

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRIST'S BODILY RESURRECTION

SERIES: SPIRITUAL REALITIES IN THE CHURCH

By Doug Goins

The story is told of an indoctrination meeting that was held in the Soviet Union before the fall of communism. The communist lecturer was addressing a large audience. He paused, then summed up his talk as the people listened fearfully: "In conclusion, there is no God. Jesus Christ never existed. There is no such thing as the Holy Spirit. The church is an oppressive institution, and anyway, the church is out of date. The future belongs to the state, and the state is in the hands of the Communist Party."

He was about to sit down, when an old Russian Orthodox priest, seated near the front, stood up. "May I say three words?" he asked.

The lecturer disdainfully gave him permission.

The old priest turned and looked over the crowd. He pulled himself to his full height and shouted, "Christ is risen!"

There was a momentary pause, and then the crowd thundered back, "HE IS RISEN INDEED!"

They had been confessing it every Easter for a thousand years, so why should they stop now? But what if that old priest and the Russian people at that indoctrination meeting were deluding themselves with religious wishful thinking? What if we're all whistling in the dark? What if the scriptural records on which we base our faith are only myths and legends?

Every generation of believers in Jesus Christ for the last two thousand years has had to wrestle with these issues. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 ([Discovery Paper 4535](#)) we looked at the struggles of the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth living some twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we surveyed the influence of their philosophical culture on their understanding of life and death. Remember, Greek philosophy did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. We discovered that some of the Corinthian Christians were much more pagan in their thinking than they were Biblical. They were afraid of being disembodied souls or spirits after death because they had not embraced the Christian conviction that human beings will experience resurrection to eternal life.

Denying the reality of bodily resurrection remains a central problem for our own culture today. Atheism rejects even the possibility of the existence of supernatural power, often claiming support in the findings of modern science. Some historians have proposed alternatives to Christ's bodily resurrection: the swoon theory, the stolen-body theory, the wrong-tomb theory. There is a theory that all the eyewitnesses, even the "more than five hundred" who saw the risen Jesus at one time, were just experiencing mass hallucination or hysteria. Christian liberalism suggests that resurrection language expresses theological truth in mythological garb, and that the disciples had some kind of subjective experience of faith that was transformed over time into the Biblical narratives that claim to describe more objective realities.

Now as we come to 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, the apostle Paul continues to address the Corinthians' confusion and our own modern struggle by proclaiming the absolute reality of Christ's bodily resurrection. He reinforces the central fact of the Christian faith as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If it all had ended on the cross, there would be no good news to share, no bold church that would bear witness, no New Testament to teach and to preach, no hope for real life here or in the hereafter. Paul argues convincingly that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the resurrection to our faith.

In verse 12 we see that these Corinthian Christians did believe that Jesus Christ had been resurrected, but some of them were denying the general truth of the resurrection.

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Paul established the fact that Christ had been resurrected in verses 3-8. The Corinthian Christians could not deny it. There was far too much evidence. Almost five hundred people who were still alive had seen the resurrected Christ; the Corinthians could go check with those people for verification. The Corinthians, Paul said, had accepted the fact. In verse 1 he spoke of "the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved." Then in verse 11: "So we preach and so you believed." He was saying to these Corinthian Christians, "You received the truth, you believed it, it radically transformed your life, and now you're grounded in that reality."

In light of the fact that they believed that, the question he asks in verse 12 is central. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*:

"Now, let me ask you something profound yet troubling. If you became believers because you trusted the proclamation that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, how can you let people say that there is no such thing as a resurrection?" (1)

They were denying that we individually, like Jesus Christ, were going to be resurrected as well. Paul's logic is very clear in this verse: If Christ has been raised, resurrection obviously is possible. Then in verses 13-19 Paul demonstrates that the resurrection not only is possible, but it is essential to our faith. He gives us seven disastrous consequences if there were no resurrection from the dead.

IF NOT EVEN CHRIST WERE RAISED....

The first consequence has to do with Jesus Christ himself. Paul makes the point twice. Verse 13:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised....

Then jump ahead to verse 16:

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised....

There is a contradiction in the Corinthians' logic, which Paul began addressing in verses 1-11. Now Paul is saying in essence, "For the sake of argument, let's allow that there is no resurrection of the dead. Then logically, no one has or ever will rise from the dead, which means that not even Christ has been raised, because he was a human being like you and me." Again, listen to how these two verses are paraphrased in *The Message*:

"If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ...If corpses can't be raised, then Christ wasn't, because he was indeed dead." (2)

A FALSE GOSPEL, AN EMPTY FAITH, A CONSPIRACY TO DECEIVE

Now, if there is no living Christ, to use Peterson's phrase, what would our world be like? In verses 14-19

Paul paints a dark, horrifying picture. Look at verses 14-15, where he summarizes three disastrous theological consequences if Christ's resurrection had not taken place:

...And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

First of all, without the resurrection, all Christian preaching and teaching and other communication is vain, or empty-meaningless, a waste of time. As we saw in the last message, Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf are the very heart of the gospel we preach. Look again at the four phrases that define the gospel (verses 3-8): "...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to [many people]." But apart from the resurrection, Jesus could not have conquered sin and death and hell, and we would still be in their grip. The good news really would have been bad news. Everything that Paul taught would have been smoke and mirrors. Every Billy Graham crusade would be a colossal waste of time. And the entire inventory of Christian bookstores would have no value at all.

In the nineteenth century there was a Scottish preacher named Alexander Maclaven who pastored churches in England his entire life. He was called "the prince of expository preachers." Listen to his observation on this issue:

"On the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is suspended everything which makes the gospel the good news. Strike that out, and what have you left? Some beautiful bits of moral teaching, a lovely life marred by tremendous mistakes about himself and his own importance and his relationship to men and to God, but you've got nothing left that is worth calling the gospel." (3)

The second consequence is in the statement at the end of verse 14, "...Your faith also is in vain." Without the resurrection, our life of faith in Christ would be a waste of time. Our faith is a response to the gospel message. If the gospel that we've staked our lives on is a sham, then so is the faith it produced. There is no point in going to church on Sunday morning, participating in home fellowships, or serving on ministry teams.

The third consequence, in verse 15, is that all apostolic witness is a lie. That means the Bible is totally untrustworthy. If the resurrection isn't true, then the apostles were the world's greatest liars, con men on a colossal scale. They claimed falsely to be from God and witnessed falsely concerning God that he raised Christ. To deny the resurrection is to call the Biblical writers not just mistaken, but willfully mistaken. There is no possibility that, as many theological liberals claim, such a mistake could have been innocent or naive.

If Christ had not been raised from the dead, the apostles not only were not sent by God with a message from him, but they were liars who conspired together. That is because the gospel records and other New-Testament documents are amazingly consistent with one another. Those witnesses would have had to work together to come up with stories that meshed so perfectly. And if they lied about the gospel, why should they be believed about anything else? Why should we embrace their moral teaching if they falsified their teaching about Jesus and the resurrection? So all New-Testament truth stands or falls together, depending on the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

UNFORGIVEN, LOST, AND UTTERLY MISERABLE

The next three descriptions of what the world would be like if Jesus hadn't been raised from the dead focus more directly on how we as believers in Jesus would be affected. These last three consequences are very personal for us. Listen to what Paul says in verses 17-19:

...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

Without the resurrection, every person who has ever lived would be hopelessly lost in sin. Our faith in Christ would not save us. We would be wandering around in the dark as lost as we ever were. All our sins from the past would still be with us, wrapping us up in a horrible robe of unrighteousness. If Christ was not raised from the dead, then sin would have won the victory over Christ, and so it would continue to be victorious over all of us. If Christ remained dead, then when we died we would remain dead and damned—the Bible says the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). He wouldn't have brought forgiveness of sins or salvation or reconciliation or spiritual life, either now or for eternity.

Again, Alexander Maclaven reflects on this:

"You have the cross rising there, gaunt, solitary. But unless on the other side of the river you have the resurrection, no bridge will ever be thrown across the gulf, and the cross remains dead, being alone. You must have a resurrection to explain the cross, and then the life and the death tower up into the manifestation of God in the flesh and the propitiation for our sins. Without it, we have nothing to preach which is worth calling the gospel. If he whom we believed to be our sacrifice by his death and our sanctification by his life has not risen, then all which makes his death other than a martyr's vanishes, and with it vanish forgiveness and purifying. Only when we recognize that in his cross explained by his resurrection we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins, and by the communion of the risen life from the risen Lord possess that new nature which sets us free from the dominion of our evil. Then is faith operative in setting us free from our sins." (4)

Second, if Christ was not raised, death would still be victorious over life. That's the point of verse 18: "Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." If the resurrection wasn't true, not only would we all face death without hope, but we would live here and now tortured by the thought that our Christian family members who have already died were lost forever.

My wife Candy's father Ted Lyons was taken by cancer fifteen years ago in his early sixties. He had lived a life of faith, walked with the Lord Jesus, and in the words of the apostle Paul, he "fell asleep in Christ." The point of this passage is that if there is no resurrection, then we will never see Ted Lyons again. There is no hope of ever having a reunion together on the other side of eternity. All we have is hopelessness and a few wonderful memories of the life that he lived.

But as 1 Thessalonians 4:14 tells us, it's not true. Because of the resurrection, we have absolute hope that we will see my dear father-in-law and my children's grandfather again. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." In verse 17 he goes on to talk about what will happen at the second coming of Jesus Christ: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord."

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 15:19, if Christ has not been raised, Christian life itself would be pitiable and miserable. Paul's point is that if all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, if he was only a good moral teacher, then we're a pretty sorry lot. What we have committed ourselves to is no better than any other pagan philosophy or religion. Why waste so much time and energy and resources on a foolish dream? Why bother investing ourselves in missions, discipleship, worship, evangelism, fellowship, or ministry in Jesus' name? Why not, logically, indulge ourselves in a lifestyle of consumption and hedonism? We might as well commit ourselves to lying and stealing and sexual immorality. If there is no resurrection, trying to live a life of spiritual wholeness doesn't seem worth it.

My seventeen-year-old son Micah had this logic thrown at him recently at a party. A bunch of kids that he works with and goes to school with were asking him why he didn't do a lot of things that they did, and he told them that he was a follower of Jesus Christ. One young man in particular was really fascinated, and he

actually followed Micah around and badgered him about his Christian faith and how limiting it was. At one point he said to Micah, "Let me get this straight: As a Christian, you don't drink or have sex or do drugs or watch porno films. What do you do all day?" The implication in that question is, what a miserable existence! And if there was no resurrection of Jesus Christ, with all its powerful implications for our life, then that young man is absolutely right. Life itself is made utterly miserable and pitiful without Christ, so you might as well do whatever you can to assuage the coldness, grimness, futility, drabness, and darkness of life.

We are people of the resurrection. But we live in a world in which the majority of the people don't have a clue about the resurrection life of Christ that is available to them. They know nothing of the salvation or blessing that resurrection life brings. Everybody who doesn't know the reality of the risen Lord has to live every day of his or her life with no sure word of what is true or false, no savior, no gospel, no forgiveness, no meaningful faith, no victory over death, no eternal life, and no hope for any of these things. That's why the people around us try so hard to anesthetize themselves against the pain of an aching heart. That anesthetic can take the form of pleasure or materialism or alcohol or recreation. That's one reason workaholism is so rampant in our valley.

THE GLORY OF THE RESURRECTION

But Paul offers hope in verse 20: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep." The power of the resurrection is at work here and now. So all the "what if" questions are answered. The foundational reality of our life and history, past, present, and future, is focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our faith is grounded on it. As a Christian, I know experientially that my Redeemer lives to grant me eternal life starting here and now. He is now my life, my all in all, my peace and joy, my Savior, my Redeemer, my Lord.

The glorious fact that Jesus rose again from the dead answers self-doubt, recrimination, guilt, and condemnation. We all have unfulfilled desires, dreams, and hopes, and we wonder whether they will ever get completed. Even if they don't, the promise of the gospel is that all those things will be satisfied in the glorious resurrection when we are forever with the Lord. God understands the limitations, the disappointments, the areas where we're not fulfilled here. But we're promised a resurrection body when there will be complete and total fulfillment.

There's a story I heard as a boy. I think my father even told it when he was preaching. It's the story of an older man who was telling the account of what finally brought him to the point of accepting Christ as his Savior and Lord. He had rejected the gospel as an adolescent. He was a successful businessman, but he became beaten down by the work-place wars, and he was weary and worn after many years of self-rule. At one point he was walking down a street in Chicago during Easter week, and he saw in the window of an art gallery a large, striking oil painting of Christ's crucifixion. He stood spellbound, captured by the vivid detail, remembering all the different parts of the story.

He realized with a start that a small boy had joined him in staring at the picture. The boy was a poorly dressed, filthy street urchin of that great city. They both stood quietly. The little boy eventually broke the silence. "Mister, do you know what it means?"

The man couldn't speak.

So the lad began to explain: "That there man on the middle cross is Jesus. Them others is Roman soldiers. They killed him. I learned that in the mission Sunday school." The man made no reply, so the boy continued, "The woman that's cryin', that's his mother."

At that point the man turned and walked away, lost in thought. In a few moments he heard running footsteps behind him. The boy's voice called out, "Say, Mister!" As the urchin caught up with him, he repeated, "Say, Mister, I forgot to tell you somethin'. He rose again."

That is the powerful message that has come down through the ages. It was affirmed by that Russian Orthodox priest under the tyranny of communism. We proclaim it here as the church gathers for worship. But I want to ask you personally, are you able to say for yourself that Christ is risen? Do you know beyond

a shadow of a doubt that his resurrection was for you personally? If you don't, you can, just as that man did standing before that picture.

Notes:

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, © 1993, 1994 by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 363.
2. Peterson, pp. 363-364.
3. Alexander Maclaven, *Exposition of the Holy Scriptures, Volume 13 - Corinthians*, George H. Doron Company, NY. P. 22.
4. Maclaven, *Ibid*.

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