20: 9-12). Fill in the chart.

Passage	Who died?	Rescuer?	Method	Purpose
1 Kings 17:17-24	Son of the Zarephath widow	Elijah	Stretched himself upon the child three times and called upon God, “O Lord my God, I pray You, let this child’s life return to him.”	The Lord heard the voice (prayer) of Elijah and the resuscitation was testimony that Elijah was a man of God.
2 Kings 4:18-37	Son of the Shunammite widow	Elisha	Prayed to the Lord, stretched himself on the son, paced back and forth (possibly praying) and stretched himself a second time on the son of the Shunammite widow.	The Shunammite widow already recognized Elisha as a holy man of God. Perhaps this miracle was a result of her faith in God.
2 Kings 13:21	An Israelite man	Elisha	The dead man’s body came in contact with the bones of Elisha.	Unknown. Perhaps a testimony that Elisha was a man of God.

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Passage	Who died?	Rescuer?	Method	Purpose
John 11:1-44	Lazarus	Jesus	Jesus commaned out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth."	<p>Jesus prayed at the tomb, "Father, I thank you that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me."</p> <p>The miracle was a result of Martha's faith and a testimony to the Jews.</p>
<p>Matthew 9:23-26</p> <p>Mark 5:22-24, 35-43</p> <p>Luke 8:49-56</p>	<p>Daughter of the Jewish synagogue official Jarius</p>	Jesus	Jesus took the girl by the hand and commanded, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"	<p>The miracle was a result of Jarius' faith and testified to the deity of Christ to the disciples Peter, James, John the brother of James, Jarius and his wife.</p>
Luke 7:11-17	Son of the Nain widow	Jesus	Jesus touched the coffin and commanded, "Young man, I say to you, arise!"	<p>The miracle brought glory to God; but, the people saw Jesus as a prophet like Elijah or Elisha.</p> <p>This occurs early in Jesus' ministry.</p>
Acts 9:36-42	The woman disciple Dorcas (Greek) or Tabitha (Aramaic)	Peter	Peter knelt down and prayed alone with the body and said, "Tabitha arise."	The miracle testified to the diety of Jesus Christ and caused many to believe in Him.
Acts 20:9-12	Eutychus	Paul	Paul fell upon Eutychus.	Unknown. Perhaps the miracle testified that Paul was a man of God.

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3. Examine Matthew 27:52. Is this a resuscitation or resurrection?

This difficult passage has Biblical scholars lining up on either side and various Bible translations will reflect their theological slant.

A resurrection?

The NIV, for example, renders Matthew 27:52-53 as: "The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."

The context of the passage (Matt 27:50-53) implies that the saints were resurrected and came out of the tombs **before** Jesus' resurrection. After Jesus' resurrection, these resurrected saints went into Jerusalem.

If these saints were resurrected, it would imply that they were resurrected with glorified bodies.

Some find a biblical basis for this. Leviticus 23:10-14 speaks of a third and last distinct festival that occurs in an eight day celebration commemorating Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread and Feast of the Barley Firstfruits. In a symbolic manner, these resurrected saints are seen as the "first grain of the barley harvest" and represented a token of the coming harvest or general resurrection when all Christians are raised.

Against this interpretation is that resurrection appears to be a process beginning at the last trumpet (1 Cor 15:42-54) and completed with life with a new body (Rev 20:4-6, 11-13). Resurrection is not a single event.

If these saints were resurrected, were they only contemporaries of the people living in Jerusalem at the time? Why not other Old Testament saints? What purpose would saints, of earlier generations, have entering the holy city and appearing to people who may not recognize them?

A resuscitation?

The NASB renders Matthew 27:52-53 as "the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many."

In the NASB translation, the tombs broke open at the moment of Jesus' death, but the saints came out of the tombs **after** His resurrection; presumably the saints were resuscitated *after* Jesus' resurrection.

This interpretive view is based on 1 Corinthians 15:23, Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5, where it states that Jesus is the firstfruits of the dead. This is understood to mean that Jesus would be the very first human being to be resurrected.

If this were a resuscitation, it occurred unlike any previous resuscitations. Prior resuscitations took place as a consequence of great faith and with a touch or command.

If these saints were raised by resuscitation, they presumably served the same purpose as prior resuscitations, namely to testify to the deity of Jesus Christ. This would also mean that these resuscitated saints would be contemporaries of those living in Jerusalem.

Each interpretation has its merits and problems, and it is difficult to know with certainty whether either is correct.

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