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CHAPTER

1

The Next Chapter after the Last

The four gospels tell the story of the life and ministry of Jesus, and in so doing, they follow accurately the ordinary course of biography, giving the facts of His birth, growth, work, death and burial. That is the way with biography: the very word itself suggests it, for it comes from *bios*, life, and *graphein*, to write, and means the written history of a person's life. So says Noah Webster.

Now, when we look at the Gospels we note an odd—and wonderful—thing. An extra chapter is added. Why?

Biography, by its own definition, must confine itself to the record of the life of an individual. That part of the book which deals with the family tree is not biography, but history, and that part which follows the record of the subject's death is not biography either. It may be appraisal, or eulogy, or criticism, but not biography, for the reason that the "*bios*" is gone: the subject is dead. The part that tells of his death is properly the last chapter.

The only place in world literature where this order is broken is in the four Gospels. They record the story of the man Jesus from birth to death, and end like every other book of biography has ended since the art of writing was invented. Matthew says, "And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb." Mark says, "And he [Joseph] bought fine linen, and took him [Jesus] down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock." Luke writes, "And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid." John says, "... There was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, ... There laid they Jesus." They all agree: Jesus was dead. The life about which they had been writing was gone. The biography was ended.

Then, for the only time in this history of human thought, a biographer adds to his book a new section which is authentic biography and begins to write a chapter to follow the last chapter. This time the story did not end with a funeral. The Subject, whose story should have ended at death, was once again back among men to challenge new writers to try to find enough paper and enough ink to write the rest of the story of the life that can never end. Whatever is written of Him now is written of a living man. He was dead, but He is alive forevermore.

That such a thing could be was intimated by the miracles of restoration which our Lord performed during His earthly ministry. The widow's son was

brought back to life for a brief time; at our Lord's gentle call Jairus's little daughter rose from her bed of death; and Lazarus, at Christ's command, came forth bound hand and foot. These were but vague disclosures of what was to come, and were at best only temporary suspensions of the inexorable law which demands that death shall always follow life—death complete and final. For these all died again, and the rule of biography was upheld. Each ended in a sepulchre at last. And that sepulchre was the period at the end of the last chapter.

What a perpetual wonder it is, then, that the biography of Jesus had to be resumed. Luke added not merely another chapter, but a whole book. The Book of Acts was a logical necessity. "He showed himself alive after his passion," writes Luke. The rest of the New Testament gives us some idea of what He is doing now, and prophecy reveals a little of what He will be doing through the ages to come.

That next chapter after the last is the source of all the Christian's hope, for it assures us that our Lord has put death in its place and has delivered us from the ancient curse. Death did not end the activities of our Lord; it did not even interrupt them, for while His body lay in Joseph's new tomb, He was preaching to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18-20). And after three days, His spirit was reunited with His body and the new chapter began, the chapter which can have no ending.

Had Christ not risen from the dead, His life, beautiful as it was, would have been a human tragedy. Since He did in fact rise, His life has been

shown to be an unrelieved triumph. The blood, the pain, the rejection, the agony of dying, the cold, stiff body and the colder tomb—these belong to the former days. The days that are now are days of hope and life and everlasting freedom.

What is true of Christ is true also of all who believe in Him. How many saints since New Testament times have lived and hoped and labored and worshiped, only to grow old and bent and to drop at last, weak and helpless, into the open grave. If that was for them the end, then we Christians would be of all men most miserable. But it was not the end. For all of God's true children there will be another chapter, a chapter that will begin with the resurrection and go on as long as eternity endures.

*The powers of death have done their worst,
But Christ their legions hath dispersed:
Let shouts of holy joy outburst—*

Alleluia!

*The three sad days have quickly sped;
He rises glorious from the dead;
All glory to our risen Head!*

Alleluia!

*He brake the age-bound chains of hell;
The bars from heaven's high portals fell;
Let hymns of praise His triumph tell,—*

Alleluia!

—MEDIEVAL LATIN