

“Christ’s Resurrection and Ours”

1 Corinthians 15:12-34

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Text Comment

We are making our way through the argument of the great apostle Paul in the 15th chapter of I Corinthians. We read the first 11 verses last week and there noticed how Paul establishes the historical character of Christ’s resurrection as an event in real space and time, an event that was in fact witnessed by many. In the following verses he elaborates the implications of that historical event. Obviously there were some in the church in Corinth who were denying the resurrection, that is the future resurrection of believers, not apparently the resurrection of Christ himself, were denying it in some way. Perhaps they were spiritualizing it, as many have in our own time, and were conceiving of it in other ways than as a return to life by the dead at the second coming of Jesus Christ. So Paul lists the logical consequences of that denial in rapid fire and so proves the illogical nature of their position. He sets out to prove, in other words, that if Christ were raised, then there is most certainly a future resurrection of believers in Christ, which is the point at issue.

- v.12 Now, what seems to be the source of the problem is found in the phrase “of the dead.” It was the future life of the dead *in bodily form* that apparently was being denied, perhaps because they misunderstood what was actually being taught. Paul will later in the chapter return to this point and make some significant point of the fact that the bodily form of human existence after the resurrection is not in every way *the same* as its form in this present world. Remember, in the Greco-Roman philosophy of that time there was a prejudice against the physical dimension of human life and very much a preference for the spiritual dimension and Corinth was a town in love with philosophy. Bad ideas usually spring up and flourish in cities more than they do in the countryside and Corinth was an important city and agog over new ideas.
- v.13 His first argument is that if bodily resurrection is impossible, then Christ’s resurrection would not have happened, but we know in fact that it did. In fact this was not in dispute in the Corinthian church.
- v.14 What is more, if there is no resurrection, Paul and all the apostles have been wrong in what they have been preaching and what Christians have been believing. They are not only mistaken, they are liars.
- v.17 The Gospel writers never shy away from the logic of their claims. Events in real history have transpired that have obvious and irrevocable implications. If those events did not occur, then the implications all fall. However many times the attempt has been made to fashion a way of having Christianity without the historical events upon which it is based, that argument is never allowed in the NT itself.

- v.18 In the Bible crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are always inseparably bound together. The latter is the triumph and the vindication and the completion of the former. As above, in vv. 3-4, Christ died for our sins and then was raised to life – one single work of redemption. If Christ did not rise from the dead, then his crucifixion did not deliver us from our sins and those who have died already are not saved but lost because, obviously, they *too* died still in their sins.
- v.20 Now Paul moves to demonstrate that Christ’s resurrection entails in it the resurrection of those who are saved by him. Paul is not going to be talking about the resurrection of the unbelieving dead, though the Bible speaks of that often enough, but they do not rise to life, to the new and wonderful life that is in store for those who are in Christ. Remember, in Jewish teaching there was a resurrection at the end of the age for all mankind. But Christians came proclaiming a resurrection that had already happened in time that was the first fruits of that eventual resurrection of the dead. What is important about the first fruits? They guarantee that the rest of the harvest is on its way and that’s the relationship between Christ’s resurrection and our own. It guarantees it and is of course the pattern and paradigm of it.
- v.23 Now we find the Adam/Christ analogy at another crucial point in Paul’s argument that in the letter to the Romans in chapter 5. As sin and death came into human life through the representative man, the first man, Adam, so resurrection and eternal life come through another representative man, the second Adam, as he will be called there. These representative roles for Adam and Christ are central to the Bible’s understanding of history and the character of the world and also of salvation. The human race is a fallen race, it fell in its first man. The inevitable process of death was begun in Adam and it is being worked out in the history of human life as one generation succeeds another. Well so is the process of renewal and rebirth is begun in Christ, the second Adam, and is being worked out for those who are in Christ as the generations of the faithful come and go in this world. Clearly the reference of the “all” shifts, as the context makes clear. Every human being is born in sin and subject to death for sin, but only all those who are “in Christ” will be made alive. Paul will pick up the Adam/Christ comparison again in v. 45.
- v.24 You will notice that the word “all”, not necessarily in the English, but in Paul’s Greek, the word “all” occurs 10x in vv. 24-28, emphasizing God and Christ’s sovereignty over the world, over time, over history, over salvation.
- v.28 Now in the total context of the Scripture and I Corinthians we take the final subordination of the Son to the Father to be functional, his specific *role* in the works the Triune God has undertaken to save his people, and not, that is to say, we don’t take the subordination to be ontological, to refer to the Son’s *being* in relationship to the Father as if he would not be as fully God as the Father, or would not possess so completely the attributes of God as does the Father. The Scripture makes it plain enough that in that respect the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one and the same.
- v.29 One commentator styles the arguments of vv. 29-34 as arguments *ad hominem*. [Fee, 761] That doesn’t mean the arguments are of no value, only that they are of a certain and

different type, not the theological arguments of the previous verses. Paul is piling on to leave no stone unturned. Such is the importance he attaches to the issue.

In the first case, he says, what about the practice of baptism for the dead. Now this, you know, is a notorious difficulty because we know nothing of such a practice from the Bible, or from the early Christian materials, or even by analogy from the pagan sources of the time. The words themselves seem to suggest that people were practicing some sort of proxy baptism, such as is practiced in Mormonism today, in hopes that they could bring salvation itself or some other blessing to those who had already died. And the second problem, not only do we not know anything about this practice, Paul doesn't say straight out as we would expect him to that such baptisms were worthless and unbiblical and he wanted them to stop.

Note, however, that Paul does slip into the third person – “*those* who are baptized for the dead” – suggesting that there were only some who were doing this and he wasn't among them. Before this he addressed the congregation in either the first or the second. He talks about what we're doing or what you are doing. But here he speaks about *those* who are baptized for the dead. Paul seems simply to be turning the practice, wrong as it was and, perhaps as everyone knew he would assume it to be, against the more important error of disbelief in the resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then what are you doing baptizing for the dead? There certainly isn't any need to be baptized vicariously for someone who has already died if he is never going to live again. Your own practices betray your confusion on this point.

- v.31 That is, he faces the reality of death in his work every day. He was in Ephesus, remember, when he wrote 1 Corinthians and that was a dangerous and difficult period for the apostle Paul on account of opposition to him from various quarters.
- v.33 Paul quotes an epigram from the 4th c. B.C. Greek playwright Menander. Apparently Paul thinks that a number are being infected by the influence of a few.

There are a lot of bad ideas and there is an awful lot of bad behavior, of course, that spread because of the pressure to conform. Conformity can be a powerful influence for good but it can also be a powerful influence for evil. Our peers mock our unsophisticated ideas or, in order to gain their approval, we think as they do and speak and act as they do. Conformity is often a sign of individual weakness, but we find it everywhere. And we find it very often as the background of the spread of serious error and worldliness in the church.

Now the Apostle Paul makes a remarkable and somewhat surprising statement in these verses, in fact, he makes it twice: first in vv. 17-19 and then, again, in v. 32. He says, in sum, that if Christ has not been raised from the dead and, if thus, there is no resurrection of Christians either at the end of the age, then we who believe in Jesus are to be pitied more than other men. And then to confirm the point and to emphasize it he says again, if Christianity is untrue and Christian hopes are false, then nothing is left for us but a mad rush for pleasure before death brings an end to it all.

Now, have you thought about that, have you pondered Paul's words? It isn't obvious that if the resurrection of Christ is a fable that we are of all men the most to be pitied. Isn't it true, after all, that people are often sustained in life by false hopes? Could it not be argued that even if Christianity were, at the last, untrue, its myths still make for a great deal of happiness, hope, and goodness in the world? Surely it could be argued, it has been argued, that even if Christians are gullible and have been duped into their hopes of eternal life, they are better off for being so. There are many philosophers in our day who think that. What is more, have we not learned that living to eat, drink, and be merry is usually a sure way to a dissolute and unhappy life, not a happier one. Earnest and sincere Christians may still have their problems, but, as a class, as a group, they are happier and more fulfilled people by far than the group in this world that is actually eating, drinking, and making merry in the prospect of nothing but death and nothing beyond death.

Some have thought that Paul's words could be understood meaning only that, if Christianity is untrue, Christians who suffer for their faith are suffering for nothing, suffering unnecessarily and they are most to be pitied for that reason. But, the fact of the matter is that most Christians in the Corinthian church of Paul's day weren't suffering terribly and none of us today would dare to say that our sufferings are worse, say, than those who suffered and died at Auschwitz or who are today starving to death and watching their children starve in sub-Saharan Africa or suffering oppression in some totalitarian state around the world. We are not to be pitied above all other men just because we are suffering for a faith and a future that isn't true.

No, what does Paul mean? Why does he say that remarkable thing? I think the answer lies in another direction. Paul is writing to Christians. He obviously thinks that the arguments he is giving them will weigh with them because they are Christians. He is not writing to unbelievers. With you want to see how the apostle Paul deals with the resurrection in a speech or sermon given to an unbelieving audience, read him in Acts chapter 17 or read Peter in Acts chapter 2. Here Paul is writing to Christians. An unbeliever would simply agree with Paul's statements in vv. 16-19 and conclude that Christians did have a futile faith and they were to be pitied and you can read any number of writers from the Greco-Roman world from that period and later who had exactly that view and expressed exactly that view of Christians – poor unsophisticated folk who had been led astray by a charlatan. Probably nothing can be done about their false hopes, but we know better can have the decency to pity them.

But Paul is speaking to a community that has come to look at life and at the world as only a Christians do. He is speaking to people who do not need to be persuaded of how unspeakably tragic it would be to have to return to the perspective of unbelief *now that they have seen life in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

For these people have had the mask pulled back and there is no way to put it back on. They have seen the world as it is, themselves as they are, God as he is, the salvation as it is, the future as it will unfold. It would be nothing short of horrifying for them, now, to have that light and that truth and that hope snatched away from them and to be left to face the world without them. *This, you see, is the great difference between believers and unbelievers in this world.* It is the great difference. All the other differences come from this. Believers see things *as they are*; as they

really and actually are. Unbelievers do not. They don't admit that of course. The Christians know that it is true. Unbelievers do not see the world as it really is. They don't see themselves as they really are. They don't see God as he really is. They know it because many of them were unbelievers themselves for a long time. Unbelievers talk a great deal about the so-called "real world" but they do not know it or see it or understand it. That *is*, by the way, why unbelievers function so well in this world. They don't see themselves, they don't see the world as these things actually are; they don't see the future as it will actually unfold; they don't see themselves as sinners before a holy God; they don't see an onrushing judgment; they are blind to all of this. And so they go gaily on in a world that is not, in fact, what they perceive it to be. And that's why the Christians *could not* function, would have to eat and drink himself into oblivion, if the hope of the world to come and the triumph of Jesus Christ over death *for them* was now taken away from them.

What Paul seems to be saying is that once a person has had his or her eyes opened to the genuine state of things, to reality, as it exists, only the Christian hope makes this world bearable. As one commentator has put it, if Christians lose the resurrection, the Christian's hope for the future, that is, he loses at the same time the present and the past. [Fee, 745] For the Christian, for one who has come to understand the meaning of existence, to be deprived of the Christian interpretation of reality is to reduce life to a "constant round of nothing." [772]

Paul then goes on to give us various illustrations of how such a loss of Christian hope would deprive us of so much as to make us of all people in the world most to be pitied.

I. There is, first he said, the matter of a Christian's consciousness of sin.

Paul says in v.17, that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins." Now, truth be told, most people in the world would not find it alarming or unsettling or troubling to be told that they were still in their sins. "All right," they would say, "so I'm still in my sins. So what?" Sin is largely an abstraction to most people, including their own sin. It is not an enormity in their lives; they don't agonize over it; they don't fear its guilt and its power. It isn't one of the great interpretive principles they consider life, their own lives, and the life of this world. Paul's statement would be an irrelevance to them. They would scratch their heads and wonder what was the big deal.

But, for a Christian it's an altogether different matter. "Still in your sins." Nothing worse could be said or heard. Once a man or a woman has had his or her eyes opened to sin, to sin as it appears to God, to the guilt and the power and the corruption of sin, to its just judgment, there is nothing worse that could be said to us than that we are still in our sins, that we must answer for them, that we can't get rid of them, that we'll never be rid of them. Luther spoke for every believer when he said truly *to feel* sin is the torture of all human tortures. To see how bad you really are, how selfish, how small-minded and petty, how impure, how unjust, how cruel, and to be made to see that all of that goes right down to the bottom of yourself where you are most yourself. There is so much that is true about you that no one ever sees except God. Thoughts that you would be absolutely mortified to have exposed to other people. Pascal never said a truer word than when he said if only other people knew our thoughts we wouldn't have another friend

in the world and if only people knew what we had said about them behind their back we wouldn't have four friends left in the world.

And the longer one lives in the world and the longer one lives with this sin and has to put up with it and fall prey to it over and over again, the more keenly he sees the ugliness of it and the more keenly he and ardently he longs to be rid of it. It was as an older man and an older Christian that Paul said, speaking of his sins, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death," and it was as a mature Christian that Samuel Rutherford wrote, "I see little in life now but sin, and the sour fruits of sin; and oh! what a burden and what a bitterness is sin! What a miserable bondage it is to be at the nod of such a master as Sin!" [Whyte, *Samuel Rutherford*, 68]

And that is what every Christian feels. It is one of the reasons why Christians really aren't like non-Christians. It is one of the things that makes them so different at bottom and then their lives to move in different directions. They don't feel it as sharply as they should. But, they feel it really. Every Christian finds the weight and the stain and the putrefaction of sin the thing above all other things that makes life in this world heavy and difficult and disappointing and sorrowful.

Only two things make that honest discovery and honest reckoning with oneself bearable. One is that in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and by faith in him we have the forgiveness of our sins. They are not held against us by the one who knows every one of them. And the second is that one day Christ will come and raise us up to sinless life and we shall finally be wonderfully, gloriously and amazingly clean and pure and free of sin. We'll hardly recognize ourselves. Suddenly to have a mind that is operating utterly unobstructed by sin and a body that is not wrong in any way to sin. But is captive to goodness and purity and righteousness and love. The world can live without that prospect. It does live without that prospect because the world does not know sin. It does not know it's own sin. It does not feel it. But once a man or woman does, then to be bereft of the hope of the gospel of Christ, to be robbed of the promise of the resurrection, is hell on earth because hell is after all the place where there is no hope and where one is left finally and retrievably to one's own miserable self.

II. Second, Paul says, there is the matter of Christian suffering.

This too is a demonstration of why Christians would be the people most to be pitied if the gospel and its hope of the resurrection were not true. In v. 18 Paul gives us an instance of this suffering when he says that if there is no resurrection, those who are fallen asleep are lost. He is speaking, naturally, of loved ones, of the loved ones of that Corinthian congregation. It is one thing to suffer the terrible shock of life – especially the death of a dear one, a loved one – but it is another thing altogether to suffer those shocks and have no hope of something better in the future.

I do not know, in all honesty, what unbelievers think about when they experience the loss of someone deeply beloved to them. Or when they suffer in some other terrible way (disease, handicap, loss, crime, oppression, loneliness). Some, of course, indulge in sheer sentimentality, take their refuge in believing things to be true because they want them to be true. And so they believe for no particular reason that their loved ones are in heaven, or that things will improve, or whatever. Others, I suppose, by an indomitable act of the human will which is a powerful thing.

They simply force thoughts, serious thoughts, out of their minds and try to get on with their life without facing the great questions that are raised by the punishing sorrows of human existence.

But I very definitely know what the Christian's response to suffering and to the loss of loved ones has been and ever shall be in this world. It is the response of confidence and hope: the confidence that all is in God's hands, that even the most painful shocks of human life cannot separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and that however bleak in this world life may be from time to time, it is soon to be overtaken by a life of endless and boundless joy which is to begin when Jesus comes again and the dead rise in him. Modern psychology tells us that suffering, by and large, is a bad thing and that we should do all we can to avoid it. But that is the counsel of despair in a world as full to the brim of suffering as our world has been, is today, and always shall be. The Christian, on the other hand, faces his or her inevitable sorrows with hope.

And when we are about to lose a loved one, a Christian loved one, we take his or her hand, and in the midst of that heartbreak and that desolation and through the tears of love, we smile, we really smile, inside as well as out, and say with absolute conviction, "We shall meet again at the right hand." And, then later, when the dull pain of the separation is felt in our hearts, we say to ourselves:

When the weary ones we love
Enter on their rest above,
Seems the earth so poor and vast,
All our life-joy overcast?
Hush, be every murmur dumb;
It is only till He come.

Now, I say, nothing could be worse, nothing, than to have been once been introduced to that high and consoling view of the human condition and then to have it stripped from you with the news that Jesus Christ did not rise and we will not rise either. Surely, that would make us the most pitiable of men and women.

III. And, then Paul says, in the third place, there is the matter of the believer's own death, your death, yours and mine.

"If only for this life we have hoped in Christ," says Paul in v. 19, "we are the most to be pitied." And then later in v. 32, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

Sigmund Freud, at 64 years of age, wrote of his death, wondering when it would come: "I do not know what more there is to say. It is such a paralyzing event, which can stir no afterthoughts when one is not a believer." That is about as honest as unbelievers ever get, most of them don't get near being that honest and, for the rest, they try as hard as they can not to think about this supreme, irrevocable and inevitable fact of human existence, that they are going to die and quite soon.

A century ago a very popular poem was W.E. Henley's *Invictus* with its famous concluding lines:

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Of course that was nothing but bluster and empty bravado and *Invictus* disappeared from English literature and from the quotation of English people after the First World War. When in the journal he edited, Henley reviewed Alexander Whyte's great volume on Samuel Rutherford, in which there is so much about honest reckoning with death and the Christian's confidence in the face of death, Henley, the boastful author of *Invictus* could only say:

"No healthy man believes that he is going to die; when the inevitable sword falls upon him he bows his head with the best grace he can muster and says nothing about it."
[Barbour, *Alex. Whyte*, 393]

So the poor unbeliever. It is the best he can do. What else? But what of the man or woman who has learned from Christ to say, "O death where is your victory; O grave, where is your sting!" Or who can say, as Isaac Watts once wrote, "I bless God I can lay down in comfort at night unsolicitous whether I awake in this world or another." What of the man or woman who knows that because of Christ's conquest of sin and death on the cross, death for him or for her, has been transferred or transformed into that one short, dark passage to eternal light. What of the man or woman who understands the end that awaits for him or for her at the second coming of Jesus Christ, a life of full, complete, entire, authentic humanity – body and soul together, but a life of perfect holiness, happiness and goodness – stretching away forever.

I say, for such a person, then to be told that Christ did not rise and his followers will not rise either, that is the second death before the first, now to know and to have to face the reality of death but to be left even without the miserable illusions that supported arrogant fools like W.E. Henley.

But, thanks be to God, Christ is risen and those who are in Christ will rise as he did in due time: the first fruits declare the coming of the full harvest. Of that Paul had no doubt and there were many others still alive in the world of his day who could bear their own witness to the fact that they had seen Christ alive again after his death on the cross.

There are many who nowadays are happy to spiritualize the resurrection, to see the account of Christ's resurrection as an event in history as it is given to us in the NT for something other than that. But, for us it is the supreme *fact* of the resurrection, to which the entire Bible and the entire

history or early Christianity bears its potent witness, that tells the tale of this life, your life and mine. When people spiritualize the resurrection, or when they deny it outright, they are after all finally left only with themselves. As one clever person put it, “[When the resurrection is denied] Jesus becomes something like King Lear. A man by that name may have existed, and perhaps he even had trouble with his daughters, but the Lear we know is the creation of Shakespeare and his culture.” Man himself has become the center of the story. But that story must be a dismal story, with little meaning and less hope. That is Paul’s honest and inescapable conclusion.

Christians aren’t making up a story and they certainly aren’t telling a story about themselves; they are recounting history; the history of the Son of God in the world. And that history of Christ and his resurrection holds within itself not only the meaning of the future and the promise of how it is to unfold, but the meaning and the significance, the only true interpretation of life now. If Christ’s resurrection is a fact, as it is, then its implications far outweigh the opinions and the preferences and the prejudices of our culture. It is a knife pointed at the throat of our culture and of its belief system. Accept the historical reality of Christ’s resurrection and a cascade of implications follows on, sweeping your entire understanding of life and replacing it with a completely different understanding, different in this way: First, it’s true and second, it’s indescribably better. It defines our lives and the meaning of our lives now precisely because it defines and determines and describes our future.