

The Resurrection of the Dead

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For many of us, change in our lives isn't the result of some slow, gradual process. Instead, it is the result of a large, dramatic event with consequences that work themselves out for years to come. For me, one such event was the death of my mother in 2011. Even after I worked my way through the grief that followed her passing, I emerged from the other side with a different perspective on life. I simply don't see things the same way I did five years ago.

This is perhaps most evident on a spiritual level. Once I got myself sorted out, I realized that it was now very, very important to me that a) God is a faithful God who keeps His promises, and b) He has promised that every human being shall rise from the dead. As I began to explore this idea, though, I quickly came to understand that this wasn't some spiritual quirk in me. Instead, the resurrection of the dead is one of the major themes of Scripture. In particular, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is one of the most significant events that the Bible chronicles. As the word presents it, it is every bit as important as Jesus' death on the cross. Let's consider this morning, then, the resurrection of the dead.

The Resurrection of Christ

Even though there are many, many passages in the Bible that explore the resurrection and its meaning, we're going to confine our attentions this morning to the first 49 verses of 1 Corinthians 15. The first portion of this text concerns the resurrection of Christ, and we will use this section to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper.

Within this portion of Scripture, the first subsection concerns **THE GOSPEL** that Paul preached. It appears in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2. The point here is quite simple. Paul wants to remind his hearers of the word that he proclaimed to them. However, its implications are quite profound. Because this two-verse chunk is an introduction to Paul's great discussion of the resurrection, it tells us that Paul considered the resurrection of the dead a necessary part of the gospel.

Let me put it like this. When we study the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, we like to make the point that Philip "preached Christ" to the eunuch, and in response, just a little bit later, the eunuch asks Philip to baptize him. From this, we conclude, and rightly so, that we can't truly preach Christ without preaching baptism.

When we apply the same logic to 1 Corinthians 15, it yields the conclusion that we can't truly preach the gospel without preaching the resurrection from the dead. When we're telling somebody about Jesus, it makes no more sense to leave out the resurrection than it does to leave out baptism or even Jesus' death on the cross. I don't know about the rest of y'all, but I haven't been doing that. It now occurs to me that in neglecting that part of the gospel, I've been neglecting the biggest so-what that the Scripture provides. Why should I become a Christian? Why should I live faithfully if I am one? Because I, along with all the other dead, will one day be raised, either to a resurrection of life or of judgment.

This same emphasis is evident in Paul's recounting of **THE EVENTS** of the last days of Jesus on earth. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. On the basis of archaeological and textual evidence, scholars have concluded that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians about 53 AD, approximately 25 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. That most likely makes this the single earliest proclamation we have that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised from the dead. Along the same lines as our earlier discussion, Paul indicates that all these events are of first and equal importance.

This doesn't make a lot of intuitive sense to us, but that's because we aren't as used to defending the Messiahship of Jesus as Paul was. Most people we encounter believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He died on the cross for the sins of mankind. 2000 years ago, that wasn't true. Paul had to convince people that Jesus was the Christ, and he convinced them by arguing that Jesus was raised from the dead. After all, 2000 years ago, it wouldn't have been a big deal that Jesus was crucified. The Romans crucified lots of people. Jesus, though, established His divinity by coming back from the dead, and in doing so, He also proved that everything else He said about Himself and His work was true.

Paul takes the next logical step when he introduces **THE WITNESSES**. They appear in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8. Simply put, asking someone to believe that Jesus rose is a lot to ask. Why should any of us believe it?

In response, Paul begins his parade of people who saw the risen Lord. Not just Peter, not just the twelve, not just James the Lord's brother, not even just Paul himself, but more than 500 others beyond that. Obviously, I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but I also think it's reasonable to hold that belief. These hundreds of witnesses are the reason why. None of them were expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. Indeed, the opposite is true. Many of them doubted the first accounts of His resurrection, and they clung tenaciously to that doubt until they saw the risen Lord for themselves. Once they met Jesus, though, their lives changed. The same timid crew that fled the garden of Gethsemane suddenly became willing to endure hardship, suffering, and even death for the One whom they had so recently abandoned. They were convinced Jesus had risen, and they were in a better position than anyone else to make that judgment.

Finally for this section, let's note that Paul says that most of these hundreds of witnesses, as of AD 53, are still alive. Our hypothetical doubting Gentile can track them down and talk to them if he wants to. To these people, the resurrection of Jesus isn't merely a historical event. It is a recent historical event. In time, it bears the same relation to them that the fall of the Berlin Wall bears to us. I was only 11 in 1989, but I still remember watching the triumphant

crowds on TV as they climbed the wall and waved German flags from atop it. It stuck in my mind. It was significant. How much more, then, would the disciples of Jesus remember His resurrection, the most significant event of their lives? Many of those witnesses died for their faith, but none of them are ever recorded as having recanted.

This explains Paul's confidence in **THE GRACE OF GOD**. He elaborates in 1 Corinthians 15:9-11. Before his vision of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, he was Saul of Tarsus, a persecutor of the church. After it, he becomes one of the most enthusiastic proclaimers of the gospel that the first century knew. Why? First, Paul was convinced by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that He was the Christ, One who had received all authority and power from God. Second, Paul was convinced by the words of Jesus that through Him, even a blasphemer like Paul could find forgiveness.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect on this in two main ways. First, let's explore the spiritual significance of Jesus' resurrection. It is comforting to believe that through Christ, we too can find forgiveness of sins and eternal life. However, there are lots of comforting things we might believe that aren't true. The resurrection of Jesus provides us with evidence that our beliefs are both comforting and true. Because He rose, we know He did not die in vain.

Second, Paul's encounter with the risen Lord was a life-changing experience. It led him to do things that he never would have done before he accepted the truth of the resurrection. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, how has our encounter with Him changed our lives? Are we decent, unremarkable people like our neighbors up and down the street, or does our faith lead us to do things we would never otherwise do? Let's consider this as we partake.

Our Resurrection

In the next section, Paul shifts from discussing the resurrection of Jesus to discussing our resurrection. He begins by spelling out the consequences **IF THE DEAD ARE NOT RAISED**. Let's read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. Paul's arguments here are probably directed against Christians who rejected the resurrection on the basis of Greek philosophy, but amazingly, they're still relevant today. Several years ago, after our daughter Macy died, Lauren and I went to a support-group meeting at the hospital. It was run by a woman who was a denominational pastor's wife, and after a few minutes of listening to her, we realized that she did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. She didn't talk about Macy as being alive with God. She talked about her as being "alive in our hearts", and many other such evasions. She had clearly fallen prey to the naturalistic teaching of our day, and believed that people who died stayed dead. Sadly, the same thing is true of many clergy in old-line denominations. They try to practice Christianity without believing in its power.

Brethren, if there is no resurrection from the dead, we might as well all go home. All of the problems that Paul identifies here are still just as true today. If the dead are not raised, Jesus is still dead too, and there's no point believing in Him. If the dead are not raised, the gospel is a pack of lies. If the dead are not raised, all of our loved ones who died in the Lord are gone forever, and soon, the day will come when we will die forever, despite our pathetic, pointless hope.

On the other hand, **IF CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED**, that has all kinds of logical consequences too. Paul outlines them in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23. If Jesus has been raised from the dead, and we only recently reviewed all the reasons we have to believe that, then the first thing that it establishes is that the resurrection from the dead is possible, period. Second, it shows that Jesus' claim to be the Son of God is true. Third, it shows that His claims about His power to raise us from the dead are true too. If God has done it once and promises to do it again, we can expect it.

If those things are true, suddenly the nature of Christianity changes. Suddenly, we're not here on Sunday morning listening to a pack of lies. We're listening to the only thing that offers us a hope of eternal life. We're believing in a Savior who is worthy of our belief, who has the power to save us even after our mortal bodies fail. Even if everyone else looks toward death with loathing and dread, in Christ, we can consider even the end of our lives with hope.

Following this, Paul discusses the events that will occur at **THE END**. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. Many conservative believers today are dispensational premillennialists. Among other things, they believe that Jesus came 2000 years ago to reign as an earthly king in Jerusalem, but the Jewish people rejected Him, so God was forced to establish the church as a Plan B. When Christ returns, though, He's going to succeed in establishing His earthly kingdom and reign in Jerusalem for 1000 years before the righteous will ascend to heaven.

There are several Scriptural problems with that belief, but one of the most serious appears in this section of text. According to Paul, Jesus' return on the Day of Judgment will not mark the beginning of Jesus' reign as King. It will mark the end of that reign. Though Paul doesn't make the connection explicit, he's working with the prophecy of Psalm 110, which predicts that Jesus will sit at the right hand of God until His enemies have been made a footstool for His feet. Jesus defeated the devil at the cross, so Satan is already imitating an ottoman, but death will not be defeated until Jesus raises everyone from the dead as He was raised.

When that time comes, though, Jesus will have accomplished His work. Because He will have no need for the authority that God granted Him upon His resurrection, He will return it to the Father, which will signal the cosmic triumph of good over evil. Until that day comes, though, Jesus will continue to reign as King.

Paul then returns, though, to **THE CONSEQUENCES** if indeed the dead are not raised. Consider 1 Corinthians 15:29-34. Paul's basic point here is that resurrection or no resurrection has significant implications not merely

for what we believe and how pitiable we are, but for the choices that we make. These choices begin with baptism. Over the years, the idea of being baptized for the dead has created a lot of confusion, but I think that Paul's meaning here is actually quite simple. As he has already noted, if the dead are not raised, even Christ is not raised. As Christians, we are baptized into Christ, because Christ told us to be baptized. If Christ Himself is dead, what's the point of that? Why be baptized for a dead person? If the dead are not raised, then baptism itself is a useless exercise.

Paul goes on to point out other areas where his life makes no sense if the dead are not raised. Because of his hope of the resurrection, he willingly faced danger in the service of Christ. He even fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, although it is unclear whether he refers here to actual wild animals in a gladiatorial arena or to the Ephesian mob, which certainly could behave in a bestial way. Regardless, though, he endangered his life because of his faith. Finally, Paul shunned the pleasures of the flesh, not because he was unmoved by them, but because he had a higher calling. If Paul was foundationally wrong, and once he died, he stayed dead, all of those decisions were foolish and worthless. On the other hand, if the dead are raised, Paul would have been wise to give even more than he did if necessary for Christ's sake.

These things apply to us too. If we are convinced that there is no resurrection from the dead, it makes no sense to be even a lukewarm Christian. There's no point to coming here on Sunday morning, much less actually sacrificing for the sake of Christ. We might as well throw ourselves into every kind of vice imaginable, because no matter what we do, we're going to die anyway. If the dead are not raised, life is meaningless, and we might as well act like it.

Once again, though, the flip side comes back with a vengeance. If the dead are raised, it doesn't make sense to be a lukewarm Christian either. If the dead are raised, we need to devote our lives to the One who will raise us from the dead. Whatever we've got, our time, our money, our energy, our decisions, we need to pile them all at the feet of Jesus. Eternal life, if attainable, is so important that it outweighs any possible harm or inconvenience here. Who cares if we have to fight our version of wild beasts? What Jesus offers is so important that fighting wild beasts for Him is worth it.

Our Bodies

In the last section of this text that we're going to be looking at this morning, Paul discusses our bodies and what they will be like in the resurrection. He begins, though, by answering **THE WRONG QUESTION**. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:35-38. At first glance, it's hard to see why this question generates the irritated reaction from Paul that it does, but from that reaction, we can infer some things about the questioner's tone and motivation. He's not actually interested in learning more about the resurrection. He wants to point out a logical inconsistency. This question, in fact, reminds me of a story that atheists like to tell. A missionary goes to the land of the cannibals to preach the gospel. One of the cannibals catches him, cooks him, and eats him. Later, the cannibal obeys the gospel himself and eventually dies. How will the missionary be raised from the dead when his body has been incorporated into the body of the cannibal? Or, to put things in the terms the Sadducees might have used, whose thighbone will that be in the resurrection?

Paul replies that expecting to get the same kind of body back in the resurrection is like planting an acorn and expecting to get back an acorn. In both cases, that's not how God set things up to work. When you plant an acorn, you don't get an acorn back. You get an oak tree, and when you're looking at the oak tree, you don't try to figure out where the cap from the acorn went. There is an essential similarity between those two things—after all, both of them have the same DNA—but they are also extremely different. A man who has never seen an oak tree would never be able to extrapolate from the acorn what the tree would look like. There is no correspondence on that level.

Paul continues to point out the **DIFFERENT KINDS** that are a part even of our physical existence. Consider 1 Corinthians 15:39-41. The creation teaches us all kinds of spiritual lessons, but Paul here points to one we often don't think much about—that God has a really good imagination. God created us—bipedal, thinking creatures who have immortal souls like He does. He also created birds—tiny feathered creatures that fly around in the trees outside. He also created animals, everything from the cows that we eat to the lions that would like to eat us. Sure, there are some similarities there, but all of those are also very different beings, and all of them took a lot of thinking up.

From there, Paul moves to the bodies that populate the heavens. As different as people and birds and cows are, they are much more like one another than they are like the sun, the moon, and the stars. A bird can be glorious, and a full moon can be glorious, but those glories are so different as to be incomparable. What's more, even among the sun, the moon, and the stars, there are all kinds of differences, and their different natures and their different arrangements in the heavens also proclaim God's cleverness for devising such an intricate creation.

Having established this about God, Paul gets back to **THE RESURRECTION**. Read with me from 1 Corinthians 15:42-44. Here's Paul's argument: If God's ingenuity as displayed in His physical creation is so boundless, then we are foolish to place limits on what He can do in the resurrection. The transformation from little acorn to mighty oak is a good starting place, but even that only begins to point to how different we will be. In my time, I've seen a few dead people, and none of them are very impressive lying in the coffin. However, as unimpressive as those mortal seeds are, so impressive will our resurrection bodies be. They will be more powerful and glorious than we can imagine.

Paul further explains by comparing **TWO MEN**. They appear in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. The first is our ancestor according to the flesh, Adam. His body was composed of dust, and because we are his descendants, we all have earthly bodies like his. However, as Adam was the first to have the body that we now have, Christ was the first to have the body that we will have. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives us the best indication we have of what those bodies will be like. When Jesus was raised, that resurrection involved His physical body. The tomb was left empty, just as our tombs will be. His resurrection body had similarities to His body before He died. People who knew Him could still recognize Him, and the wounds of His crucifixion were still identifiable. However, He was different after He was raised. He could suddenly appear inside a locked room, and He could ascend not merely into the clouds, but into heaven. In heaven, the fullness of His glory was revealed, a glory that was prefigured on the Mount of Transfiguration.

All of us who are faithful are going to end up with similar forms. Beyond that, I can't give details. I can only repeat what the apostle John says about it, which is that we don't know what we're going to be, but we are going to be made like Jesus simply by seeing Him for the first time. The bodies of our resurrection will be amazing in a way that we aren't currently equipped to comprehend, and we will inhabit them for an eternity spent with God.