

The resurrection of Christ guarantees our resurrection

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
at Poplar Baptist Church, on April 16 2017

Please read 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verses 1 to 34

Introduction

Have you ever had this experience? You try speaking with someone about the message of Christianity. You say to him that he needs to trust in Jesus to have his sins forgiven, and how, if he does not trust in Christ he will go to hell. The person answers you, “No, I don’t believe in it. Once you’re dead you’re dead.” The person completely denies that the dead shall be raised, that there will be a future judgement. He denies heaven and denies hell. He says that this life is all that there is.

A similar view had come into the church in Corinth. Some believers were starting to say that there is no future resurrection of the dead. They were saying that once you die that is the end of your existence.

We do not know why they were saying this. It may have been that they were influenced by sceptical unbelief. All sorts of philosophical ideas were around in Corinth, and they may have picked up one of these ideas. For example, there was a group of philosophers known as the Epicureans. They believed that everything in the world is determined by material things. They said that there was no God. In morals they put forward the theory of what is called “hedonism”, that pleasure is the ultimate value. They said that there is only one life, and that we should try to achieve as much pleasure as possible in this life. It is possible that this idea had come over into the church from the world, and had been adopted by the some of the early believers.

Or, it may be that the believers were influenced not so much by scepticism but by an overemphasis on the supernatural. We know that

the church in Corinth was very keen on supernatural gifts. Perhaps some believers so emphasised the supernatural element of Christianity that they said that all the blessings of the future can be experienced now. They were saying, in effect, that the future resurrection of believers is not necessary, because we can know resurrection life now. We can claim for ourselves perfect health and prosperity. In his second letter to Timothy chapter 2 and verses 17 and 18, Paul warns Timothy about two professing believers, Hymenaeus and Philetus, “who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.” Perhaps this is what some of the professing believers in Corinth were also doing: saying that the resurrection has already taken place.

Whatever the reason, either through believing too little or through believing too much, some professing believers in Corinth had started to believe that there was going to be no future resurrection of the dead for believers. So Paul answers this false teaching here.

You might say to yourself, “I do not need to hear this, because I am a Bible-believing Christian. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and I believe in the resurrection of the dead for believers.” However, I wonder if, in fact, this might be more relevant for you than you might at first imagine. You might believe in a theoretical way that there will be a future resurrection, but what are you mainly living for? Are you eagerly looking forward to the new heavens and the new earth, and striving to have the best possible experience at the resurrection, or is your main aim in life to make your present experience as fulfilling and happy as possible? Could it be that, perhaps without realising it, you have become a modern-day Epicurean in your lifestyle, seeking as much pleasure as possible in this life? Or could it be that you have been influenced by the “super-supernaturalism” of some professing believers, who claim too much for the Christian life, and even go so far as to deny that Christians will suffer in this life.

In this passage the apostle shows how mistaken was the view that the Corinthian believers had accepted, and calls them back to a correct view. He reaffirms that Jesus was raised from the dead, and shows how, if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then we also will definitely also be raised from the dead.

We can divide the passage into four sections:

1. The resurrection of Jesus is a fact, verses 1 to 11.

2. If you deny our future resurrection, then you deny the whole of Christianity, verses 12 to 19.
3. Jesus's resurrection proves that we shall be raised, verses 20 to 28.
4. If you say that there is no resurrection, you are thinking like an unbeliever, verses 29 to 34.

1. The resurrection of Jesus is a fact

The apostle says in verses 1 to 11

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

The point that Paul is making in this section is that Jesus, the Christ, God's special king, did actually die. He was actually buried. He was actually raised from the dead. We are not talking about some fairy tale. This is not wishful thinking. This is what actually happened. It is as much a fact as the fact that a few weeks ago a man drove a car at pedestrians on Westminster Bridge, killing several of them, and then stabbed a policeman to death.

The apostle says that Christ "died for sins, according to the Scriptures". The death of Jesus was a fact. You can read the account of his death in the Gospels. Executions in those days were not private affairs done behind closed doors. They were public events. Jesus was publicly put on display as he was crucified, for the world to see. A very large crowd

had gathered. Before many witnesses Jesus had nails put through his hands and feet, and then he was lifted up to die. Just to make sure he was dead, a Roman soldier put a spear into his side, and out came blood and water.

There are those who say that it was not actually Jesus who died, but that at the last minute someone else was substituted in, and Jesus was taken up to heaven while still alive. Why do they believe this? Because for them it is inconceivable that a holy prophet should suffer such indignity and shame.

But Jesus's death took place in public in front of a large crowd, many of whom had been buying for his blood. He was guarded by Roman soldiers. It would have been impossible for anyone else to have died in his place. If this had happened there would have been an outcry. No. It was Jesus on that Cross, and he did actually die.

What about the thought that is inconceivable that God would allow a holy prophet to die a shameful death? The answer is that this was "according to the Scriptures". In the Old Testament God had said how he was going to send a servant who would die in the place of sinners. It was all planned by God, as his way of saving people.

Then the apostle mentions that he Jesus was buried. We know from the Gospels that Jesus was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. A large stone was rolled over the entrance. A guard was placed at the entrance, to make sure that the body was not taken away. The Gospels name the witnesses who saw this happen. Why is this significant? Because it proves that he was dead. He was, literally, "dead and buried".

Then the apostle speaks about how Jesus was raised from the dead. The point he is making is that this actually happened. The resurrection is not some hoax, or some invented myth. The stone was actually rolled away, by God's divine power. The rolling away of the stone revealed that the tomb was empty. Jesus had been raised back to life. He then appeared, in person, to numerous people. He spoke with them. They touched him. He ate food in their presence. He was actually there in front of them, in a new, resurrection, body.

This resurrection, like Jesus's death, was "according to the Scriptures". It had been spoken about in the Old Testament. It was planned by God, and now it had come to pass.

In order to remove any doubt about this, the apostle then goes on to list some of the witnesses. First Peter. Then the twelve apostles, minus, of

course, Judas Iscariot. Then, the apostle says, Jesus appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time. He says that at the time he wrote the letter, most of these were still alive, though some had “fallen asleep”, in other words some had died. Then he appeared to James, and then the other apostles, and then, “as to one abnormally born” to him, Paul. The appearance to Paul took place some time after Jesus’s death and resurrection, perhaps months or years later, and was the last resurrection appearance of Christ, apart from the appearance to John which is recorded in the book of Revelation.

According to Old Testament law, to have someone put to death there had to be three truthful and reliable witnesses who would agree. But the apostle here has listed more than 512 witnesses!

These witnesses were under very strong pressure from the authorities to deny the resurrection. But they persisted in speaking about it. When threatened with death if he carried on speaking about the resurrection, Peter said to those authorities, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4.19 – 20).

So this is the first thing to see, that Jesus was actually raised from the dead.

2. If you deny the future resurrection, then you deny all of Christianity

Paul says in verses 12 to 19,

¹²But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

What is he saying here? He is saying that if you say that there is no future resurrection, then you are denying the whole of Christianity, lock,

stock and barrel. If you say that there is no such thing as a resurrection from the dead, then you must say that Jesus was not raised. But if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then the preaching of the Gospel, the Good News, about Jesus is useless, and so is the faith of believers, because, as we have just seen, fundamental to that Gospel is the fact of Jesus's death on the Cross for our sins, and his resurrection from the dead. So if there is no resurrection, there is no Gospel. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then the apostles who preached the Gospel are false witnesses, because they have testified that Jesus was raised from the dead. If Christ has not been raised from the dead then the faith of those who believe is an empty and futile faith, based upon a lie. If there is no resurrection, then those who have believed are still in their sins, because for our sins to be forgiven Jesus had to die on the Cross and rise again. His death by itself was not enough. He had to rise again, to prove that God was satisfied with his sacrifice for our sins. If there is no resurrection, then it means that those who have already "fallen asleep in Christ", that is, died as believers, are lost and have no hope. The apostle says that "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." As Christians we have all the suffering that comes through living in a fallen world, and in addition, we inevitably have extra suffering because we are Christians. The apostle says that if the only reason we believe is for what we gain in this life, then we are worse off than all men!

What the apostle says here is highly relevant at the present time, because there are many who claim to be "Christians" who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and deny that we also shall be raised. What he says is that if you deny the resurrection of Jesus and our own future resurrection, then you deny the whole of Christianity.

3. The fact of Jesus's resurrection guarantees our future resurrection

The apostle says in verses 20 to 28,

²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he

has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For he “has put everything under his feet”. Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

The reality is, says the apostle, that Jesus has been raised from the dead. It is a fact. It has happened. And if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then it is absolutely certain that we ourselves also will be raised.

The apostle uses the term “firstfruits”. The term “firstfruits” speaks of the early first harvest that comes from a crop. It is the guarantee that more is coming later in the year. The fact Jesus was raised from the dead guarantees that we also shall be raised.

The apostle continues, “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.” This is a reference to what happened back in the Garden of Eden. Adam ate of the forbidden fruit, which immediately led to Adam’s spiritual death and also the consequence that physical death came into the world in due course. This is why we all die. So, says the apostle, just as death came into the world through a man, Adam, so the resurrection has come through a man, Jesus. “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” Just as all who are “in” Adam, all who are united to Adam, die, so all who are “in” Christ, who are united to Christ, will be made alive. Just as we share the curse of death, that came upon Adam, so we shall share the blessing of resurrection, that Jesus enjoyed.

“But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” (verse 23) We do not have the resurrection life now. We have to wait for it. When he comes, then we also will be raised, and will enjoy the glory of the resurrection.

When this happens, the end of the world as we know it now will take place. Verse 24: “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” Jesus, the Son of God become man, will destroy all enemies, including Satan and death, and then hand the Kingdom back to the Father.

This is the inevitable result of the reign of Christ. Having been raised from the dead, Jesus was taken back up to the Father's side, and from there he is bringing reigning and bringing all enemies under his feet. Verses 25 and 26, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Once this is done, then Christ the mediator, the Son of God become man, will put himself under the authority of his Father. "When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all."

So we see that Jesus's resurrection guarantees our resurrection.

4. If you deny the resurrection, you might as well live like an unbeliever

The apostle says in verses 29 to 34,

²⁹Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them? ³⁰And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? ³¹I die every day — I mean that, brothers — just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³²If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."
³³Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."
³⁴Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God — I say this to your shame.

What the apostle is saying here is that if you deny the resurrection, it makes any Christian service pointless. You might as well live like an unbeliever.

The apostle asks the question, if there is no resurrection from the dead, why did some of the believers get baptised on behalf of the dead? It seems that there was a practice that if someone was converted and then died before he had a chance to be baptised, then a living person would be baptised on behalf of the person who had died. The apostle is not commending the practice, but pointing out the inconsistency of the believers in Corinth. If they did not believe in the future resurrection, why did they bother with baptism on behalf of those who had died?

He also asks a question about himself. If there is no resurrection, why does he bother to serve Christ? He says in verses 30 and 31, "And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I die every day — I

mean that, brothers — just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Why does he risk life and limb for Christ, if there is no resurrection, and if there is no reward for serving Christ? He might as well just settle down and live a quiet and comfortable life. In verse 32 he asks “If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained?” The “wild beasts” he refers to are probably those who instigated the riot when he was in Ephesus. What is the point, he asks, of going through horrendous suffering for the Gospel, if there is no resurrection? You might as well live like a non-Christian if there is no resurrection. What does the unbeliever say? “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” The unbeliever says, “Extract as much pleasure as you can from life, because this is the only life you are going to get, and you never know when it will be over.” That is where you land up if you say that there is no resurrection.

In verse 33 the apostle shows them where their wrong thinking has come from. He says, “Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”” They had been influenced by the world, by the materialistic and worldly thinking of their non-Christian friends. He calls them to repentance. “Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God — I say this to your shame.” (verse 34).

Conclusion

We have seen from this passage how Paul answers those who deny the future resurrection. He reminds the believers of the facts of Jesus’s resurrection. He points out that to deny the future resurrection is, effectively, to deny the whole of Christianity. He shows how Jesus’s resurrection is a guarantee of our own resurrection. He also shows that, if you deny the future resurrection, you are effectively thinking like a non-Christian.

What should be the effect of this passage upon us?

If you are a Christian, this passage should lead you to be strong in your view of your own future resurrection.

You might in theory believe in the future resurrection. But does this truth dominate your life in the way it should? Are you instead living for what you can get out of this world, just like unbelievers do? How, if at all, are your ambitions different from those of your non-Christian friends? What do your non-Christian friends live for? By and large, they make it their aim to get as educated as they can, in order to get as high

paid job as they can, in order to be able to live as comfortably as they can, in order that they can maximise their pleasure. Is your life, fundamentally, any different? To be sure, you attend meetings with God's people on Sundays, whereas your friends might go to football matches or on day trips with the family. But is there any real substantive difference between your life and that of your non-Christian friends? There should be. You and I should be living for our eternal hope. All that we do in this life should be focussed upon increasing our eternal happiness, at the resurrection, rather than on increasing our happiness in the present world. So if you are a Christian, hear the message of this passage. Refocus your attention on the life to come, rather than on this present life.

If you are not yet a Christian, the message for you is, whether you like it or not, your body will be raised from the dead. But, if you do not get saved, when you are raised it will be for judgement rather than for salvation. Jesus said, as recorded in John's Gospel chapter 5, verses 25 to 29

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

We are living in very uncertain days. We do not know if at any moment a nuclear holocaust may be unleashed, and we may be all swept away. Come to Christ and receive from him God's salvation, before it is too late.

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