

Thanksgiving Forever!

1 Corinthians 15:57-58

You might be sitting in a coffee shop with a friend when you hear this. Or perhaps you will be visiting in a Sunday school class with a friend or relative, and the teacher will say it. The friend or teacher will question the reality of the resurrection – whether anyone really rises from the dead. They might voice interest in reincarnation. They may express an outright rejection of religious teaching and moral principles.ⁱ Or they might express the opinion that a person ceases to exist at death, or at least that bad people cease to exist.ⁱⁱ Perhaps they will say something more subtle, rather than an outright question. Something like this: Yes, the Gospel is important, but the important part is the death of Christ for our sins, not the resurrection. After all, didn't Jesus proclaim from the cross, "It is finished?" (John 19:30). So if the payment for our sins was finished, what more is necessary? Therefore, they say, the resurrection isn't important.

As we approach this Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, please direct your attention to 1 Corinthians 15:57-58. Studying the great resurrection chapter today may raise the question about whether we are mixed up on our holidays. After all, this is the Thanksgiving season, right? Not the Easter season, correct? Yet 1 Corinthians 15:57-58 shows us the connection and how much we have to be thankful for. The Apostle Paul wrote, **"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."** (1 Corinthians 15:57-58) The words of verse 57 give us our Thanksgiving theme: That we ought to express profound thanks to God for Jesus Christ, the Victor over death, and for the victory He gives us forever.

The Church at Corinth

The church at Corinth sent a series of questions to the Apostle Paul. Among these was a question about the reality of the resurrection. This was not a surprising question in their day, nor in ours. When Paul preached to the philosophers at Mars Hill in Athens, he was mocked when he proclaimed the resurrection of Christ (Acts 17:31-32). During Jesus' ministry, He was confronted by a group known as the Sadducees who denied the resurrection (Luke 20:27). So the battle that had been going on for decades reached the homes of the church members at Corinth. But they learned to give thanks to God for Jesus Christ, the Victor over death, and for the victory He gives us forever.

I. The Battle

The questions that the church sent to Paul included some details about what people were saying.

A. The Questions Denying the Resurrection

Some people in the congregation were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). They meant that no one has risen or will rise after death. In essence, they believe that life is swallowed up in (or defeated by) death. Even today, critics may characterize our beliefs as "pie in the sky when you die." To this we respond that we believe in rewards from the Lord at His Word.

Another question the critics put forward was this: “How are the dead raised up?” (15:35) This interesting question must be answered with God’s eternal Word instead of man’s ever-changing understanding. The short answer is that Almightyⁱⁱⁱ God is able to raise them up by His power. He demonstrated this in raising Jesus Christ. Yes, scientists and philosophers argue that such a resurrection is impossible. After all, they say, the atoms of decomposing human bodies have spread over land and sea. These atoms may now be a part of other bodies! But remember, we are talking about the God who created all things. The Almighty controls every atom. He knows how to answer all those questions about quarks and neutrinos. The Blessed God is perfectly capable of giving each believer a glorified body. God created the natural, human body of Adam from the dust of the earth; so He will give each believer a spiritual, human body in the image of the Heavenly One (15:44-48).

Now these questions from Corinth may be put to you in your community, and you need to be ready to answer them. Get ready to give thanks for Jesus Christ the Victorious One, the Resurrected One, who has given us the victory forever.

B. The Results of Denying the Resurrection

The Apostle Paul pointedly portrayed the situation:

- If there is no resurrection from the dead . . .
 - Christ is not risen from the dead in any physical or spiritual sense (15:13)
 - Our preaching is empty and your faith is vain (15:14)
 - In fact, we are false witnesses (15:15)
 - People who have died believing in the resurrection have perished in their sins (15:18)
 - We are pitiful people who are fooling ourselves (15:19)
 - Persecuted servants of Christ would have been better advised to “eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” (15:30-32)

These verses make it clear that Christ’s resurrection is a crucial part of the Gospel. If Christ died (even dying for our sins), but did not rise, then our faith is empty. If the resurrection is not true then, Paul assured us, our faith is a pitiful delusion. If Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25), gave us promises^{iv} that are false, then our faith is foolish. This means that the resurrection was not merely an add-on to the Gospel or a postscript about Jesus. The resurrection is the demonstration of God’s trustworthiness, and the very ground for our trust in the Gospel. So when a friend or teacher denies these truths (subtly or not so subtly), be ready to answer this falsehood (1 Peter 3:15-18). As one author wrote, “Paul will demonstrate that such a denial reveals a profound lack of insight into the diverse nature of God’s creation and thus the lack of knowledge of God himself (15:34).”^v

- These evil companions were corrupting the good morals of the congregation by their deception (15:33-34).

The Apostle Paul warned, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;” (2 Timothy 4:3). Note the connection here between denying sound doctrine and living for lusts. Paul admitted this in verse 32 of 1 Corinthians 15: “If the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”^{vi}

Now that we have seen the battle clearly, let's look for the victor in this battle. When some say that there is no resurrection, let's ask, how did the eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection respond?

II. The Victor, Jesus Christ

In the words of verse 57 the victory is **"through our Lord Jesus Christ."** Why can we say this? The fact is, **"But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of those who slept"** (15:20)

Jesus Christ is . . .

- The Suffering Savior (15:3-4)
- The Risen One (15:20)
- The Heart of our preaching (15:12-15)
- The Heart of our faith (15:17-18)
- The Source of our hope and joy (15:19)
- The "Firstfruits"^{vii} of all those who have died as believers in Christ (15:20,23)
- The Man of the Resurrection (15:21)
- The Source of our new life (15:22)
- The Coming One (15:23)
- The Ruling King, subduing all enemies, including death (15:24-26)
- The Submissive Son (15:28)
- The Life-giving Spirit (15:45)
- The Lord from heaven (15:47)
- The Victor whom God used to give us the victory (15:57)

*Suffering Savior, Christ died for our sins, making full payment and rising again
Heart of our preaching, in whom we believed, Source of our joy and the hope we've received
Firstfruits of all who will rise, He has led! Our resurrection, He rose from the dead
Source of new life, He is coming again, conquering death and the kingdoms of men
Serving His Father, this life-giving One, our Lord from Heaven and God's only Son
Thanks be to God for the victory He gives, we face tomorrow for we know He lives*

Now that we have understood the battle, and the Victor in that battle, let's ask how and why this victory has any meaning for us.

III. The Victory that God Gives to Believers

- The Victory through the Gospel: "Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures." (15:3-4)
 - This Gospel is the victory that has been proclaimed to us (15:1)
 - This Gospel gives us the victory wherein we stand and by which we are saved. (15:1-2)
 - Eyewitnesses testified to this Gospel victory (15:4-7) including some who had already died. This is Gospel victory in confident hope (15:19)
 - We have Gospel victory though we stand in jeopardy (15:30-32)
- The Victory Illustrated

- The victory of “the Firstfruits:” Christ’s resurrection and being alive means that later fruit (that’s us!) will rise to be with Him forever (15:20-23)
- Every harvest testifies to God’s ability to grant us His victory (15:35-38)
- All creation testifies to God’s ability to give us His victory (15:39-41)
- The old creation under the curse causes us to long for the victory of the promises for the new creation (15:42-53)
- Believers are not buried at death; we are planted for the resurrection! (15:36-38)
- The Victory Prophesied
 - Death is swallowed up in victory (15:54; Isaiah 25:8)
 - Death has lost its sting and the grave has been defeated (15:55; Hosea 13:14)

Springing out of the truth of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul issued three sharp commands: 1.) Do not be deceived!, 2.) Wake up! and 3.) Stop sinning! Some people around us do not have the knowledge of God, and for this we should be ashamed (15:33-34). Everyone you see and know will face God at the resurrection to everlasting life or the resurrection to everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). Even now, the Lord is recording our God-honoring responses in His book to be opened at our resurrection (Malachi 3:16).

What shall we say to these things? “THANKS BE TO GOD!” In this season of thanksgiving, many will give thanks for past and present blessings. But this year, shouldn’t we also give thanks for future blessings? Thanks be to God, that’s exactly what Christ’s resurrection allows us to do. In our Thanksgiving celebrations this year, let’s voice our thanks to God for His victory in the resurrection. And as Pastor Richard Snively used to say, “Keep on keeping on.” Why? The Apostle Paul summed it up with these words, **“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”** (1 Corinthians 15:58) We are beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Let’s stand fast, immovable in the faith. Let’s keep on serving the Lord abundantly. Let’s remember that the Lord who raises us from the dead will reward us. Our labors are not in vain in the Lord. Thanks be to God who has given us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9), let’s turn to each other and say, “Thanksgiving Forever!”

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ⁱ This is the philosophy of nihilism.

ⁱⁱ This teaching is known as annihilationism.

ⁱⁱⁱ God introduced Himself as the Almighty in Genesis 17:1. The book of Job uses this title for God 31 times. Psalm 91:1 tells us that believers dwell in the shadow of the Almighty. In Revelation 1:8, Jesus testified about Himself: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, says the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.” In this remarkable verse, we find that Jesus Christ is the eternal One who died and rose again, and that He is the Almighty. The word “Almighty” translates [*pantokrator*]; this word is a combination of [*pas*] meaning “all” and [*kratos*] meaning “power.” (In English, we use words such as “democrat” (power of the people), “bureaucrat” (power of the bureau) or “autocrat” referring to a dictator. But Jesus Christ is the Almighty – the all-powerful One!

^{iv} John 5:29, Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 19:28; 20:19

^v Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 402.

^{vi} Quoting from Isaiah 22:13

^{vii} “Firstfruits” are the first indication of a coming bountiful harvest.