

Translation

1 Corinthians 15:12-24

¹²But if Christ is preached as having been raised from the dead, how are some among you saying that there is no resurrection from *the* dead? ¹³Now, if there is no resurrection from *the* dead, *then* neither has Christ been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is worthless, and your faith is worthless, ¹⁵and we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, since we bear witness against God that he raised the Christ, whom he has not raised—if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised; ¹⁷and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is useless; you are still in your sins; ¹⁸then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ are dead. ¹⁹If only in this life we have hoped in Christ, we are to be pitied above all humankind!

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from *the* dead, firstfruits of the ones who have fallen asleep. ²¹Indeed, since through man *comes* death, also through man *comes* resurrection from *the* dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in its own proper order: Christ, the firstfruits, then those of the Christ in his appearing, ²⁴then the end, when he delivers over the Kingdom to the God and Father, when he has nullified every rule and every authority and power.

Commentary

1 Corinthians 15:12-24

12 **an objectionable claim** • Paul has reviewed the fundamentals of the Christian faith as proclaimed by every one of the apostles. It does not matter that they each have wildly divergent paths in their journey to faith in Jesus Christ. They still all preach the exact same thing about Jesus. He died for our sins on the cross. He was raised from the dead in glory on the third day. Paul did not agree with the apostles on every point. In fact, his discussion in chapters 8-10 of this letter on the matter of eating meat sacrificed to idols differs from the simple prohibition that the Jerusalem council issued to all the Gentile churches (Acts 15:28-29). In Romans 14 Paul will outline a whole series of matters on which sincere Christians should differ, following each one's individual conviction without seeking to impose it on other believers: eating, drinking, observing special days. There are many things in the Christian faith about which we should be diverse without sacrificing our love and unity. But the resurrection is not one of these things.

Paul asks why it is, given the universal agreement about the resurrection of Christ, that there are some among the Corinthian believers who are claiming that there is no such thing as resurrection. We face a similar objection to the Christian faith today. As a result of the Enlightenment and the insistence in the Age of Reason that anything miraculous or supernatural be rejected outright, things like the resurrection of Christ were deemed false from the outset because there was nothing repeatable about the event. It could not be subjected to the scientific method as it was not a thing reproducible in a lab. Thus, from a philosophical standpoint, in the Modern era the resurrection of Christ was rejected outright from an *a priori* assumption that there is no such thing as the supernatural. We are now in a Postmodern Era, in which people have largely abandoned the rigid assumptions of Modernism, but these kinds of objections to the Christian faith persist. The New Atheists like to scoff, comparing our faith in Jesus' death for our sins and his resurrection to belief in Santa Claus, or the Easter Bunny.

In Paul's day, the objection to the resurrection came from a different place. Plato had a profound impact on the way Greeks thought. He believed that the spirit in man was the good thing, man's pure and higher reality. But Plato recognized the bad things in humankind, what the Bible calls sin. These things, he suggested, were the result of pure spirits being trapped in these bodies we have, that are prone to disease and injury, that are often subject to lusts and desires that can become predatory or gluttonous or self-destructive. The problem, Plato thought, was matter. Spirit is good; matter is evil. So, because of Plato, most people in the Greco-Roman world did not hope one day to be resurrected. They hoped one day to be free from the constraints of this wicked body, to be free spirits, unencumbered by matter. One of the earliest attempts to corrupt the Christian faith was the attack of Gnosticism, a belief that through the special revelation of angels, one could move beyond the initial teachings of Christianity to deeper truths, and through that secret knowledge, find the way to escape the body and become free spirits. From this rejection of the body as wicked came Docetism, the

belief that Jesus was God, but that he only appeared to be human. If he was truly pure and perfect, they reasoned, he could not have contaminated himself with a material body. Thus, he was an apparition. He only appeared to be human. Some version of this line of thinking was likely what lay behind the claim in Corinth that there is no resurrection.

For Greeks in the ancient world, the thought of resurrection was not appealing. They saw it as a continuation of the problem of sin. They thought of it as restrictive and bad. In their mind, the only way to fix sin was to free the spirit from the prison of the body. Thus, the promise of resurrection in Jesus Christ was not something Greeks found appealing. The Greeks were wrong on several points. To begin with, the human being has been created as an incarnate entity from the beginning. The body is not a prison, nor is it a punishment. We are meant to be living bodies. Sin did not change this. Also, it is false to believe that Sin only contaminated our bodies, making them weak and broken, prone to illness and wicked desires and actions. Sin also tainted our minds, our wills, our souls just as much as it damaged our bodies. We fell in every sense of the word when Sin entered our lives. A fallen soul divorced from its body would be no less fallen. Eliminating the body would fix nothing.

13-19 **consequences** • So, if we don't find the idea of resurrection to be appealing, why can't we just remove that from the Christian faith and move on? Paul lays out the consequences of rejecting resurrection. The first, most obvious point, is that if there is no such thing as resurrection, then Christ himself never rose from the dead. If we reject resurrection altogether, then Jesus died and is gone forever. He is no longer around to do anything for us, good or bad.

This sets off a whole chain of consequences. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the preaching Paul and all the other apostles have been doing is worthless, empty, vain. There is nothing there for them to talk about. The Christian faith is of absolutely no use, if Christ is dead and gone. The claim of the gospel is not that Jesus will model for us a new way of living. It is not just a series of ethical principles we are encouraged to embrace. The gospel claim is that, where we are powerless to save ourselves, to find victory over Sin, Jesus has won that victory for us. He has defeated all the forces of Sin and even Death itself, and he provides, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, the means to be free from the power of Sin and the curse of Death. We can be forgiven and restored to a relationship with God, and that restored relationship can begin an eternal process of healing all that Sin has broken in us. From those observing the Christian faith from the outside, this may look like a person trying to behave in a better way, trying to be kinder and more loving. But from the inside, it is much more profound than a new self-help project. It is new creation, new life. Take away the risen Lord Jesus, and there is no gift of the Holy Spirit, no new life, no power to be free from Sin and its destructive force. Take away the risen Christ, and the preaching of the gospel is worthless.

What happens if the preached message of Christ becomes worthless? That means that putting your faith in that message is a waste of time. Paul tells his readers: if that's true, then not only is what I told you worthless; what you put your faith in is also worthless. Your faith is doing you no good.

If Christ has not been raised, its even worse than that. Not only is the preaching of the apostles and any resultant faith in that message worthless—it is wicked, perverse, evil. If Christ is dead, not only do the apostles fail to offer any help—they are in fact deceivers, misleading people. And this isn't some minor deception. They have become false witnesses against God. It's like the world is in court, trying to figure out the truth about God, and the apostles have taken the stand to lie about him. They are slandering God in the court of public opinion, misleading people about God himself. Paul says that their claim about Christ, if there is no resurrection, is a testimony presented *against* God. They would be falsely accusing God of having done something he didn't do: raise the Christ.

If the dead aren't raised, then Christ has not been raised. If that's the case, the Christian faith is useless. It accomplishes nothing for us. If Christ is dead, our sins are not forgiven. We have no Holy Spirit to free us from the power of Sin, to lead us in the new way of life eternal. We are still in our sins. We have gone nowhere. Nothing at all has changed about our situation. If there is no resurrection, our siblings in the faith who have died are gone, perished, extinguished forever. We will never see them again. Their lives are over and that is the end of the story for them.

The same is true for us. If there is no resurrection, our hope must be limited to this life alone. Paul says that if this is the case, we Christians should be pitied above anyone else in the human race. We become the most pathetic losers of all, for we placed our faith in something useless, and are spending our lives serving a dead King who can do nothing at all for us. We are deluded and are simply wasting our lives. Paul could not make this any clearer. If we gut the gospel of the resurrection, we have lost the gospel. It ceases to be good news.

20-24 **good news** • This is getting truly depressing. Paul has dragged his readers to the brink of the abyss. That's the whole point he's trying to make. If we cut out the resurrection, all is lost. Our faith is nothing. Jesus is nothing. Our plight is absolutely hopeless. But that's why we call it good news. That's where we would be if Christ hadn't risen from the dead. Thematically, I could have stopped this study at verse 19 because the next five verses go well with the ones that follow, but we need to get the "but in fact..." or we might misunderstand completely where Paul is taking us with his line of argumentation.

The truth of the matter is that Christ *has* been raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits from among those who have fallen asleep. Paul continues to use his preferred term for the death of those who have put their faith in Jesus. It is not a euphemism, because Paul truly and literally means to say that those who have died physically are merely awaiting the day of their awakening to life everlasting, their day of resurrection. There are many who have fallen asleep in this manner. Of them all, Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection, the first of the sleepers to awaken in resurrection. No one else has yet experienced this. In all human history to date, there has been only one resurrection. There have been revivifications, people like Lazarus, who were brought back to life, but these were not true resurrections, for these people all still eventually

died. In the Christian faith, resurrection follows the pattern established by Christ. It is resurrection to a perfect immortal body free from the effects of Sin that weaken and demean the human body, causing people like Plato to assume the body itself was the problem.

Paul explains it in broad terms. Death became a part of human existence because a human being introduced it into the realm of human life, and from that human being, it spread to everyone. Death was not introduced by a microbe, or by some animal. It was introduced by a fellow human being. Likewise, resurrection from the dead, the antidote to death, had to be introduced by a human being. That is why God had to become a man in order to rescue humankind from sin. It took a man to bring death, and it takes a man to bring life. We all share in Adam and have followed his example in sinning, so we have all died spiritually and become enslaved to Sin. Likewise, all can be made alive if they will identify themselves with Christ, join him rather than Adam.

Paul's simple statement here might be read in a universalist manner. All died in Adam; all will live in Christ. I would suggest that the many warning passages in the New Testament against being lost through unbelief make this reading impossible. Paul is saying that the mechanism for death entered human existence through a human being, and God himself became a man to make available to all a mechanism for life eternal. Paul would be contradicting himself if he were suggesting here that all will be resurrected regardless of whether they placed their faith in Jesus or not. As one of many Scriptural examples, see John 5:28-29, where Jesus says, "*an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*"

But there is an order to this resurrection. It has begun already with Christ, the firstfruits of the resurrection. The next to be resurrected are those who belong to the Christ. They will be resurrected at the time of his appearing, what we often refer to as the Second Coming, although the New Testament actually prefers "appearing" because Jesus, by his Holy Spirit, is very much here right now. He just needs to appear bodily. Once this has happened, the end comes, and the Christ hands over his Kingdom to God the Father, after having nullified every rule, authority, and power. Christ alone will reign in eternity. All the governments and rulers, all the human structures of authority and power that we have constructed will be dismantled by Christ. He alone will reign supreme over all. It is one of the reasons we warn against attaching ourselves to any earthly power structures. They will not remain. We invest ourselves in the eternity being brought into our world right now through Jesus Christ by his Holy Spirit. The only Kingdom we swear unwavering allegiance to is the Kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

Conclusion: Resurrection is not wishful thinking. I don't believe the resurrection will happen just because the Bible says it will. I believe it because Jesus, whose death almost 2,000 years ago is as close to an established historical fact as anything in antiquity, has made himself known to me, has given me the gift of his Holy Spirit, and has bound my soul to his own. That power has utterly transformed me from the inside out. This is why the Christian faith is good news. Jesus

literally died to crush the power of Sin over us. His dead body was raised from the dead, victorious, and this very risen Lord gave the first Christians their marching orders, and gifted them with his Holy Spirit to empower them in their task. I know one day I will rise to share eternity with my Lord because he is alive today, and the gospel message has delivered on its promise with the gift of the Holy Spirit and new life. The Christian faith is not a philosophy; it is trust extended to the living Lord Jesus who invites us to faith in him today. Have you received this good news?

Outline of a Passage

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:12-24

Title: Why Resurrection Matters

Proposition: The resurrection of Christ is a foundational truth to the Christian proclamation because without it, all the gospel promises fail; it is necessary for the forgiveness of sins, the saving presence of the living Lord Jesus Christ, and any victory over Sin and Death.

Gen. Objective: Teaching/Salvation

Spec. Objective: That we the listeners will hold to faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, whose resurrection secures the forgiveness of our sins, his saving presence in our lives, and our victory over Sin and Death.

Introduction: *Show the image from 10 Cloverfield Lane.* Does anyone know what movie this scene is from? *10 Cloverfield Lane* is a tense psychological thriller. A woman and a man are trapped in an underground bunker with a stranger who is clearly not mentally stable. He assures them that there has been a nuclear event and going outside the bunker would kill them. The question in the movie becomes whether or not this is true. If it is, they need to stay in the bunker to stay alive. If he's lying, they're trapped in a bunker when they could be out enjoying the world. In a way, that's very much like the Christian faith. Paul wants us to understand that the truth in the claims of our faith make all the difference in the world. Truth, reality... these things matter profoundly to the living of our lives. Specifically, the question Paul addresses in today's passage is this: Why does the resurrection of Christ matter?

Body:

1. (12) **an objectionable claim**
2. (13-19) **consequences**
3. (20-24) **good news**

Conclusion: Resurrection is not wishful thinking. I don't believe the resurrection will happen just because the Bible says it will. I believe it because Jesus, whose death almost 2,000 years ago is as close to an established historical fact as anything in antiquity, has made himself known to me, has given me the gift of his Holy Spirit, and has bound my soul to his own. That power has utterly transformed me from the inside out. This is why the Christian faith is good news. Jesus literally died to crush the power of Sin over us. His dead body was raised from the dead, victorious, and this very risen Lord gave the first Christians their marching orders, and gifted them with his Holy Spirit to empower them in their task. I know one day I will rise to share eternity with my Lord because he is alive today, and the gospel message has delivered on its promise with the gift of the Holy Spirit and new life. The Christian faith is not a philosophy; it is trust extended to the living Lord Jesus who invites us to faith in him today. Have you received this good news?