

1 Corinthians 15:12-22 “If Christ Be Not Risen”

Intro. As you can see, I have just read from the 15th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, which is the longest chapter in Corinthians. It is the chapter that’s devoted to the subject of the resurrection, both the resurrection of Christ and of our resurrection. So the fact that Paul devotes so much space to this subject indicates the importance of the subject of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, according to Rom. 10:9, belief in the resurrection of Christ is a requirement for salvation.

Yet there were those in Corinth who did not believe that the body actually rises from the dead. In fact, Paul refers to this in v.12, when he says, “How do some among you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?” You see, in the Greek and Roman culture that Paul was writing to, they did not believe in a bodily resurrection after death. The Greeks believed that the body was like a prison that the soul was bound to, and that death was actually a release from the prison of the body. So some of the Greeks who were converted to Christ had a hard time believing that the body would somehow rise from the dead. And even in the case of Christ, if He rose from the dead, the apostles only saw what *appeared* to be a human body. The philosophy of the culture trumped biblical declaration.

Likewise, there are certainly those today who have their doubts about the doctrine of the bodily resurrection, and thus they doubt that Jesus literally and bodily rose from the dead. For example, we have a growing number of atheists who certainly do not believe in the resurrection or life after death. We have agnostics who have their doubts. We have the so-called intellectual scientists who do not believe that miracles happen. They say we live in a natural world. We just evolved by time and chance. They say there is no God and there are no miracles. And when you have that kind of a presupposition that miracles do not take place, then it is not surprising that there are those who say Jesus never rose from the dead. They have a hard time believing that even God can take the decayed remains of a body and cause those remains to live again with immortality. And it’s not just atheists, agnostics and scientists that deny or doubt the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. In 2006 a Scripps Howard/Ohio University poll found that only 36 percent of the 1,007 adults interviewed responded positively to the question: “Do you believe that, after you die, your physical body will be resurrected someday?”¹ Most believe in a heavenly afterlife. They just don’t see that involving a recreated immortal body.

Paul’s basic response to the deniers of the bodily resurrection is found in v.12, “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?” If Christ was raised from the dead, we have every reason to believe that we as believers in Him will rise from the dead!

And so, whether you are with us today with these doubts or whether you perhaps do not believe in the resurrection, or perhaps someone you know someone who doesn’t believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we’re going to see how Paul addresses that issue. He says, “Okay, let’s just suppose that there was no Easter, that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Are you prepared for what that really means? Let’s see what the implications of such unbelief are:

¹ www.religionnewsblog.com/14273/most-americans-don't-believe-in-the-resurrection.

I. IF JESUS DID NOT RISE THE APOSTLES WERE FALSE WITNESSES

Paul says in v.15, “Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ.” The apostles all preached that Jesus rose from the dead. So Paul is saying, “Listen, if you’re going to conclude or rule out the possibility that Jesus rose from the dead, then you’re going to have to say that I, Peter, James, John, and all the other apostles are false witness.” Yet the fact of the matter is, as recorded in the Bible, they testified that they saw Jesus live from the dead. They heard Jesus’ voice. They touched Jesus’ body (1 John 1:3). They even ate with Jesus and saw Him eat food before their very eyes. And this was their testimony. Yet if Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then they were not simply mistaken, but willfully mistaken, that is, liars, perjurers, and false witnesses.

You know what, I can believe in a miracle called the resurrection a whole lot easier than I can believe that these apostles were false witnesses. I want to share with you several reasons why it is incredible that they would’ve been false witness.

A. Because There Were So Many Witnesses – As we see from vv.5-8, it wasn’t just one or two that saw Jesus alive from the dead, but all 11 of the remaining apostles, as well as many of the women who faithfully followed Jesus. Not only that, but according to v.6, the Bible says that a total of 500 witnesses saw Jesus alive from the dead during the 40 days after His resurrection. How could 500 witnesses be wrong?

Then furthermore, their testimony was not only so numerous, but also:

B. Because Their Testimony Was So Consistent - One way a smart attorney can try to break the testimony of a person is by pointing out inconsistencies. Yet there are no real inconsistencies in the accounts of the resurrection that you read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the writings of Paul or Peter. Sure, they tell the story from different perspectives, but all of their testimonies are consistent that Jesus is alive from the dead.

Furthermore, you can’t believe that these were false witnesses:

C. Because Their Lives Proved Their Credibility – These men helped to establish Christianity, a religion of faith that has the highest morality of any religion on the face of this earth in my estimation. Read their high moral teachings. See how they lived their lives. Their moral integrity makes such a supposition impossible. These men who lived godly lives, who were always known for telling the truth (1 Th. 1:5), are you going to say that they were liars? I don’t think so.

Furthermore, according to all the evidence in the gospel records:

D. Because They Did Not Even Expect the Resurrection – Many times the gospel accounts indicate that they did not believe or anticipate the resurrection of Christ. When the women reported the resurrection, Luke 24:11 says, “And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them” (see also Lk. 24:25; John 20:19). How can you say that these men would invent a story that they didn’t even expect? They were unlikely storytellers. They had to be convinced that Jesus was alive.

Then there was Paul. He was a persecutor of the church. He absolutely was adamant against Jesus and yet something dramatic happened that caused him to start preaching that Jesus

is alive. How can you explain such transformation and consistent testimony from such unlikely witnesses as these.

And then consider last of all that:

E. Most of the Apostles Died a Martyr's Death – Yet they did so saying that Jesus is risen from the dead. How can you believe that liars and perjurers would have died for something that they knew was not true? Yet if Jesus did not rise from the dead, you must conclude that these apostles were liars and perjurers. I find it hard to believe.

Notice the second thing you must conclude if Jesus did not rise from the dead.

II. IF JESUS DID NOT RISE OUR PREACHING IS VAIN

Paul tells us in v.14, "If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain." He is saying, "Our preaching is a colossal waste of time if Jesus is not risen from the dead." Without the resurrection there would be nothing worth preaching. These apostles proclaimed everywhere they went that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures. We can be saved, forgiven because He rose from the dead, and yet all their preaching and all of their words were just a bunch of hot air if Jesus did not rise from the dead.

I know some folks say that *my* preaching is a waste of your time! But it's *not* if Jesus rose from the dead. If He rose from the dead is the Son of God according to Romans 1:4. You better pay attention to what the Bible says because your well-being here and your eternal destiny depends upon it.

Now let's see another implication of unbelief regarding the resurrection:

III. IF JESUS DID NOT RISE OUR FAITH IS VAIN

He says this in the last of v.14 and in v.17. Paul said in Romans 10:17, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Our faith is only useful if it is based on truth. But if Christ is not risen, then our faith is futile. It is of no value. It will not do us any good. In contrast with that, the Bible says that we are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). We have hope of eternal life by our faith in Jesus and yet if Jesus is not risen, your faith in Jesus is futile. It is empty; it is useless, Paul says. That is what you must conclude. After all, your faith is only as good as the object of your faith.

If you were to be hiking in the mountains of West Virginia and you come across this big ravine, and yet you notice that there's a footbridge across that deep ravine. You come up to the footbridge and you have to make a decision. Do I trust this bridge to get me safely across? Well I've got news for you, it doesn't matter how much you believe, if you get on that bridge and that thing is old and rickety and no good and your weight causes it to collapse, your faith in that bridge isn't going to help you a bit. Your faith is only as good as the object of your faith.

Even so, if the object of our faith, Jesus, is dead and gone in some forgotten tomb somewhere in Palestine, then our faith is useless and no good. If you trust in a dead Savior, how can faith in such a person bring you life? And if our faith is useless, then we must conclude three other things according to Paul:

A. Then You Are Still in Your Sin – Paul says in v.17, "And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" Ah, we believe Jesus died on the cross. We believe that

He died for our sins. We believe that when Jesus wore that crown of thorns and died on the cross that somehow, someway according to Scripture, He was paying the price that we deserve and that now we can be forgiven. That's what we have been believing. But if Christ is not risen, then you are still in your sin. If Christ is still in the grave that means that God did not accept His death as a payment for sin. Without His resurrection, we have no proof that the one who suffered on Calvary was more than the feeble victim of an enormous wrong. Only the resurrection proves that Jesus died for our sins rather than His sins. Christ's resurrection is the positive proof that His sacrifice was, indeed, sufficient and fully accepted by God, according to Rom. 4:25. Oh, how tragic it would be to come to the end of life and close your eyes and stand before a holy God, and God says, "You sinned. The soul that sins shall die. The wages of sin is death. You are still in your sin. Depart from Me. I never knew you." Yet that is the necessary conclusion if Christ be not risen.

Notice in v.18 a second conclusion. If our faith in Christ is useless:

B. Then Our Loved Ones Are Still Dead – By the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians the church had been established for five or six years. Some of those early believers had already died believing that they would go to heaven. Yet Paul says in v.18 that if Christ is not risen, "Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." Not only have their bodies rotted in the tomb, but their spirits have forever perished as well. If Christ be not risen then that means when you lay that loved one to rest and say that tearful goodbye for the last time, then you never see that love again. There's no hope.

We might as well mark away all the tombstone inscriptions that give us hope of seeing our loved ones again because if Christ be not risen, there is no hope. Everyone has perished. We might as well write on all tombstones, "Dead forever!" The cemeteries are nothing more than reminders of the stark reality of death.

Can you believe that the intelligent Creator, who created this world, created it with nothing better than that? That we live and die and that's it? That's the way it would be if Christ be not risen.

Notice how he concludes his argument in v.19. If Christ has not risen from the death, then that means:

C. Then We Are To Be Most Pitied - There Paul says, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." Paul went everywhere preaching the gospel that Jesus is alive. He died for our sins. We can be forgiven. We can be born again. We can have a new life now, and we have eternal life in heaven. To do so, he had to suffer persecution, shipwreck, stonings, and imprisonments. The apostle Peter said, "See, we have left all and followed You" (Lk. 18:28). And yet Paul says if Christ is not risen, then that means that we only have an empty hope; just a bubble that will burst into tragic disappoint. And for Paul to have suffered all of that for a lie, for an empty dream, then he and other apostles and missionaries deserve to be pitied among all men.

We pity those who discover that their high hopes were empty. A young lady falls in love with a young man who is nice looking and successful. He promises to marry her and they set a date. Yet on their wedding day he doesn't even show up! She and her family have sacrificed thousands of dollars for the wedding, and lots of time preparing, all for nothing!

So Paul says, “Listen up folks, if you don’t believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you got to be prepared for what that means, and the picture is not pretty. You are still condemned by your sin with no real hope of life after death.

You know, there’s a lot of young people listening to death music, music with dark themes. Their lives are so hopeless, so miserable, so empty that the only thing some think about is suicide. Some feel that life is so bad they might as well go to school with a bunch of guns and handmade bombs and blow away as many as they can and then kill themselves. Where did that philosophy come from? It comes from a realism that if there is no God, if there is no Christ, if there is no resurrection, then life has no meaning and no real hope.

Although Paul had, for the sake of argument, allowed the possibility that there was no resurrection, he now wished to reaffirm the resurrection so that there can be no question of its truth. With a dramatic turn Paul hurls the great Easter fact at the Corinthian error. He moves from the depression and the doubts of verses 12 to 19 to the glorious truth of v.20. Beginning with that verse we see a wonderful truth:

IV. CHRIST IS RISEN, WHICH ASSURES OUR RESURRECTION!

There Paul says, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” All these doubts are like a house of cards that are blown down by the wind of truth.

As we have seen, Paul has already supported this affirmation when he gave the overwhelming evidence of the Resurrection of Christ in vv.4-11. The resurrection of Christ fulfilled prophecy (v.4b). His resurrection was affirmed by the eye-witness testimony of many witnesses (vv.5-8). The dramatic change in Paul’s life is another strong evidence. He went from being a zealous persecutor of the Church (v.9) to one who proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ with even greater zeal (v.10).

You might say, “So what?” Even if Jesus Christ did rise from the dead, how does that impact us today? Essentially, Paul shows how the statement of Jesus in John 14:19 is true, “Because I live, you will live also.” His resurrection life guarantees our bodily resurrection someday. Just as the denial of the resurrection of Christ has implications, even so the affirmation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications. Notice two reasons why the resurrection of Christ assures our own resurrection:

A. Because of the Principle of the Firstfruits - He says in the last of v.20 that Christ “has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” If you study the gospel accounts Jesus many times talks about the fact that someday He is coming again, and that when He comes again, the dead in Christ shall rise. Then He likens that resurrection day many times to a harvest, such as the gathering of wheat. And what Paul does in v.20 is he looks back into the Old Testament at the feast of the firstfruits and he sees a special truth. You see, in the feast of the firstfruits God says that when the harvest starts to come in, you are to take the very first of the harvest, and instead of consuming that for yourself, you are to take it to the priest and offer it as a sacrifice to God, the firstfruits (Lev. 23:10). And what you are doing is you are saying to God, “I sacrifice this to you and I’m trusting you to bring in the rest of the harvest.” So do you see what Paul is doing when he says that Christ is the firstfruits? He is saying that just as that firstfruits offering guarantees the rest of the harvest, even so, Christ’s resurrection guarantees that the rest of His saints will be gathered into their eternal home.

Hundreds of years ago many men talked about a continent across the ocean from Europe, but Columbus went there and came back again, and that ended doubt. Many men before, and apart from Jesus, have cherished thoughts of an immortal life beyond the grave, but Christ is the One who has been there and returned. If you will let Him, He will make you partakers of His own immortal life.

Isn't that a wonderful truth? Isn't that a wonderful assurance? As certainly as Christ was raised, so certainly shall we be raised.

Paul doesn't stop there. He says there's another reason why we're confident that the dead will rise and that we will see our loved ones again.

B. Because of Our Faith Connection to Christ - Look at vv.21-22, "For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive." Let me try to explain this to you. God told Adam and Eve that in the day you eat the forbidden fruit, you shall surely die. And that sentence of death came upon Adam and Eve the moment they disobeyed God. And the sad reality is that all of their descendants who are "in Adam," have upon themselves the same sentence of death. Every one of us, unless the Lord comes first, will die. We will taste death. It is unavoidable.

Harry Houdini in the 1920s amazed people with the way that he could get out of prisons and chains and handcuffs and the weirdest contraptions. He always was able to escape. But in 1926 Harry Houdini died from a ruptured appendix. He was only 52. He always told his wife to look for him to come back. He expected to be able to speak to her from the spirit world. For 10 years she kept looking for him. But he never came. Death conquered Harry Houdini because he's a son of Adam. Every son of Adam dies.

Do you see what Paul is saying here? Just as it is true that in Adam all die, so in Christ all² will be made alive. By virtue of our relationship with Adam, we all die. But if you have a faith relationship with Jesus Christ, you will share in His resurrection life. That the assurance that Paul gives. We shall live. And that is why v.18 is not true. That is why our loved ones who believe in Christ shall not perish but they shall live forever!

Dear Christian, you can see that all of your hopes in Christ are based upon solid truth. And so since Christ has risen, your hope of eternal life is not mere wishful thinking. Through Christ we have the assurance of our own resurrection, and the resurrection of our loved ones.

Conclusion: A seminary professor lost his wife when she was a young woman, an untimely death. He had his little preschool son with him. He went to take him to the funeral home to see the body of his mother. They had embalmed her beautifully. She was there, almost life-like. The little boy looked at his mother and the dad tried to explain to him this inexplicable thing called death, and to tell the little boy that they would not see mommy again until they saw mommy in heaven.

The little boy couldn't understand death; he wasn't familiar with death. He said, "No daddy, you're wrong. Mommy is just asleep. I've seen her like that plenty of times. She's asleep. She can wake up." And then he began to say, "Wake up mommy, wake up mommy, mommy, wake up, wake up mommy." And with tears that professor put his hand on the shoulder of that

² Only those who trust in Jesus Christ are His descendants, and the second "all" therefore applies only to the saved. Universalism is not taught here.

little preschool boy and said, “Son, you can’t wake her up, but when Jesus comes, he’ll wake her up.”³

This Easter Sunday we celebrate this wonderful hope we have in Christ. We serve a risen Savior who can forgive your sin. Are you ready to face death? Only Jesus can give hope of eternal life for you and your loved ones. Believe in Him today. What a glorious day to give your heart and life to Jesus, on Easter Sunday!

Sources: R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Paige Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church: an Exposition of First Corinthians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Dr. Adrian Rogers (notes from his sermon on vv. 12-20); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983); Spiros Zodhiates on vv.14a, 15-17, 19, *Conquering the Fear of Death: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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³ Told by Dr. Adrian Rogers in his sermon on I Cor. 15:12-20.