
What if Jesus did not Rise from the Dead?

1 Corinthians 15:12-34²³

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Who in the church could possibly deny the resurrection?

Surely Paul is mistaken...

Surely Paul is not here talking to supposed Christians...

Surely no one would do this today...

Surely...

Well maybe no one we know is infected with the disease of this error. But maybe it would be good to be fortified with the vitamin of truth and the exercise of pointed logic in our souls...

Its Piercing Question (v. 12)

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?

There were Christians at Corinth who asserted that 'there is no resurrection of the dead.' For the apostle to the Gentiles who had proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection this was appalling. This denial struck at the core of the gospel.

The Preaching Context

Everywhere Paul went he preached the resurrection of Christ. All the Apostles preached the resurrection as an essential truth in evangelism. We do not have a dead Redeemer. Nor do we have a dead Ruler. Our redeemer and ruler has been raised.

Paul in his sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, Greece presents Jesus' resurrection in a historical context. He simply asserts the fact of the resurrection with its implication for the listening philosophers. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

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The Profound Scandal

Since the resurrection is what was proclaimed, how can you possibly say there is no possibility of a resurrection? In the face of what was preached to you, how is it even remotely possible that you now question or even deny it?

What did they believe? What are the hints and possibilities? David Prior helps identify the key sources of objections (Prior, p.256-257)

The common Greek person believed in the immortality of the soul. The body was seen as a prison. Death released the soul to enter the real world, the world of spirit, not material. It was difficult for Christians to discard this philosophy they were so familiar with. So the resurrection was denied because it involved the eternalness of the glorified human body.

It is also possible that some Corinthians questioned the claims of an empty tomb. Like the skeptics then and now, they had all kinds of alternative explanations as to what happened. Since their basic assertion is that "dead men don't rise..." Paul constantly faced the incredulity of people. He still proclaimed the resurrection expecting that without the work of the Spirit, rational people would have reasonable objections. So skeptics with their personal and religious agendas have offered all kinds of explanations for the empty tomb.

It is likely that the people at Corinth had an illogical blend of these ideas. However, it is necessary to bring truth to bear on error and expose its spiritual dangers.

Its Deadly Implications (v.13-19)

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.

If a resurrection of any kind is not possible, then Christianity is a delusion. If a resurrection is not possible, then there are some important logical conclusions they need to think about. So Paul pushes them. Anyone who deviates from biblical truth must face up to the implications of what they assert and deny ... (Prior)

Paul uses reputation to give some structure to this. Look at the parallels in verses 13 and 16. Then look at the parallels in verses 14 and 17. Finally in verses 15 and 18 where God is misrepresented and the future state of believers is misrepresented.

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Now, one thing to note. There are some who deny the resurrection is of the body. They claim that the resurrection is the release of the inner person to take on a heavenly, spiritual and non-material body. This is a tragic redefinition of the word. Resurrection means to raise the body. Jesus' resurrection was in a body. It is the body coming up from the grave. To talk about a resurrection without a body is nonsense.

If there is no such thing as bodily resurrection from the dead,

...then Jesus is not raised. (v. 13, 16)

If bodily resurrection is not possible in the nature of things, then Jesus is not raised from the dead. In other words a Christian who questions the possibility of bodily resurrection has destroyed the possibility of Jesus' resurrection. This is because the Scriptures anticipate and assert that Jesus rose from the dead in a real human body. It is what the Old Testament prophesied and pointed to, Jesus predicted and the Apostles taught. So person professing to be a Christian who denied the possibility of a bodily resurrection had denied the gospel.

...then the death of Christ was meaningless. (v. 13)

If Jesus is not risen, then His death on the cross was the end. It was just one more crucifixion among thousands. The gospel is neutered. It leaves the Redeemer dead in the grave. But Jesus' death is only half of the gospel. Jesus died to bring an end to the curse, the old world, sin and law. The resurrection brings the new life. Through the resurrection Jesus brought the transforming life and power of the new creation into this old, fallen world. The renovation began. His resurrected body is part of the resurrected new creation. Without His resurrection there is no giving of the Spirit; there is no regeneration. To deny the resurrection is to leave no hope for the new. The death of Jesus then was simply, another death.

...then our preaching is a lie. (v. 14)

If Jesus is not rise, then our preaching is a lie. The resurrection of Jesus is not only the gospel that saves, but the truth that transforms. We believe and preach that the resurrection is an essential part of the whole fabric of Christian, Biblical truth. This is what we teach and preach. This is what we say is *true*. But if Jesus did not rise from the dead in his glorified body then our preaching is false. We proclaim what the Bible says. We proclaim what Paul taught. So, if there is not resurrection, then the Bible is not true. It is a lie. But we believe the Bible is true. We proclaim the resurrection because the Bible says that Jesus was raised. For a person to deny the resurrection is to deny the truth, the means by which one is saved.

...then faith in the cross is foolish and futile. (v. 14, 17)

If there is no resurrection then trusting the cross is vain, empty, without profit. There is no salvation at the cross if there is no empty tomb. Those who deny the possibility or the fact of the resurrection and still claim to trust in Jesus' cross are believing in vain. That faith will not save them.

...then we are all still in our sins. (v. 17)

If there is no resurrection, then we are remain in the old creation. We are still in our sins. We are still dead in our sins. The resurrection raises us up out of sin's death and unites us to the life of God. Because Christ is raised, because we have been regenerated, then we have the life of God and His righteousness. Those who deny the resurrection are in fact still in their sins because their faith, their belief, is futile, vain and empty.

...then believers won't be resurrected. (v. 18)

If there is no resurrection, then believers who have died will not be raised. If there is no possibility of a resurrection, then none of us, none of our Christian friends will ever be resurrected in the last days. But praise God, there was and will be the resurrection of the dead.

...then we are foolish and to be pitied (v. 19)

If there is no resurrection, then there is no hope in the life to come. Our dreams of the new creation, the new heavens and new earth, are vain. Since there is no life after death, then we have been foolish. We have given up so much in this old world while looking forward to the new. If all we have is hope in this life, then we are foolish to have given up so much.

So the resurrection is supremely important. Without the fact and the proclamation of the resurrection, the gospel is not being preached or believed.

Its Grand Unfolding (v.20-28)

Paul argues that there is a clear order of things set up by the resurrection.

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.

In Two Representatives (v. 21-22)

The first Adam brought about ruin and death (v. 21a, 22a). The creation was cursed. But more importantly, all humanity fell into ruin and under judgment. Adam's sin as head of the human race brought total depravity and damnation.

The second Adam, Jesus Christ, brings about resurrection and deliverance (v. 21b, 22b). In the resurrection Jesus resolves our depravity, our damnation and our death. All those who are in Christ will be made alive.

This idea of in Adam and in Christ, of the old and new, of the first and second, of the old creation and the new creation, of death and life, sin and righteousness is basic to Christian thinking. So history is the unfolding of the tragedy of the old Adam and the triumph of the new Adam.

In Two Resurrections (v. 20, 23-24a)

There is also a historical order to the resurrections. First is the resurrection of Christ (v. 20, 23a): Christ was raised first. His resurrection is the pattern and principle of our own resurrection. His resurrection is like the first fruits of the harvest that was brought into the Temple. Jesus is raised first and goes ahead into glory. The second is the resurrection at the end of days.(v. 23b): When Christ returns, all his people will be raised. The dead in Christ will be raised from the dead in glorified bodies. Those who are alive will receive their resurrection, glorified bodies immediately.

In Triumphal Reign (v. 24-28)

All earthly enemies will be destroyed because of the resurrection (v. 24-25). The end will come when the present reign of Christ in his spiritual kingdom is handed over to the Father. He reigns now while overcoming and eventually defeating all those who

resist, refuse and rebel. Once Christ has won the kingdom, then He will deliver it up to His father. What an unimaginable great day!

The final enemy will be destroyed because of the resurrection (v. 26). This terrible foe is physical death. After the second resurrection, there will be no more death. Death and hell are cast into the lake of fire. Only righteousness and life will rule.

The eternal order will be established because of the resurrection (v. 27). Paul is careful to maintain the equality of the Godhead. And, there is also an eternal functional subordination. The equality and authority between God the Father and Son will be eternally maintained even in the heavenly rule and reign of Christ. He is King and will rule. But He is still subject to His Father.

Jesus died and was raised and will at some time in the future receive the fullness of the glory of His kingdom. So there is an already and a not yet, even for the Lord Jesus. So this "already, not yet" order ought to keep us from triumphalism. It helps us to understand that we are still waiting for all that God has promised.

Its Entailed Conduct (v.29-34)

Doctrine always is to inform and direct our duty. Truth affects our conduct. If the resurrection is a fact, then there are some very practical implications for our conduct.

²⁹ Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰ Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ³⁴ 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.

Three results frame Paul's words.

A Problematic Practice (v. 29)

What does this sentence mean? There as many as 81 suggested explanations. The simplest is that Paul is questioning something the Corinthian church had done. Some there had been baptized on behalf of people who were already dead. We don't know why. We don't have any other information. But Paul says, "Why would you do such an extreme thing if there is no resurrection?" They were not even consistent with their own thinking. So, his challenge is a two edged sword. Your thinking about the resurrection is wrong. Your practice of baptizing for the dead isn't even worth his time to attack it directly. It is almost simply dismissed as an artifact and an example of how messed up their thinking was.

A Personal Statement (v. 30-32)

³⁰ Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

Why in danger? Is this a question for him? Is this what they asked? If he is an Apostle of the resurrection and Jesus has begun to reign, why is his life so full of dangers? He protests that he dies daily. This is not a sentence to be taken out of its context and used as a quiet time reflection. Paul dies daily because he is exposed to daily dangers. As they well knew, it even meant that he faced the wild beasts of Ephesus. He was convinced that something infinitely better awaited him in the resurrection-life of heaven.

David Prior writes, "Luke's description of Paul at Ephesus makes it fairly plain that the apostle is referring to direct encounter with occult forces and the imminence of mob-lynching under the influence of frenzied devotion to the local goddess, Artemis." Paul alludes to the gladiatorial combat that took place in the coliseum in Ephesus to highlight the pitched battle against evil, occult forces and error that he often faced.

A Practical Exhortation (v. 33-34)

Paul concludes with startling warning.

If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ³³ Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ³⁴ 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.

But if in facing death, the dead do not rise, then the common Greek aphorism should guide their life: Let us eat, drink for tomorrow we die." However, we may not adopt a careless view of life that says, "Let's live for today because tomorrow we die." This view led some in the church at Corinth into loose living. The pressure of that statement weighed on sensitive souls in the struggle of ministry.

Sadly, some of the loose living came because Christians were being too heavily influenced by their unbelieving friends. We are hugely affected by the company we keep. Christians in that church were being drawn into denying the resurrection and living carnal lives because, to the shame of the church, they had not learned about God.

So, they must come back to their senses (because they are in a daze) and stop sinning.

Reflect and Respond

Anyone who denies the resurrection has denied the faith...

Anyone who questions the resurrection has not yet entered the faith...

If you do not believe in the resurrection, then do not be so foolish as to live the life as a Christian without having the life of the Spirit. You are totally wasting your life...

If you believe in the resurrection then you have and will experience the triumph of Jesus' rising from the dead. You are a part of the new creation.

Since the resurrection is a fact, then all our suffering, dangers, toils, troubles and sacrifices are worth it...