

“If There is No Resurrection of the Dead . . .”

I Corinthians 15:12-19

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12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. – I Corinthians 15:12-19, ESV

If there is no resurrection of the dead . . .

Several years ago, a poll was conducted by Ohio University, who interviewed **1,007 adults. Only 36% of them said "yes" to the question: "Do you believe that, after you die, your physical body will be resurrected someday?"** 54% said they do not believe and 10% were undecided.

When he heard the results of this poll, Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said, “This reflects the very low state of doctrinal preaching in our churches. I continually am confronted by Christians, even active members of major churches, who have never heard this taught in their local congregations. We have a lowest-common-denominator Christianity being taught in so many denominations that has produced a people who simply do not know some of the most basic Christian truths.”

62% of these 1,007 adults surveyed believed in some sort of afterlife with a continued consciousness. But many of these believed that their souls would live on without a resurrected body.

Interestingly a different poll of self-identifying Christians in Great Britain found that 25% of them did not even believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Another poll of Americans found that 25% of practicing evangelical Christians denied the future general bodily resurrection on the Last Day.

When we compare these modern survey results with what Paul says in today's passage from I Corinthians 15, we can see a real problem. Too many people embrace a version of Christianity that has no future resurrection from the dead and many people even call themselves Christians while denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Today, we're going to consider why we absolutely need the resurrection of Jesus and our own future bodily resurrection in Jesus in order to have any sure Christian hope or a reliable Christian faith.

Paul begins this passage by asking a question, one which reflects that the Apostle Paul is shocked by what some people are saying in Corinth.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

It would appear that many of the professing Christians who were members of the church in Corinth embraced a popular Greek philosophy called Dualism, which held to a radical distinction and difference between the human body and the human soul. The human body was considered earthly, unspiritual, and disposable. Thus, that which was done in the body was largely irrelevant to the spiritual life. On the other hand, the human soul was thought to be the divine spark, the heavenly light, trapped in the body like a prison, and the goal of human existence was to free the body from the soul.

To such Dualists, the ideal goal was to see the body and soul separated at death and the soul enjoying the perfect presence of God. For them, the idea that there would then later be a resurrection of the body and reunion of body and soul was pointless, a step backwards, totally unwise and irrational. And so, they denied the resurrection of the body. They may not have explicitly denied the resurrection of Jesus Himself, but they were in a state like many Americans – 72% of Americans affirm the resurrection of Jesus, but only 36-37% believe in the future resurrection of the dead. So, just about half of all Americans who do believe that Jesus rose again from the dead don't believe that they will rise again. 2,000 years after I Corinthians, the same philosophical ideas continue to corrupt the thinking of Christians despite the clear teachings of the Bible.

I. . . . then not even Christ has been raised

Paul begins by stating a rather obvious point, but it is one he repeats, and so it must be important, and it must not have been that obvious to many of the Corinthians:

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

You see, if our bodies are just useless, and if the end-goal is to free our souls from our bodies, then why in the world would Christ be resurrected? Why wouldn't He be so happy to be rid of His suffering earthly body which had been humiliated and marred on the cross and just be pure spirit, if that's the goal?

Well, simply put, because that's not the goal.

If we deny that the dead are raised, well then, Jesus, who was one of the dead, must not have been raised.

II. . . . our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain

And then, Paul starts to explain what we lose if we lose the resurrection of Christ:

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

“Vain” here means empty, containing nothing. Without the resurrection of Christ, I have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe. After all, why should I preach a dead and buried Messiah, and why should you put your hope in a Christ who could not overcome the grave?

Hebrews 2:14-15 gives us Christ's mission as our Savior, the reason He took on flesh and blood:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

But, here's the problem Paul is addressing with the Corinthians: If the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised, and if that's true, how can we say that

He destroyed the one who has the power of death? How can we say that He has delivered us who through fear of death are subject to lifelong slavery? If Christ was not raised, then the devil still has the power of death, and we are still enslaved. So, what kind of Gospel could be preached? What kind of faith could be put in this Messiah? It would all be empty.

III. . . . the Apostles are false witnesses

Not only would the Apostolic preaching be empty, but the Apostolic witness would be absolutely fraudulent:

We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. – vv. 15-16

These are serious charges that would absolutely need to be brought against the Apostles if the dead are not raised. To misrepresent God is to deceive people willingly about the most important thing in life and eternity.

This is one of the clearest proofs of the reality of the resurrection – the Apostolic witness. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal said, “I believe witnesses who get their throats cut.” What he meant is that we should take seriously the testimony of witnesses willing to suffer and even die for their testimony. The Apostles said they had seen the risen Christ. This was their representation of God: That He had raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Were the Apostles lying?

- Well, Peter held steadfastly to his testimony, even though he was crucified upside down.
- James, the brother of John, held out his testimony of Jesus even though he was slain by the sword of Herod Agrippa.
- And the Apostle Paul continued to testify to the risen Jesus even though he was beheaded.

Men don't die for lies.

Some have theorized that perhaps Jesus didn't really die on the cross, that He just swooned, and then revived in the cool of the tomb. But the Apostles didn't just see Jesus risen again; they also saw Him ascend into heaven. And Paul was met by Jesus who came down from heaven shining brighter than the Noonday Sun. So, they knew that Jesus was the victorious and exalted victor over death, and that's why they were unafraid to face death for their faith in Him.

IV. . . . you are still in your sins

What would be the consequences of an empty faith, of believing in a dead Messiah? Paul gives us three of them here in verses 17-19:

1. We are still in our sins.
2. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. They are gone forever.
- 3, Christians are the most pathetic, most pitiful people in the world.

Let's look at the first one:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.

If Jesus died on the cross for our sins, why do we need Him to rise from the dead? To put it simply, if Jesus remained dead, then the payment for our sins bounced, the check was rejected by the bank for insufficient funds.

Romans 4:25 tells us Christ "*was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*"

Christ being raised from the dead is our vindication, our justification, our right standing before God because it means, beyond any doubt, that God accepted His "*Tetelestai*" on the cross – "Paid in full!" as true and good news indeed!

Imagine for a moment if you lost your job and you couldn't keep up with your mortgage payments and were in danger of losing your home. Then, one day, I showed up and I said, "Don't worry. It'll be okay," and I wrote you a check for the full amount of the outstanding balance of your mortgage. Wouldn't that be fantastic

news? You would be so happy and thankful . . . until you went to deposit the check and it bounced higher than the moon. I don't have that kind of money!

Without the resurrection, we would have no basis to believe that the record of our debt piled up by all of our sins had truly been settled. We would still be in our sins.

V. . . . those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished

And what about our loved ones who fell asleep in Christ – that is, those who physically died while believing in Jesus? Well, Paul says . . .

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

In Revelation 1:17-18, the glorious Jesus Christ says to the Apostle 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.*”

What wonderful words – “*I have the keys!*” No more do we need to fear the grave, for our Savior has the keys to Death and Hades. He grabbed them when He Himself was in the grave and rose again . . . Except . . . If He didn't rise again, and if He isn't alive forevermore, then He doesn't have the keys and we have every reason to fear the grave, for death is not a defeated enemy. That would mean that our lost loved ones who trusted Christ were still lost nonetheless. They have perished and will not live forever.

After the death of her dear brother, Lazarus, Jesus comforted Martha with the reassurance of who He is:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” – John 11:25-27, ESV

Well, if the dead are not raised, then what sense do Jesus' words make? What sense does Martha's confession make? It's all empty and meaningless words.

Of course, Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead, but even that would have been a mostly empty exercise if Jesus Himself did not defeat death in His own resurrection. To be temporarily restored to your family would cause some rejoicing, but if it was only temporary, to be followed by final death later, then how could Jesus rightly claim to be the resurrection and the life?

I'd like to take a moment to explain why the New Testament uses the term "sleep" to refer to dying and how that's connected to the resurrection. This expression - "those who have fallen asleep" - has caused some people to propose that, at death, believers fall into a "soul sleep" - that is, that our souls sleep dormant until the resurrection of the dead.

But we know our souls do not sleep between our death and the return of Christ based on several texts:

1. Jesus' Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16 has both of these men in their souls, before the resurrection, either suffering the torments of judgment (the rich man) or else enjoying the rest of "Abraham's bosom" (Lazarus). Their souls were not sleeping.

2. In 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, Paul writes:

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (ESV)

Here, we see clearly the contrast for our souls: Our souls can either be at home in the body and away from the Lord, or else they can be away from the body and at home with the Lord. And then, at the Last Day we must all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to receive what is due for what we have done in the body.

3. In Colossians 1:21-24, Paul writes:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for

that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. (ESV)

Here again, as in 2 Corinthians, we can see clearly that our souls can either live in the flesh or depart and be with Christ.

So, our souls do not sleep. No soul sleep. Why then does Paul use the term “those who have fallen asleep”? If our souls are not sleeping at death, what is? Obviously, it must be our bodies that sleep. Without our souls, our bodies are lifeless and still. But they do remain our bodies and they do remain Christ’s own.

Our bodies sleep in the earth so that they may awake at the end of time, on the Last Day, and face judgment, as Daniel 12:2 says, “*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*” (ESV) “Many of those” can literally be translated as “the multitude of those who sleep,” meaning a universal resurrection of all the dead at the end of time for Judgment Day

Paul writes of this day in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18, and he again uses the term “those who have fallen asleep” with a clear eye to their rising at the resurrection:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (ESV)

I think this truth has profound implications for how we ought to treat the bodies of believers who have fallen asleep in the LORD and who will rise again at the resurrection.

VI. . . . we are of all people most to be pitied

Paul concludes this section with the third consequence of an empty faith in a dead Messiah:

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

The root for the word “pitied” is mercy, which is also the same as the root for miserable. You have mercy on people who are pitiful or miserable.

I mentioned Blaise Pascal earlier and his great quote, “I believe witnesses who get their throats cut.” But Pascal is best known for Pascal’s wager.

Here’s how Pascal put it in his famous *Pensees*:

“Belief is a wise wager. Granted that faith cannot be proved, what harm will come to you if you gamble on its truth and it proves false? If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation, that He exists.”

The more complete argument is more complex. Pascal basically says that if you find yourself unable to believe in Christianity, then you should try to live as if you believed, hoping that living as if you believed will lead you to actually believing. To really take this step, though, you have to be “all in.” You have to be willing to risk everything in this life for faith in God. And the reasoning, according to Pascal, is that if your belief turns out to be mistaken, then you will have lost the finite pleasures and treasures of this world – a finite loss. But if you’re right, then you get an infinite gain. On the other hand, if you refuse to believe and you’re right, what have you really gained? It’s just a finite gain of a limited number of years of earthly pleasure and treasure. But if you refuse to believe and you’re wrong, then you suffer an infinite loss.

So, Pascal proposes in his wager, better to try for the infinite gain and risk finite loss than to try for the finite gain and risk infinite loss. It has logical strength, for sure, but it has one weakness:

If the Christian’s hope turns out to be wrong, they have lost everything they really hoped for. The loss of a promised infinite inheritance that we had placed all our hopes on is an infinite loss. And that makes us the most miserable, most pitiful, most wretched people on the planet – IF the dead are not raised.

So, if the dead are not raised, then the preaching of the Gospel is empty and meaningless, your faith in Christ is empty and meaningless, you are still in your sins, our departed loved ones in Christ are gone forever and have truly perished, and we are of all men, most to be pitied.

Boy, what a joyful and hopeful message, right? Well, of course it is, because each of these “what ifs” points to the truth of the opposite, doesn’t it?

If Christ is risen from the dead, then the dead will all be raised, just as He said.

If the dead are raised in Christ, then our Gospel proclamation is not in vain but full of real substance and solid hope.

If the dead are raised in Christ, then your faith in Christ is well-placed, and He is indeed the anchor for your souls. Far from vain, your faith is secured to the most substantive and unshakable place, to the risen and exalted Jesus Christ.

If the dead are raised in Christ, because Christ has been raised, then you are no longer in your sin. God has accepted all of the payment for your sin. The check has cleared the bank. Your sin-debt to God is removed forever.

If Christ has been raised and thus the dead are raised, then our loved ones who fell asleep in Christ are not lost. They have not perished. They are enjoying the presence of God in their souls and they will receive resurrection bodies when Christ comes again. They live forever and they will live forever.

If Christ has been raised and the dead will rise in Him, then we are of all people the most blessed, the most privileged, and should be the most thankful.

And that's where we're heading next week, for Paul's next two words are the powerful turn of the chapter – "But now . . ."