

THE HOPE IN CHRIST'S RESURRECTION
1 Corinthians 15:12-19
June 11, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Have you ever considered how the doctrine of the resurrection has been assaulted throughout the history of the church? Some religions teach what is known as “soul sleep,” in which the body dies and disintegrates, while the soul or spirit rests. They base their conclusions on Paul’s terminology of those who die in Christ as “fallen asleep.” However, this is an errant view because the Scriptures teach that at death, the body goes to the ground but the soul goes directly into the presence of God. The materialist believes in the utter extinction or the total annihilation of the body and the soul. Others teach reincarnation, where the soul is recycled in some form. Others teach of the absorption of the soul. All of these beliefs are attacks on the gospel and Christianity because in all of these views, the body or the personhood of the believer is lost forever at death. Rather than place all of life, body and soul, in the hands of the Creator and the way He has established that man might have life, they fall back on their own wisdom and devices to secure eternity or, in the case of the materialist, to discount the existence of a Creator altogether.

Why these attacks? Because the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ is the pivotal doctrine for Christianity alone. No other world religion has the resurrection as part of its teaching. Take the resurrection out of Christianity, and Christianity falls. As we saw last week, the bodily resurrection of Christ *is essential to our understanding of salvation past as well as our present salvation*. In our text this morning, we see that *a correct understanding of the bodily resurrection is crucial to our future hope of eternity*. If Christ is still in the tomb, then, Paul writes, the believer has no hope.

I. The False Teaching of “No Resurrection” (15:12-13)

In verse 12, we see the crux of the problem at Corinth regarding the doctrine of the resurrection. Paul writes, **“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?”** We introduced this issue by way of introduction last week.

1. An illogical assertion (v. 12)

Some at Corinth claimed, in spite of the proclamation of Christ and His resurrection, **“that there is no resurrection of the dead.”** Their skepticism can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the Greek thought of the day was that the body, or for that matter, all things material, was inherently evil and a bondage to the soul. At death, the soul was set free from this bondage for all eternity. The thought that the soul would one day be reunited to a resurrected body, which is evil, was unthinkable to the Greek. This Greek influence could have crept into the body at Corinth, much like many other cultural practices that we have seen in this letter.

A second reason for their skepticism could have been the influence of the Sadducees. One of the hallmarks of Sadducean doctrine was the impossibility of the resurrection. You remember it was this group that questioned Jesus concerning the recognition of marriage in heaven (Mark 12:18-27). They were trying to back Jesus into a corner concerning the resurrection by pitting the words of Scripture against the words of Christ. Jesus’ response to them, “You do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God” (12:24). The Sadducees’ heresy concerning the resurrection stemmed from ignorance both of the Scriptures and of the power of God, to which

Paul attributes to be *the* truth and *the* power of the resurrection, making the resurrection of the dead not only *possible*, or *probable*, but *absolutely certain*. We know the Sadducees were active during Paul's missionary journeys as indicated in the book of Acts (5:17; 23:6-8). This Sadducean heresy, that the resurrection was impossible, could have influenced some at Corinth.

A third source for this thinking could have come from the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus, both of whom Paul said had "gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place" (2 Timothy 2:17-18). These two men spiritualized the resurrection, teaching that it took place at the moment one came to a saving knowledge of Christ. They denied the bodily resurrection of the believer and in so doing had "upset the faith of some" (2:18). Roger Ellsworth notes that this spiritualizing would have catered to the spiritual elitism that existed in the church at Corinth [*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 234].

Regardless of the source of their skepticism, some at Corinth said, "**there is no resurrection of the dead**" (v. 12).

2. A logical conclusion (v. 13)

However Paul, the master logician, shows the fundamental problem concerning this illogical assertion: it could logically lead to only one conclusion, and that was a false conclusion. "**But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised.**" To be consistent, the only conclusion that the Corinthians that purported "**no resurrection of the dead**" could draw was that Christ Himself had not been raised from the dead. Remember, these at Corinth did not deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. They simply denied the resurrection of everyone else. But listen to Paul's argument. "Do you agree that Jesus rose from the dead?" Their answer would be, "Yes." "Do you believe Jesus was a man?" Again, their answer would be, "Yes." But Paul would argue that they could not have it both ways. If Jesus rose, then the dead do rise. And if dead men don't rise, then not even Jesus rose. You must believe one or the other. Roger Ellsworth spells this out, "Paul says once one accepts the flat affirmation that dead men don't rise again, one is left with this syllogism: 'Dead men don't rise. Christ was a man. Therefore Christ himself did not rise again!'" [*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 240].

I am sure that the Corinthians who asserted "no resurrection" had not thought through the implications as concisely as Paul. But this is how heretical teaching is birthed. A person cannot teach Scripture or a particular doctrine *partially*. We must preach the whole gospel to the whole person. All of Scripture and the doctrines that we glean from Scripture have a logical flow and purpose to them. This is the importance of a systematic approach to theology. These at Corinth, in denying the future bodily resurrection of the saints, had ripped the very heart out of the gospel. Though they did not deny the bodily resurrection of Christ Himself, they could easily have led others to do so. An unbeliever, particularly in the philosophical culture of Corinth, would easily draw the same conclusions from the syllogism above and see no reason to believe the gospel. They would remain skeptical of the resurrection and continue to deny Christ.

But the Corinthians' faith was also at stake. False teaching has a way of tearing down our theological defenses and can eventually overwhelm our thought. The more one is around false teaching, the more numb they become to the truth. In the end, they end up denying things they thought that they would never doubt! I remember a discussion I had with a young person some years ago who was contemplating going to one of our most liberal Baptist universities. This young man had aspirations for the ministry and was going to major in Christian studies. Without sharing with him my concern that he thought more highly of his theological wisdom than he ought, I told him this very thing, that the longer you sit in garbage the more you stink. The

longer you hear false teaching, the more desensitized you become to the truth. Well, needless to say, he did not listen to anyone's counsel against his decision and left one of the most conservative Baptist churches in Memphis to attend this liberal university. When I saw him two years later he was a full-blown liberal, denying the fundamental truths of the gospel, one being the bodily resurrection of Christ. That is how false teaching works, and it is what concerned Paul about the church at Corinth. The longer they succumbed to these false teachings, the further down the slippery slope of unbelief they would slide.

II. The Theological Consequences of "No Resurrection" (15:14-15)

False teaching does not come without a cost. There are spiritual consequences when the gospel is cheapened or watered down. If one essential part of the gospel is skewed or left out, then all is for naught. Paul illustrates this concerning the false teaching of "no resurrection."

1. The gospel is meaningless (v. 14)

First, Paul says, if there was no bodily resurrection of Christ, then the gospel is meaningless. **"If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain."** As we saw in vv. 3-4, the bodily resurrection is essential to the gospel. Simply put, without Christ's resurrection the gospel would be false in its entirety. All of the appearances of Christ (vv. 5-8) after His death and prior to his ascension would have been useless. Further, Paul says that **"our preaching is in vain."** He, along with all of the other apostles, would be nothing more than charlatans. And the one's to whom Jesus appeared would have to be seen as fabricating a myth to propagate their beliefs. Calvin noted, "For what remains if Christ has been swallowed up by death—if he has become extinct—if he has been overwhelmed by the curse of sin—if, in fine, he has been overcome by Satan?" [*I Corinthians*, vol. 2, 18] Do you see the theological implications that Calvin brings to light if Christ is still in the tomb? He remains under the curse for sin, in short, a sinner, and has been defeated by Satan. Therefore, everything we preach as it pertains to the gospel is worthless because Christ is a sinner and unable to atone for the sins of men.

This leads to Paul's conclusion that their **"faith is also vain."** If there is no substance in the gospel, then their belief in it was also without substance. The faith of the Corinthians depended on a gospel that was true in all aspects. If the gospel was a sham, then so was their faith. John MacArthur states, "A dead savior could not give life. If the dead do not rise, Christ did not rise and we will not rise" [*I Corinthians*, 411]. MacArthur, following Paul's logic, exposes the fallacy at Corinth. Either Christ rose, and so do we who sleep when the Lord returns, or Christ did not rise, and therefore no one has life. If Christ did not rise and in doing so secure the future resurrection of all believers, then we could only say with the psalmist, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure" (Psalm 73:13) and with the prophet Isaiah, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity" (Isaiah 49:4). If Christ did not rise, then His work was in vain and our faith is in vain.

2. The gospel is a lie (v. 15)

"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."

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he

is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. [C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ?]

From this quote comes the quip, “Jesus is either Lord, liar, or a lunatic.” This is Paul’s contention concerning the theological consequences of “no resurrection.” Just as with Christ, either Paul’s and others proclamation about Christ and His bodily resurrection were absolutely true, or they were all lunatics, proclaiming a meaningless gospel, and all liars, proclaiming falsely that God raised Christ from the dead when He did not. And further, although Paul does not specify it here, if the resurrection is not true, then Christ Himself is a liar. And most tragically, God is not a God in whom we can trust because He has provided a way of salvation that is hopeless.

If the resurrection is not true, then the gospel is a lie. The “gospeller” is a liar, the person of the gospel, Jesus Christ, is an impostor and the God of the gospel is a hoax. Do you see the importance of the resurrection? Do you see what can happen when we misconstrue not only the gospel, but any part of God’s truth? Do you see what happens when we make Scripture fit our own beliefs rather than mold our beliefs to Scripture? When we try to make Scripture say what we want it to say, nothing but heresy can come from it. We must guard our hearts and minds against the assaults of Satan and his minions, who at every turn try to distort God’s Word. And yes, Satan even uses preachers and church leaders for his wicked purposes. May you heed this warning this morning!

III. The Practical Consequences of “No Resurrection” (15:16-19)

In v. 16 Paul reasserts the logical conclusion: **“For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.”** He then offers three practical consequences if the doctrine of “no resurrection” is true.

1. No salvation for them (v. 17)

Paul shows that every essential of the doctrine is intricately tied together. In v. 3 Paul stated, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Here he ties forgiveness of sins not only to Christ’s atoning death, but to His resurrection as well. **“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.”** Here is Paul’s assertion, “If Christ died, then He was raised.” Period! The truth of the gospel depends on it. As we saw earlier from Calvin, if Christ was not raised, then He remains under the curse of sin. And if Christ remains under the curse, then so do all of Adam’s posterity. The death that came as a consequence of the sin of our first parents, both physical and spiritual, remains for all men. If Christ is still in the grave, then there is no way that man can be rescued from the wrath of God for their sins. Let us personalize this. If Christ did not rise again, then **“you are still in your sins”** with no hope of salvation from your sins. You are condemned with no hope of being made right with God. You remain dead in your trespasses and sins and will for all eternity remain spiritually dead and sinful. None of the promises associated with the gospel are true if Christ was not resurrected. Simply put, we have no provision for sins apart from Christ’s resurrection. We stand damned before God!

2. No salvation of the dead (v. 18)

“Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.” As we saw last week, Paul uses the euphemism **“fallen asleep”** to describe those who had gone to the grave with Christ as their Savior. The certainty of Christ's resurrection provided the certainty that they too would rise again, that they would be awakened from their sleep at the Lord's return. But if Christ has not arisen, then Paul says that these have truly died, that there is no hope of being awakened.

Paul's argument cut to the chase of what many at Corinth believed. As we have noted, these that denied a future bodily resurrection did not deny the resurrection of Christ. Paul has blown their illogical assertion out of the water in this text. But further, those that denied a bodily resurrection of the believer believed that their loved ones had died with Christ. But Paul forces their hand here. If a person denies the resurrection, the logical implication is that those who have died in Christ are lost. But if these had died in Christ, then they too would one day be risen with Christ, both spiritually, which takes place the moment one comes to faith in Christ, and physically. Both deaths that entered the world as a result of sin, spiritual and physical, are reversed in Christ. There comes both spiritual and physical life for those who are in Christ Jesus, who are identified with His death and His resurrection. So Paul shows the importance of the future bodily resurrection of the saint. Our eternal life is not simply spiritual, but a physical one as well.

3. No hope for eternity (v. 19)

Paul concludes, **“If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”** Paul's statement again is logical. If hope in Christ is limited to this life only, then Christians above all others are to **“be pitied.”** Why? Because they have lived their entire life renouncing this world for the world to come, only to discover in the end that there is no world to come [Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 155]. Charles Hodge straightforwardly shows the implications of Paul's assessment:

Not only the future, but even the present is lost, if Christ be not risen. Not only did the departed sink into perdition when they died, but we, who are alive, are more miserable than other men... That is, if all the good we expect from Christ is to be enjoyed in this life, we are more miserable than other men.

Leon Morris echoes this thought, “If there is no resurrection then Christians are pitifully deluded. They have set their hopes on a Lord who they think will bring them a richer, fuller life” [*1 Corinthians*, 208].

With these statements, based on Paul's logic, we see the importance of sharing the whole gospel with the whole person. Our churches are full of people today that “trust Christ as their Lord and Savior” for what He can do for them *now* without ever considering the future. They may be products of a “health, wealth, an prosperity” gospel that focuses only on this life. They may have been offered a therapeutic gospel that promises Christ as the only remedy for their present circumstance, their current “felt need.” Jesus is offered as the “cure” for all of their problems, whether it be a difficult marriage, a better paying job, help with rebellious children, or whatever their present need is. Often their greatest need, that of forgiveness of sins and being made right with God through Christ alone, is bypassed. However, a gospel such as this only offers hope in this life. So people live their lives for the present without ever considering that if they are truly in Christ, then their citizenship is already in heaven and that their citizenship is

secured in the truth of Christ's resurrection and their future resurrection. Paul's conclusion is that if our hope is in this life only, then anyone is better off than the Christian.

Conclusion

The resurrection has immediate implications in the life of a believer, past, present, and future. If Christ was not raised, and if we and those who have gone before us will not one day be raised, then the gospel is a sham. But Paul continues, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (v. 20). We will look at this truth and how Paul ties the resurrection of Christ to that of the believer in a couple of weeks.

Are you living today in the power of Christ's resurrection, knowing that your citizenship in heaven is secure based on this gospel truth? Have you trusted Christ simply for what He can offer in this life? If so, then hear Paul, "You are to be pitied." Do we benefit from the resurrection in this life? Absolutely! But it does not end in this life. We must live with eternity in mind.