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Sermonic Study on Isaiah 26:19

Easter Sunday

By THEO. LAETSCH

The resurrection of Christ is the foundation on which the faith and hope, the very life of every Christian, is built (1 Cor. 15:14-20). The fact of Easter pertains to the New Testament. But the promise of a future Easter dates back to that day on which sin and death entered into the world and on which the Lord gave to sinful Adam and Eve the blessed assurance of the coming of a Deliverer (Gen. 3:15). This promise served as the basis of Adam's hope and faith, expressed in the name he gave to his wife, Eve, the living, because she was the mother of all living (Gen. 3:20). From mortal Eve would spring forth life, living beings, chief of whom was the promised Woman's Seed, the Bruiser of the Serpent's head. On Eve's Easter faith, see Gen. 4:1; on Lamech's, Gen. 5:29; on Jacob's, Gen. 49:18; on Job's, ch. 19:25-27. See also Ps. 16:10-11; cp. Acts 2:25-31; Ps. 22:16, 23; Is. 53:8 ff.; Hos. 13:14, cp. 1 Cor. 15:54. Is. 26:19 also is an Easter text. Death and life, grave and resurrection, corruption and immortality, are placed in boldest contrast. Here the Lord sends the glorious rays of the Easter sun into the darkness of sin and sorrow and death and corruption, dispelling the gloom these horrible realities cast on the lives of men and filling heart and soul with life and light and hope and joy.

The Prophet had spoken of men who were dead and would not live, who had died without hope of resurrection unto life. Those were the men who had opposed the Lord, who had rejected the gracious invitation of His live-giving Gospel, and had scoffed at the majesty of the Lawgiver as manifested in His punitive judgments. Theirs would be a resurrection unto shame and everlasting contempt (Dan. 12:2; Is. 66:24).

In sharpest contrast to these wicked men the Prophet had spoken of a righteous nation, keeping the truth, dwelling in a city whose walls and bulwarks are salvation appointed by the Lord Himself; a people trusting in the Lord, desiring Him with all their soul (vv. 1-4, 7-9, 13). Yet even this nation was not immune against sorrow and anguish. They still had to fight a daily battle against strong and wily enemies, and only

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too often they yielded to the temptations and attacks of sin and Satan. They had wrought no deliverance on the earth from these foes (v.18) and seemed completely powerless against the prince of terrors, death. Generation upon generation had come into being only to sink into grave and corruption. And during their lifetime they were languishing under the chastenings of the Lord, which continued in spite of all the prayers they poured out. All their cries of anguish directed to the Lord had remained unanswered (v.15-18). Shall they also, like the wicked, be doomed to everlasting slavery to sin (Rom. 7:14-24)? Shall their death, like that of the wicked, be an everlasting death, and their resurrection a resurrection unto unending pain and torment?

When they look at themselves, so weak and sinful; when they look at their enemies, so powerful and cunning, their case seems hopeless. Yet the Church of God has learned to look away from itself, to look away from the enemies, to look upward to Him who is the Lord, their God; to trust in Him who is the Lord Jehovah, the I AM THAT I AM, the God of infinite grace and never-ending loving-kindness; to stay their mind on Him in whom is everlasting strength, who is the Rock of Ages (ch. 26:4). No less than twelve times the name Jehovah, Lord, is mentioned by the Church in this chapter (v. 4, three times; 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 21). This Covenant God, the Lord of unlimited power, of everlasting strength (v. 4), from everlasting to everlasting (Ps. 90:2), the Fountain of Life (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 2:13), had just given to the Church the marvelous assurance that He would swallow up death in victory (ch. 25:8) and had pledged His name and truthfulness as a guarantee for the fulfillment of this miracle ("For the Lord hath spoken!"). Cp. (v. 9) the Church's acknowledgment of the truth of this statement on the Day of Resurrection, foretold by the Lord. And staying her mind on the Lord, trusting His word, the Church cries out in joyous faith and confident hope. "Thy dead *men* shall live, *together with my* dead body shall they arise"; literally translated, "Live shall Thy dead, my corpses shall arise." Emphatically the predicates are placed at the beginning and the end of the statements in chiasmic form, bringing out the jubilant certainty of the Church. Dead people, corpses, surrounded by life and resurrection! What an Easter sermon of joyous faith! The Church calls these corpses "*My dead bodies.*" The word

nebelah is derived from a root meaning to be decadent, to fade and fall, used ten times of withering plants or flowers (cp. Is. 28:1, 4; 40:7-8). The noun "corpse," "carcass," "dead body," etc., is used six times of carcasses of animals; some twelve times of carcasses of unclean animals, some 28 times of human corpses. The Church knows that also her members are not immune against death and corruption; not exempt from God's judgment upon all sinners, Gen. 3:19; Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23. Yet the Church calls these dead "My dead bodies." The Church does not repudiate its members after they have died. During their lifetime these members were united in one body with the Holy Christian Church by common faith in the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who loved them and gave Himself for them. And in death they are still the Church's dead, beloved not only by their family, but by the Church, mourned not only by their relatives, but by the community of saints, honored even in death by being given a Christian burial, their memory being blest also after they are dead and buried (Prov. 10:7). The Church knows that not only the memory of her dead shall not perish like that of the wicked (Is. 26:14). Her dead are not the corpses of unbelievers whose hopes and expectations die with their death (Prov. 11:7). Though, like the corpses of the unbelievers, they will be turned dust to dust, ashes to ashes, yet they are and remain corpses which the Church acknowledges as her dead bodies, to which the promise of her Lord applies that He will swallow up death in victory. In fullest confidence in this word of her Lord, in a jubilant Amen to His promise, she cries out, "My dead corpses shall arise!" "Thy dead shall live!" Her corpses are not only her own, they are the Lord's. Having lived unto the Lord, they were the Lord's, acknowledged by Him as His own in life and in death. The dead body of the believer is the body of one upon whom the name of the Lord has been named by the Covenant God and blessed by Him (Num. 6:23-27; Ex. 20:24 b); whose heart the Lord had circumcised (Deut. 30:6), had daily cleansed from all sin, renewed and sanctified (Ezek. 36:25-27); whose weary and sorrowful soul He had satiated and replenished by His Word and Sacraments. This dead body is the body of one whose name was written in the Book of Life of the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 13:8) and rose again (Rev. 1:18; Rom. 14:9). This dead body is the body of a member of that

Church whom the Lord has graven indelibly upon the palms of His hands; whom He will never forget, even though a woman forget her suckling child (Is. 49:15-16); who, whether he lives or dies, is the Lord's, to be forever with the Lord. "Live shall Thy dead! My dead bodies shall arise!" The graves shall be emptied! The dead, no matter how long they have been dead — a few hours, or centuries, or millenniums — shall come back to life. No matter how and where they died — in flames of fire, or in their sickbeds, or in the maws of wild beasts, in city or desert — they shall arise. The one condition of their resurrection is their death (1 Cor. 15:51). The very fact which we bewail, the death of our loved ones in Christ, is really an assurance by the Lord, who cannot lie, of their resurrection, their restoration to life! That is the joyous faith, the glorious hope, the firm conviction, of every member of the Church of the Risen Lord — Easter faith, Easter hope, Easter joy!

So firm and confident is the Church's faith in the word and promise of her Lord, so alive and vigorous her hope of the resurrection of the body and everlasting life, that in the exuberance of her joy she turns to the graves where she has buried her dead, to the corpses that are her own in life and in death, in time and eternity, and shouts out triumphantly, victoriously, "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust!" That is the Church's prelude to that great symphony of Resurrection Day (2 Thess. 4:13-17; 1 Cor. 15:42-57; John 5:25-29; Matt. 25:31-40; Rev. 21:22). Arise from your graves! Awake from your sleep! Come forth to new life, to life eternal and joy without end! When the Lord's dead come back to life, when the Church's dead bodies rise from their graves, they awake not to a state of everlasting weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12), nor will there ever be an occasion to seek the Lord in trouble, or to pour out a prayer when the chastening of the Lord is upon us (Is. 26:16). "Awake and sing!" Then the Lord has wiped away tears from all eyes and taken away the rebuke of His people forever (Is. 25:8). The greatest rebuke, the most shameful reproach for the believing child of God, is his sinfulness, the incurable wickedness and deceptiveness of his own heart (Jer. 17:9). This reproach will then be removed forever. Into that new Jerusalem there shall in no wise enter anything that defileth (Rev. 21:27); there only righteousness shall dwell

(2 Pet. 3:13). There the members of the Church Triumphant will stand before the Lamb in robes of spotless purity, washed clean and made white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9-17). And there shall be no more tears, neither sorrow, nor crying, but singing and everlasting joy and never-ending gladness (Is. 35:10).

For this life and joy the Church takes no credit for herself. No human efforts could possibly accomplish such miracles. As the members of the Church humbly confessed that all their works were wrought in them by the Lord (Is. 26:12), so, individually and collectively, they give all glory to the Lord (Rev. 7:9-12). Turning to this Lord, the Church confesses: "For Thy dew is as the dew of herbs." The word translated "herbs" occurs once more (2 Kings 4:39) in the same sense and is a very suitable expression. In Palestine, rain usually does not fall from May to the latter part of October, and therefore the vegetation is dependent chiefly on the heavy dew resulting from the moisture brought by westerly winds from the Mediterranean Sea and cooled by the night air (Margolis on Micah 5:6). The vegetation parched by drought and heat was refreshed and brought back to life and vigor by the copious dew. "Thy dew," the Lord's dew, is not a poisonous vapor, a death-dealing smog, but life-giving, refreshing, restoring strength and vigor. The members of the Church have experienced this life-giving power of the Word of God, which is spirit and life, time and again in their lives. And so it is the same voice and Word of God that like a dew of life penetrates the tomb and restores the dust and ashes into which their bodies have dissolved to their original form and imbues them with new life, just as the voice of Him who is the Resurrection and the Life, His brief word "Lazarus, come forth!" was powerful enough to restore to life that decaying corpse. This omnipotence of the Lord of grace is a gracious power, the same grace which during the lifetime of the believer had so often proved itself to be a dew of herbs. This grace had created in him who was dead in trespasses and sins a new, spiritual life, had richly and daily forgiven all his sins, had comforted his sorrowing heart, had strengthened his drooping spirits, had kept him in saving faith. This grace will not overlook his grave wherever it may be. The gracious voice of his Lord will call him also from corruption to His

heavenly home and fill his heart with joy and his lips with laughter and songs of praise.*

"And the earth shall cast out the dead." We prefer Luther's translation: Thou shalt cause to drop, overthrow, the land of the dead. This translation is in better keeping with the original. This earth, which had become a vast cemetery, will be overthrown, destroyed by fire, and in that new earth created by the Lord to be the dwelling place of His people, there shall be no more need of graveyards and cemeteries; there shall be no more dead bodies, no more corpses, to be buried, for death shall be swallowed up in victory. There will be only life, abundant life, eternal life, life of holiness, of constant loving service of God and one's fellow man, life as God had implanted into the first man when He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7) and created man, male and female, in His own image, in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Such life after the likeness of God's life shall be the Easter gift of the Lord to all His own on that great Resurrection Day!

Throughout the two chapters Is. 25 and 26 a sharp line of demarcation is drawn between believers and unbelievers, which must not be disregarded by the preacher. While the Easter gifts are procured for all mankind and offered to all men without distinction, yet only faith can apprehend them, only believers, God's own, the Church's own, can enjoy the blessings of Easter. These blessings may be brought to the attention of the congregation in various ways. We offer a few suggestions. *The Resurrection Hymn of the Church of God.* My dead bodies shall arise! (Resurrection.) Thy dead shall live! (Life eternal.) Awake and sing! (Everlasting joy.) Thy dew is a dew of herbs! (Certainty.) — *Our Blessed Easter Hope.* It brings us glad tidings of great joy. It is divinely certain. It can dwell only in the heart of believers. — *The True Easter Spirit.* Rejoicing in the Easter gifts. Giving all glory to God. Or: The joy is ours. The glory is God's. — This text offers splendid material for funeral sermons.

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* Others translate the word "herbs," *oroth*, lights, the plural denoting the abundance of light. In this sense the word occurs in the singular only Ps. 139:12, Esther 8:16, never in the plural. Since the translation "herbs" is so suitable and validated by the plural 2 Kings 4:39, and the sense is not affected, we prefer the rendering of the A. V. and Luther's "Tau des gruenen Feldes," dew of the green field.