

PREFACE

In my preparation for our next class I have come to realize that resurrection from the dead—not just Christ’s, but everyone’s—is central to the end-times story. Without it the entire narrative would fall apart; without it there would be no Rapture, there would be no judgment of the dead. For both those in and not in Christ, what we think of as death is simply a way-station. No one stays dead. Everyone, except those alive when Christ returns for the church, dies the “first death”—what we call death. Everyone who dies that death will be raised *from* that death—even the enemies of Christ. The first death is just a way-station. All those who die in Christ experience only one death.

Read Revelation 20:6.

Those who are *not* in Christ, however, will be judged—and at that judgment there will be only one verdict: guilty. Their sentence? The second death. Earthly death is not final for anyone. Near the end of the Last Things (*eschaton*) even death itself will be cast into the second death: the Lake of Fire. The true and final death—the second death—will not be hell, nor will it be nothingness; it will be an eternal, unending torment by fire.

Read Revelation 20:11-15. *(Just a thought: Maybe we do a disservice to unbelievers by telling them only the good news of the gospel, rather than scaring them to death with the bad news of what will happen to them without Christ.)*

In the passage before us the apostle Paul lists a number of consequences of—as some in the Corinth church were claiming—there being no resurrection. David Garland claims that Paul, here, is not railing against their rebellious rejection of what has been taught them—i.e., the gospel (vv3-4)—but is, instead, addressing, like a patient teacher, their illogical ignorance. This apparent subset of the church did not realize the ramifications of their position, so Paul sets out, by orderly argument, to fill in the blanks of their reasoning.

We have seen Paul periodically rail against their obstinacy and arrogance in rejecting what he had taught them—intentionally working against what he had taught. Most scholars believe that is not the situation here. They just haven’t thought this through.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:11-19.

v12

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

This verse begins the second section of Chapter Fifteen. The first, just concluded, was where the apostle gave evidence that **Christ was, indeed, raised from the dead**. In that section he laid out sequentially the order, what happened—the proof that Christ was, indeed, raised from the dead. Now through v34 he will offer evidence for **the certainty of our resurrection**.

Just as do some believers today, this group of Corinthians hadn't fully thought through this business of resurrection. They had indeed believed the gospel preached by Paul and others, and the resurrection of Christ from the dead was an essential part of that gospel. Yet somehow these individuals, because of the influence of philosophies they had previously followed, were convinced that there would be no bodily resurrection for believers. Interestingly, the ancient Job (ancient even to the first century) had no problem with bodily resurrection. In fact, he held to a pretty accurate concept of the eschaton.

Read Job 19:25-27.

The position Paul now speaks against was probably a holdover from the Hellenistic philosophies the Corinthians had previously held, in which there is a bright line between the body and the soul.

David Garland: According to this view, humans are composed of two inharmonious parts, body and soul, that are of unequal value. At death, the mortal body is shed like a snake's skin, and the immortal soul continues in a purely spiritual existence.

From their perspective, the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a special case that would not apply to them. To the contrary, Paul insists in v20, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the *first fruits* of those who are asleep" (emphasis added). The "first fruits"—Christ set the pattern, for *you*.

v13

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

Now Paul begins his defense of bodily resurrection by means of a series of five unimpeachable "if" statements, a methodical argument *ad absurdum*, (establishing a claim by showing that the opposite scenario would lead to absurdity or contradiction; for the sake of the argument, let's allow that your position is correct; let's see how things fall into place if what you believe is true).

He begins by stating the obvious: absent resurrection, even Christ would not have been raised. He was *not* a special case; Christ set the pattern for all of us; He was special only in that He was the first. Since Christ Jesus is the one who made possible the resurrection of the dead, if that did not happen, then that means He did not make it happen by being raised Himself. If there is no resurrection then Christ was not raised. If Christ was not raised then the pattern was not set. No one can be raised from the dead because Christ wasn't!

v14

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

Note what this verse does *not* say, that "our preaching was *in vain*," as in the ESV. That would mean that an authentic gospel was preached to them without effect; it didn't find a purchase in their lives—which, of course, happens every day around the world. The gospel is preached but finds no purchase. It is rejected. But that has no bearing on the gospel itself. What Paul is saying is that if Christ was not raised—which we preached to you!—then what we preached was empty of truth—a lie—devoid of any spiritual value (vain = *kenon*). The NKJV captures it with, "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty."

v15-16

Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised;

If there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised. If that is the case, then all the apostles and teachers of the gospel are liars; they have been lying about God raising Christ from the dead, which He did not, if the dead are not raised. Moreover, better than 500 individuals are also part of this conspiracy, perpetuating a lie that Christ showed Himself to them alive.

Here Paul also reaffirms his position that Christ did not raise Himself, but *God* raised Him in an act that vindicated the work of His Son. Earlier, in v4, Paul made the point more subtly by means of the verb tense—**perfect passive indicative, which means it is an objectively completed act done by someone else, the effects of which are still felt in the present**—but here he states it flat out: "we testified...against God that He raised Christ." *If your position is true, Paul is saying, then we blasphemed by preaching in God's name that He raised Christ Jesus from the dead, when He did not.* Verse 16 repeats, almost verbatim, v13. He is repeatedly punching this home: For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. You *must* believe in the resurrection of believers to believe that Christ was raised from the dead.

v17-18

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

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

Here is the part even many of today's believers do not realize: Absent His resurrection, Christ's death was meaningless and ineffective. And in these two verses Paul applies this hypothetical to both the living and the dead.

I was born and raised in the church, sat on an endless succession of miniature chairs to listen to flannel-graph stories from my earliest years. Over the span of my life I have listened to multiple thousands of sermons. And throughout all of that the impression with which I was left was that Christ's death on the cross was the be-all and end-all of faith and salvation. Oh, His resurrection was not ignored, or even downplayed. But the punchline was "Christ *died* for the ungodly," and "while we were yet sinners, Christ *died* for us" (from Romans 5:6-8; emphasis added). It was the cross! He became the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

None of that is false; it is absolutely true. It, too, is essential. Yet it was not until this study of First Corinthians that I fully appreciated that without His being raised from the dead—without God resurrecting Him from the tomb—the death of Christ would have meant nothing. Earlier in this letter, in Chapter Six, Paul lists what the Corinthians were before they came to Christ, ending with v11: "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."

Let's take just a moment to consider justification, because it is critical here.

What is justification? As Wayne Grudem defines it,

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which He (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in His sight.

When are we justified by God? Grudem again: "Justification comes *after* our faith and as God's *response to* our faith." That is not to say that it is our faith that justifies us; that would be dangerously close to being justified by works, by something we did. No, just that our faith in Christ must be in place before God will justify us. Now to the important question pertaining to this study and Paul's *ad absurdum* argument to the Corinthians:

What act in the final days of Christ Jesus made possible our justification? I grew up thinking it all happened at the cross—at His atoning death. But that is not correct, or at least the whole story—though there is measure of truth in it.

Read Romans 4:23-25.

Grudem: In the resurrection, God was saying to Christ, “I approve of what You have done, and You find favor in My sight.” If God “raised us up with Him” (Ephesians 2:6), then, by virtue of our union with Christ, God’s declaration of approval of Christ is also His declaration of approval of us.

I don’t think it is possible to state this any clearer or dramatically than Paul does in these verses: “If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (vv16-18). Done. Full stop. It’s all over. If there is no resurrection, it is all a lie, a worthless empty facade of *papier mache* that crumbles to dust. No forgiveness of sin, no justification—nothing but a dead “messiah” moldering in the grave. Those who have died have simply perished. And you, when you die, will be the same. No Rapture, no rewards, no reigning with Christ—because there *is* no Christ; he remains in the grave.

v19

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

The apostle concludes this dark hypothetical by stating the obvious:

Garland: [If all this were true,] the world would be right: the cross is utter folly (1 Corinthians 1:23). The joy that characterizes the basic orientation of Christian life is based on the confidence that Christ will return, the dead will be raised, and all wrongs will be made right. If that is not true, then joy is replaced by despair. [But then there is v20.]