

## **Christ Has Been Raised from the Dead**

1 Corinthians 15:12-34

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Imagine with me for a moment that tomorrow morning a breaking news story from the Middle East reveals that archeologists have found Jesus' bones, and with some trick of modern science they were able to prove beyond all doubt that these were indeed his remains. Four years ago, in fact, James Cameron produced a documentary on the Discovery channel claiming just that, that archeologists had indeed found Jesus' remains. It was, of course, all wrong, all completely discredited by all the experts. But imagine it was true. Jesus' bones had been found. He was not raised from the dead. I wonder, would you show up at church next week? Would that discovery destroy your faith?

Several years ago this very question was asked of the top Anglican archbishop of Australia, "If Jesus' bones were discovered, what would that do to your faith?" His answer was that it wouldn't do anything to his faith because Jesus Christ has risen in his heart.<sup>1</sup>

Now friends, the apostle Paul would have found this kind of language nonsensical. For Paul everything - absolutely everything - hangs on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul knew nothing of a feel good, "Christ has risen in my heart" kind of Christianity. Paul only knew a Christianity based on history, based on truth, based on fact. And, for us today there is one overarching Christian truth that keeps us from shutting down this church next Sunday - the truth of the resurrection of Christ. We are here this morning because Jesus really has been raised.

In vs.15:3-4, Paul calls the resurrection of Jesus a matter of *first importance*. Paul has already dealt with a lot of really important things in this letter, including idolatry, sexual sin, confusion over marriage, Christian love, spiritual gifts, orderly worship, division, and various kinds of immorality. All of those things were very important, but the resurrection of Jesus is of first importance. It eclipses everything else.

We can't be sure why, but some in Corinth were denying the resurrection. So Paul writes now to show them just how important the resurrection is. Indeed, without the resurrection, the whole of the Christian faith would be lost.

### **If Christ Has Not Been Raised...**

In v. 14, Paul says that if Christ has not been raised our preaching is in vain. Paul knows that all of his gospel labor, all of his preaching and teaching, all of his words spoken and written about Jesus, all of it is in vain without Christ's resurrection.

The gospel preached has power. It has very great power to bring hard hearts and dead souls to life. God illustrates this for us when he takes Ezekiel in a vision to the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). God tells Ezekiel to preach to the bones, to prophecy to them - and he does. He declares God's Word to them, he speaks God's promises to them, and the bones live. This is what preaching does. It brings life to its hearers.

Martin Luther relied heavily on the power of the preached word. He says:

*In short, I will preach it [the Word of God], teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? Mere fool's play. I did nothing; I let the Word do its work.<sup>2</sup>*

Martin Luther certainly understood the power of preaching. But if Christ has not been raised, then preaching has no power.

Paul's words here also show us that if our preaching makes sense without the resurrection of Christ, then it is not Christian preaching. I could preach all kinds of sermons that would not be in vain, that instead would be quite helpful, motivating, and moving even if Christ has not been raised. I could give wonderful sermons on wonderful topics. I could preach with such power, zeal, persuasion, wisdom, relevance, and insight that lives are drastically changed for the better. But if I preach in such a way that my message makes perfect sense without the resurrection, then I have failed as a Christian preacher and tragically distorted my pastoral calling. Paul suggests that the resurrection of Jesus is so central to his preaching that he would not have anything to preach about if it were not true. This is the real standard of whether or not a sermon is truly Christian.

Paul also teaches that if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is in vain as well (v. 14). The wonderful doctrines of our faith, the soaring promises of God to his people, the very hope of the gospel - all of this is lost if Christ has not been raised. The grand words of Paul in Colossians 3:1-4 calling us to set our minds on things above where Christ is seated at God's right hand would all be utter rubbish, empty talk, a grand hoax, if Christ is still in the ground.

Our observance of the Lord's Supper would no longer make any sense if Jesus were not alive today. At the meal, we commune with Christ. We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again as we eat and drink together. But if he is not raised, he is not coming again and our faith cannot be nourished and strengthened by a dead Christ.

The glorious doctrine of our union with Christ would all be for naught if he is not raised. We cannot abide in Jesus if he is gone. Jesus tells us that he is the vine and we are the branches (John 15). If the vine is dead, then we as branches are likewise dead.

Prayer, also, is futile without a resurrected Christ. Praying in Jesus' name would be no better than praying in your own name. Without the resurrection, Jesus is just a man - a great man, perhaps, but still just a man who has perished along with everyone else, unable to answer prayer.

Paul also teaches that if Christ has not been raised, we then misrepresent God (v. 15). We are liars. We have lied about God. We've told falsehoods about who he is, about his power, and about our reason to hope in him. Everything we've said is true about God is not true if Christ has not been raised from the dead.

Moreover, if Christ has not been raised then we are still in our sins (v. 17). Without the resurrection Jesus died for no one, sin still reigns, the power of sin (which is

death) still rules the day, and we have no answer to what is by far the greatest problem we face - our sin. Simply put, we are not justified without the resurrection. Romans 4:25 says, "[Christ] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." If Christ was not raised then God will say to no one on the final day, "Well done good and faithful servant." Christ's perfect righteousness will not have been imputed to us. His death would hold no power.

In Galatians 1:4, we read, "[Christ] gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age." But if there is no resurrection, we are delivered from nothing. If Christ was not able to deliver himself from the present evil age, he certainly will not deliver you and me. Every aspect of our faith is in vain without the resurrection.

Paul goes on to teach that if Christ has not been raised, then all who have died have perished (v. 18). Just this week I was headed to a viewing at the funeral home. I told my five year old daughter that a friend's relative had died, and my daughter replied, "Oh, your friend must be happy." "Why happy?" I asked. "Because his relative can be with God," she said. And yes, it is true, when all who are in Christ die they go on to be with God spiritually while awaiting the resurrection. Without Christ's resurrection, though, there is no glimmer of hope, comfort, or peace when a loved one dies.

Paul then says that without the resurrection of Christ, Christians are, above all, to be pitied (v. 19). With these words, Paul acknowledges that the Christian life is not easy. Paul's own calling was grounded in suffering. Jesus said, "I will show [Paul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Act 9:16). Our own Christian calling is grounded in suffering. All Christians are called to take up their cross and follow Jesus. As Christians, we are called to hold very, very loose ties with the things of this world. We must be ready to abandon our possessions, our loved ones, and even our lives for the sake of Christ's name.

The Christian life is not easy. We see it repeatedly in the Psalms. So many of the Psalms were written by and for miserable Christians who suffer and face constant affliction because of their faith. I've yet to find the believer in the Bible who is all about a *happy-clappy* Christianity. Instead, the faithful in Scripture are well versed in suffering, hardship, and persecution. They know the difficulties of living the Christian faith in a hostile world. They know what it is like to be an exile upon the earth - and it is not easy.

The Christian life is so very demanding that Paul says, "if there is no resurrection, then we are to be pitied above all others." Why? Because we have given up so much in this life for the sake of our Christian calling. There is a challenge here. If our lives make sense without the resurrection - if they are not pitiable without the resurrection - then perhaps we are not living Christian lives at all.

Paul's own life would not have made any sense without Christ's resurrection (see vv. 29-32). In v. 29, Paul speaks that famously difficult passage about being "baptized on behalf of the dead." It is an extremely difficult passage. Many scholars and pastors freely admit their ignorance of Paul's meaning. Others endlessly debate the multitude of possible interpretations out there. Perhaps the best suggestion is that Paul is not speaking about water baptism, but about a baptism of death, the kind of baptism that Jesus speaks of when he asks James and John if they would be able "to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38). Jesus was speaking of his death as a kind of baptism. It is certainly possible that here Paul is speaking of baptism in the same way, asking, "Why be baptized unto death? Why suffer if there is no resurrection?"

This interpretation certainly fits the context quite well. Paul goes on to talk about his own suffering, being in danger every hour. He says, "I die everyday" (v. 31), all for the sake of his Christian faith. He freely acknowledges that if there is no resurrection, he would rather eat and drink than suffer. Why not party now since tomorrow we die?

But, Christ has been raised. In v. 20, Paul says that it is a fact. And because Christ has been raised there are many, many glorious implications. Paul lists several.

In v. 22, Paul teaches that because of Christ's resurrection all who are in Christ will be made alive. Jesus is the firstfruits (v. 23). His resurrection shows what ours will be like. Our very bodies will be raised like his. We will live on.

Commenting on the kind of mourning that happens at a Christian funeral, Charles Spurgeon says:

*None of you weep because your dear mother is before the throne; but you weep because her body is in the grave, because those eyes can no more smile on you, because those hands cannot caress you, because those sweet lips cannot speak melodious notes of affection. You weep because the body is cold, and dead, and clay-like; for the soul you do not weep. But I have comfort for you. That very body will rise again; that eye will flash with genius again; that hand will be held out in affection once more. Believe me, I am speaking no fiction. Yes, you shall see that body once more.<sup>3</sup>*

The apostle Paul also teaches that if Christ really has been raised, then Jesus becomes our true federal head, our representative before God. In v. 22, he says, "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Without Christ we are all under Adam, and just as Adam sinned and died, so we too sin and die. We are sinners because we are children of Adam. We are guilty because of Adam's sin. But, when we trust in Christ, we are no longer counted as children of Adam, we are instead Christ's. And, just as Christ has been raised in victory over sin and death, we too will be raised in victory.

In vv. 24-26, we learn that since Christ has been raised, he reigns in victory over every power, every enemy, even the great enemy of death. I love John's vision of Christ in Revelation. John is in exile, suffering. John is writing to a church that is terrified. The forces and powers and governments of the world are closing in on them, about to quite literally crush them. Then John sees Jesus in all of his holy glory - terrifying indeed for sinful eyes. Yet Jesus tells John, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18). The following message in Revelation is that Jesus reigns over all things, and he is coming back to establish his reign, to bring justice to wickedness, to make right every wrong, to protect his people and defeat all of his and our enemies. The truth of Christ's resurrection, and his subsequent victorious reign, is news of comfort and hope for all of God's people. Because Jesus reigns, we have nothing to fear. And we know he reigns because he has been raised!

Revelation, of course, culminates with a vision of Christ's kingdom established forever, in which death has been obliterated:

*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the*

*throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:2-5).*

As Paul concludes his argument, he offers one single point of application. He basically says, since the resurrection is true, stop sinning: *Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame (vv. 33-34).* Paul wants us to know that since Christ has been raised, we ought to live as if Christ’s resurrection matters. In light of the resurrection, sin no longer ought to make any sense to the Christian.

Jesus is coming again. We are being called into a kingdom of righteousness. We are a part of that kingdom now. Our hope, our longing, our end, lies in an eternity in which there will be no more sin. Some day soon we will be with our resurrected Lord, and as we literally fall at his feet in worship, we will see and know and feel the truth that sin no longer makes any sense – it no longer holds any power whatsoever over us. The very notion of sin will be an absurdity. And likewise, even today, the notion of sin ought to be an absurdity, because Jesus really has been raised from the dead.

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1 Cor 15:1–19). A lightly edited transcript of a sermon preached on May 23, 2007 at The Gospel Coalition’s conference in Deerfield, IL ([http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2007\\_gospel.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2007_gospel.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, qtd. by Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (Acts 24:15). A sermon preached on Feb. 17, 1856 (<http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0066.htm>).