

Challenges Christians Face

Christ's Resurrection Assures Our Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

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Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of what happens to us when we die. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Christ's Resurrection Assures Our Resurrection."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28:

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

Introduction

Physicist and bestselling author Stephen Hawking may believe in extraterrestrial intelligence and the theoretical possibility of time travel, but for him, the notion of life after death is a fiction too fanciful to accept.

In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, Hawking referred to heaven as a “fairy story” and spoke in support of a humanist ethic that emphasizes making the most of our time on Earth rather than the promise of life after death. Hawking said:

I have lived with the prospect of an early death for the last 49 years. I'm not afraid of death, but I'm in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first . . . I regard the brain as a computer that will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.¹

There are many people who are like Stephen Hawking. They do not believe that there is life after death.

However, the apostle Paul believed that there is life after death, and it is all based on Christ's resurrection from the dead.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church to address a number of challenges facing the Christians. They had first written to Paul, and he wrote this letter in response to theirs. Paul had also heard about challenges, and he addressed those too.

The issue of what happens to Christians when they die is what Paul addressed in chapter 15. Earlier in the chapter (15:1-11) Paul set down the evidence for Christ's resurrection from the dead. Then, Paul showed that because of Christ's resurrection from the dead, there *can* be a resurrection from the dead for Christians (15:12-19). Now, in the section we are going to study today, Paul showed that because of Christ's resurrection from the dead, there *must* be a resurrection from the dead for Christians (15:20-28).

Lesson

So, in our lesson today we learn that because Christ has been raised from the dead, Christians must be raised from the dead because of their relationship to Christ.

¹ See <http://www.geekosystem.com/stephen-hawking-heaven-fairy-tale>.

Let's learn about this as follows:

1. The Fact of Christ's Resurrection (15:20)
2. The Causal Relationship Between Christ's Resurrection and Our Resurrection (15:21-22)
3. The Time Relationship Between Christ's Resurrection and Our Resurrection (15:23-28)

I. The Fact of Christ's Resurrection (15:20)

First, let's look at the fact of Christ's resurrection.

Paul said in verse 20: **“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”**

Paul insisted that **in fact Christ has been raised from the dead**. Paul had already given the insuperable evidence for Christ's resurrection in verses 1-11. Only a blind person could not see the evidence for Christ's resurrection.

But Christ's resurrection was more than just one person's conquering death. The very purpose of Christ's resurrection was the fact that he was the **firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep**.

Paul drew an analogy between Christ's resurrection and the Old Testament ritual of firstfruits. When the Israelites harvested their crops they were to bring a representative sample, called the firstfruits, to the priests as an offering to the Lord. Leviticus 23:10 says, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest” The firstfruits indicated that this was the first portion of the entire harvest.

That is Paul's point here. Christ's resurrection from the dead was not a single, isolated event. It represented the beginning of something much larger. It represented the first portion of the entire harvest, as it were. Christ's resurrection assures the rest of the harvest. The full harvest, of which Christ is the first sign, is the harvest of those **who have fallen asleep**.

The New Testament frequently uses the euphemism “sleep” for the death of believers. Now, why is that so? The reason is to emphasize that the deaths of believers are only temporary conditions. Christ himself had fallen asleep in death, but by his resurrection his spirit was reunited with his body, which is now glorified.

By the way, the resurrection of which Paul speaks is a permanent resurrection. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament mention people who died and were miraculously brought back to life (cf. 1 Kings 17:22; 2 Kings 4:34-36; 13:21; Luke 7:15; John 11:44). But every single one of those people died again. Even those whom Jesus raised from the dead—the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus’ daughter, and Lazarus—eventually died again.

Of course, there were two people in the Old Testament—Enoch and Elijah—who went straight to heaven without dying.

The only person in history who has died and then was raised back to life (without dying again) is the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, because **Christ has been raised from the dead**, he is **the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep**.

II. The Causal Relationship Between Christ’s Resurrection and Our Resurrection (15:21-22)

Second, let’s look at the causal relationship between Christ’s resurrection and our resurrection. That is, Paul explained how we can be assured of our resurrection.

Verses 21 and 22 are at the very heart of covenant theology. They explain our fall into sin as well as our redemption. In these verses Paul set before us two men, Adam and Christ. They representative two groups of people.

A. *Adam Brought Ruin and Death (15:21a, 22a)*

First, notice that Adam brought ruin and death.

Paul said in verse 21a: “**For as by a man came death . . .**” The man to whom Paul was referring is Adam. God said to Adam

in the Garden of Eden after he had created him, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17).

Sadly, Adam did eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That was disobedience to God, and the Bible calls that sin. Eventually, God confronted Adam and said to him, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17-19).

So, because of his sin Adam died. He was cut off from God spiritually immediately. And he was eventually cut off from life physically. But the process of death began in his body at that moment.

But Adam was not the only one who died. Paul said in verse 22a: “**For as in Adam all die . . .**” Now Paul is wonderfully precise here. **Adam** is the federal representative of all human beings. And when God pronounced the curse upon Adam, all of his progeny received the curse as well. **In Adam all die.**

Adam’s original sin has been passed on to every single one of his descendants. The only exception is Jesus Christ. He was supernaturally conceived and so he did not inherit Adam’s original sin.

And so because of Adam’s original sin that we inherit, all people commit actual sins—and no one is excepted. Everyone commits actual sins because everyone has inherited the result of Adam’s original sin.

B. Christ Brings Resurrection and Deliverance (15:21b, 22b)

And second, notice that Christ brings resurrection and deliverance.

Paul said in verse 21b: “. . . **by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.**” The person to whom Paul was referring here is Christ. Resurrection comes because of Jesus Christ.

Paul made that clear in verse 22b: “. . . **so also in Christ shall all be made alive.**”

Again, I want you to note Paul's precision. He said that it is **in Christ** that **all** shall **be made alive**. The “**all**” who shall be made alive are all those who are **in Christ**, that is, all Christians.

Paul is teaching the federal headship of Christ in these statements. God has appointed two federal representatives. He appointed Adam first. Adam was promised life upon condition of obedience in the Garden of Eden. God threatened him with death if he disobeyed. And, by implication, all his natural-born descendants would receive either life or death by Adam's obedience or disobedience.

Sadly, Adam disobeyed God. He died, and ruin and death entered our world. And all his natural-born descendants also died in him.

But God then appointed a second representative—Christ, also known as the second Adam. Although it is not specifically recorded in the Bible, by inference we deduce that Christ was also promised life upon condition of obedience. God threatened him with death if he disobeyed.

Happily, Christ obeyed God. But, as you know, he died. However, he died not to pay the penalty for his own sin. He died to pay the penalty for the sin of those who belong to him. He died for all those who are “**in Christ.**”

And how does a person become united to Christ? All people are united to Adam by physical birth. Similarly, all people are united to Christ by spiritual birth. That is, those who are born again are enabled to trust Christ and repent of their sin. Those are the ones who are **in Christ**.

And what Paul is saying is that every person who is in Christ **shall be made alive**. In Adam all die, but for those who are in Christ, they shall be made alive!

What a glorious hope it is that Christians have!

II. The Time Relationship Between Christ's Resurrection and Our Resurrection (15:23-28)

And third, let's look at the time relationship between Christ's resurrection and our resurrection. That is, when do these resurrections take place?

There is a definite time and order in which things will happen. So Paul said in verse 23: **"But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."**

First, **Christ as the firstfruits** has already been resurrected. That happened some 2,000 years ago.

Second, **then at his coming those who belong to Christ** will be resurrected bodily. **Those who belong to Christ** refers to those who have been born again. It refers to those who have believed Christ and repented of their sins. In other words, it refers to born-again Christians.

His coming in this verse refers to the time when Christ will return visibly and bodily to this earth. At that point of his return the bodies of all Christians will be resurrected and reunited with their spirits. These bodies will not be like our current bodies. They will be like the body that Christ had after his resurrection. In other words, we will have glorified bodies. They will not be subject to sin, suffering, disease, or pain.

After Christ returns, Paul said in verse 24a, **"Then comes the end . . ."** It is at this point that there will be the final judgment and the formation of the new heavens and the new earth.

At this time, Christ **delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power** (15:24b). Just as the firstfruits represented the first portion of the entire harvest, so his resurrection guaranteed destruction of **every rule and every authority and power**, and the presentation of his entire kingdom to God the Father. It is filled with language of conquest and triumph and success and victory!

Paul had just set forth a complex scenario that pointed to Christ as the firstfruits: Christ's resurrection, then the resurrection of Christians, then the destruction of authorities, and finally the deliverance of the kingdom to God the Father.

To explain this scenario further, Paul pointed out in verse 25 that Christ **must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet**. This verse recalls Psalm 110:1, where the psalmist David said, "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" This psalm spoke of the promise of great victories given to the descendants of David. Every time a Davidic king experienced victory over an enemy, he saw this dynastic promise realized in his life. Paul applied Psalm 110 to Christ, since Christ is David's greatest and final son to sit on the throne for all eternity. In Christ all the Davidic promises come to full realization.

Paul focused here on reigning in victory. The New Testament explains that Christ was seated on the throne of David at the time of his resurrection and ascension (Ephesians 1:20-21). God once promised that David's family would rule over the entire earth (Psalm 89:20-29), and this promise now applies to Christ. Thus, Christ will eventually reign visibly over everyone and everything.

Of course, **the last enemy to be destroyed** by Christ is **death** itself (15:26). Adam brought ruin and death to the entire human race (Romans 5:12-14), but Christ brings resurrection and deliverance to those who belong to him. This destruction of death is the last great work of Christ. This will occur at the end.

How do we know that death will be destroyed? Paul said in verse 27a: "**For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.'**" This is a reference to Psalm 8:6, which says, "You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet." Paul considered it an indisputable fact that Christ would reign over all creation. And so even death would be destroyed.

Realizing that the expression "**all things**" might be misunderstood, Paul qualified himself so that he would not be misunder-

stood. And so he said in verse 27b: **“But when it says, ‘all things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.”** That is, it should be clear to everyone that **“all things”** did not refer to God himself.

Finally, Paul explained that **when all things are subjected to him**, that is, to God the Father, **then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all** (15:29). Christ will continue to reign, because his reign is eternal (Revelation 11:15). But he will reign with the Father in Trinitarian glory. He will reign as the Second Person of the Trinity for all eternity.

Conclusion

As I was reading various commentaries in preparation for this sermon, I was struck by what Gordon D. Fee had to say about this portion of Scripture. He said:

This is one of the great passages in the NT, not only in terms of Paul’s own argumentation, but especially in terms of the true significance of Easter. It is therefore unfortunate that at times this powerful demonstration of the certainty of our own resurrection is overlooked in favor of an apologetic of trying to prove the resurrection to unbelievers. First of all, that is not what Paul is trying to do. What he has going for him is the common ground of their common faith in the resurrection of Christ. There is a place for apologetics, that is, the defense of Christianity to the unconverted; but Easter is not that place.²

Simply, what Fee is saying is that at Easter this is one text that is often used to defend Christianity. However, we should simply declare the glorious certainty of our own resurrection.

We sometimes get discouraged because we encounter brilliant minds like Stephen Hawking. Who are we in comparison to

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 760.

others who seem so much more intellectually capable than ourselves? And if they have figured out all kinds of things that we could never begin to fathom, and then say that heaven is “a fairy story for people afraid of the dark,” who are we to question what they say? Perhaps they are right?

Friends, the fact is that Christ really did rise from the dead. If Stephen Hawking and others like him say that Christ did not rise from the dead, they are simply wrong on that point.

And because Christ rose from the dead, we can be assured of our own resurrection. Christ's resurrection assures our resurrection.

His resurrection has set in motion a chain of unstoppable events that absolutely determines our present and our future. Christ is the firstfruits of all those who are is, and will be most certainly be raised at his coming.

So, if you are a born-again Christian today, you can rejoice in the certainty of your bodily resurrection one day.

And, if you are not yet a Christian, I invite you to ask God to give you the new birth so that you can believe in Christ and repent of your sin. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thank you that his resurrection guarantees our own resurrection. Thank you that his resurrection guarantees the destruction of the evil powers and authorities. Thank you that his resurrection guarantees that he will hand over the kingdom to his Father. And thank you that his resurrection determines the present and the future.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve the risen Jesus Christ!