

If Christ is Not Risen

1 Corinthians 15:13-19
Easter 2021

With Study Questions

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But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁴ And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching *is* empty and your faith *is* also empty. ¹⁵ Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise. ¹⁶ For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁷ And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins! ¹⁸ Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:13-19).

I'll Make It

I received an email recently with a link to a story in the Huffington Post. The story was about a former mayor of one of the largest cities in America. He was contemplating his own mortality against his achievements, especially as they related to the civil arena. At 72 years old, he was about to attend his 50th college reunion and he found it disquieting at how many former classmates would be there in memory only. It made him think about his limited amount of time. But it was the next thing he said that was very likely the reason someone thought I'd be interested in the article.

His comment was that he had "little doubt about what would await him at Judgment Day." Referencing his work on gun safety, obesity and tobacco, he said "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close."

Perhaps this was just a clever way of saying that he feels he's done a good job; as if to say his conscience is clear before God of any gross negligence or dishonesty. Nonetheless, it is quite common for people to think of religion in this fashion. As if the primary goal of spiritual pursuits is to help people to be good enough, good enough to overcome bad habits and misguided ethics. Even good enough to make it to heaven.

This is understandable. Because when people construct religion, that is generally the outcome. Manmade religions are, for the most part, about good

deeds, a healthy mental/spiritual outlook with the hope of somehow making it to heaven. The Bible has a term for this. It's called works righteousness or, more aptly, salvation by **"works of righteousness"** (Titus 3:5; Romans 3:20, 28; 4:5; 9; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8, 9). Religion becomes a sort of contest of who can make the cut, who has the chops!

This is why when people get invited to church, they often respond by defending themselves. The defense often comes in the form of "I don't need it" which is another way of saying I'm relatively happy and I am not in need of therapy or relatively good and not in need of guidance. I would like to suggest that, even though joy, happiness and guidance are included in the aims of biblical Christianity, these things are what you might call collateral benefits.

For the heart of the Christian faith is not something that anyone is "relatively" competent in achieving. The heart of the Christian faith addresses a dire and universal need/issue. There is not, nor has there ever been, a person who is secure enough, smart enough, good enough, rich enough, self-actualized enough or wise enough that they stand outside of the circle which is addressed and resolved by the person and work of Christ.

Missing Everything

What is meant by the person and work of Christ? Who is Jesus and what did He do that was so significant that it addresses a universal need that no one else could, or has even attempted to, address? In the passage we read this morning we see a series of conditional conjunctions **"if"** *ei* forming conditional clauses. This is a literary device offering potentiality based upon a possible precondition. As we learned from Tevye "If I were a rich man" (possible precondition), "All day long I'd biddy biddy bum" would be the potential outcome. The clear goal of these clauses is to demonstrate that apart from the present topic, the Christian faith becomes essentially meaningless.

So, what is the present topic? What do the conditional clauses address? What is the one thing that if we miss it, we've missed everything? Let's briefly review the conditional clauses: **"If there is no resurrection" (vs 13); "if Christ is not risen" (vs 14); "if in fact the dead do not rise" (vs 15); "if the dead do not rise" (again in vs 16); "if Christ is not risen" (vs 17) "if in this life only we have hope in Christ (vs 19, emphasis mine).**

This is truly astonishing! When we read the words **"if in this life only we have hope in Christ"** Paul seems to indicate that everything else Jesus had to offer as a teacher, a philosopher, an example of godliness, etc. becomes

relatively meaningless. For me to draw the conclusion that if Jesus is merely about me overcoming bad habits, correcting my misguided ethics, instilling me with security, wisdom, prosperity or a keener sense of who or what I actually am, or any other virtuous or profitable attribute, then all preaching is empty, faith is empty, pastors are false witnesses preaching an empty message, sin has not really been addressed and Christians are indeed pitiable.

Or it can be put this way: If there is no resurrection of Jesus Christ all the sermons ever given are empty, faith is futile and barren, the apostles are all false witnesses, sin is victorious over men, those who died professing faith in Christ have perished and truly Christians (especially during the time of the writing of this passage) are the most pitiable people on the face of the earth.

The Resurrection

The singular and unparalleled pinnacle of the message found in the Scriptures is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is, or should be, the culmination of every sermon and the discovery and hope of every Bible study. It is the heart of hope. The most difficult seasons of the most mature, godly characters in all of Scripture will find their minds and hearts swept to the resurrection.

The entire book of Job conveys a tragic season in his life. He became the target of Satan, losing his livestock, servants and eventually his family. The well-known passage used in memorial services comes from Job.

Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. ²¹ And he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord." ²² In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong (Job 1:20-22).

How could Job have such a disposition? What did he know that would grant such a noble, hopeful response to tragedy? Job would speak of the resurrection:

For I know *that* my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; ²⁶ And after my skin is destroyed, this *I know*, That in my flesh I shall see God (Job 19:25, 26).

In the twelfth chapter of 2 Samuel we read again of a father's grief. David's baby boy had become ill and David pleaded with God for seven days to spare the child; he would fast and lay all night on the ground. But the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him; they didn't know what he might do. What David did do was clean himself up, change his clothes, go to church and have something to eat. This surprised his servants. But David explained that he knew he could not bring his baby back, but that he would someday be with his baby. David would write in the Psalms of the resurrection:

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness (Psalm 17:15).

Is there a more vexing story than Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his own son? We learn in the New Testament something that is not as readily apparent in Genesis.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,¹⁸ of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called,"¹⁹ concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

It would appear that the godly, in the face of tragedy, are ever ready to cast their thoughts heavenward and gaze upon their own lives from a perspective of righteousness, eternity and the power of God to overcome death itself. All of this, surrounds and proceeds from the resurrection of Christ.

Literal and Physical

The resurrection was literal, and by that, I mean physical. It has been suggested that the resurrection was merely an ideal, the way we might describe someone coming out of depression or severe illness. I've been to many a memorial service where it is said that so-in-so, though dead, lives on in our hearts. But to understand the resurrection of Christ this way renders the gospel (as we learned in our conditional clauses) meaningless. A resurrected Jesus bid Thomas to touch His wounds (John 20:27).

Jesus doesn't merely live on in our memories. In a society that has become increasingly ecumenical and plural in terms of religious influence, the Christian faith, truly Christ Himself, offers that which is unique, singular and unlike any human religious construction. Packer put it well:

Suppose that Jesus, having died on the cross, had stayed dead. Suppose that, like Socrates or Confucius, he was now no more than a beautiful memory. Would it matter? We should still have his example and teaching; wouldn't they be enough? The Jesus of the Gospels can still be your hero, but he cannot be your Savior.¹

The resurrection was not merely Jesus coming back to life. As if that wouldn't have been impressive enough. But we read of a number of people in the Scriptures who died and were brought back to life. The resurrection of Jesus differs from these in at least two ways: Jesus brought Himself back to life.

Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. 18 "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father (John 10:17, 18).

Secondly, all the people who were brought back to life would die again. Not so with Jesus. The resurrection was not coming back to life merely to die again, but to a life immortal and incorruptible.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a demonstration of His power over death itself. His victory wasn't merely metaphor or allegory. Everything Jesus did and said was validated when, in a hitherto unknown demonstration of power, He conquered mankind's greatest enemy.

In Romans, Paul writes that Jesus was raised for our justification. The resurrection of Jesus was the public declaration of the Father's acceptance of the work of Christ. Furthermore, it is the resurrected and ascended Jesus who, as our High Priest, presents His own justifying, atoning blood before the Father. A dead savior would, not only be a lying savior, but also one incapable of

¹Packer, J. I. (1996, c1994). *Growing in Christ*. Originally published: I want to be a Christian. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, c1977.;Includes index. (Page 59). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

standing before God the Father pleading the case of His brothers by virtue of His own sacrificial payment.

With this in mind Jesus must be viewed either as a dead, powerless deceiver, incapable of saving even Himself, or the Living Savior who has conquered death and grants the same resurrection to those who call on His name (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Often times the Christian faith is presented as a means to help us through difficulty. It is heralded as a way to alleviate our sorrow, or loneliness, or aid in our marriages or business. But these general difficulties in humanity don't always apply across the board. Some people are happy, successful and surrounded by love and support. But everybody, without exception, dies. And this final enemy is vanquished, only by Christ.

There is an old saying that a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client. The worst condition anyone could ever find themselves in is dying and being interviewed by God to see if we merit salvation. If we're defending ourselves in that interview, truly we have a fool for a client. But God, in His great love for sinners, "**gave His only begotten Son**" (John 3:16) to be our "**advocate**" (1 John 2:1). He has never lost a case because He pleads by virtue of His own life, His own sacrifice and His own victory. Let us be wise and put our trust in Him.

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this (John 11:25, 26)?

Questions for Study

1. What do people generally view as the purpose of the church or religion?
2. What are different responses you hear when you invite people to church?
3. What do the conditional clauses tell you about the significance of the resurrection of Christ?
4. Discuss different aspects of the resurrection and why they are important.
5. What Universal need does Christ address in the resurrection?