

WHAT CHRIST'S RESURRECTION MEANS

1 Corinthians 15:20–34

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1 Corinthians 15:20–34 (NIV)

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For 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. 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. Now, if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? 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. If 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.’ Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’ 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.”

Three weeks ago, I reached the age Jack Benny claimed for so many years. Some of you passed that milestone a few fence posts ago. Others of you can still look forward to it. When I was a kid,

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an adolescent, I wanted to be sixteen. “If I could just be old enough to drive a car.” When I was sixteen I wanted to be twenty-one. Then I would be a man and I would be through college. When I was twenty-one I wanted to be twenty-four. I wanted to be through seminary and perhaps married. And when I was twenty-four, I wanted to be twenty-nine. Because at twenty-nine, I would be old enough to be respected in my calling and not treated as a kid. But I’d still be young enough to be in the twenties.

Thirty-nine is an age I never particularly wanted. According to the national average, more of mortal life is behind me than before me. Any of us who have done any serious thinking at all recognizes that unless Christ returns for us first, we’re going to die. I’m going to die, you’re going to die. We don’t like to talk about death. It is one of the most undiscussed subjects in our culture, but it is going to happen. I realize that every time I have a birthday. Someday, it will happen, unless Christ returns. It will be wonderful if He does and we’re the generation that avoids death.

As a child, I used to go out and lie on the grass and look up at the sky. The sober reality would hit me. Someday, I will be lying underneath this grass instead of on top of it. The thought of being buried underneath all that dirt petrified me. This fear surfaced last year, when we took mom to her graveside. I thought, “Mom’s body is going to be in the ground.” Suddenly, I heard the minister say words from Psalm 91 that I’d never heard before—I’ve heard them but not “heard them.” This phrase came leaping out at me. “He will cover thee.” The meaning of Christ’s work came alive in my life. The end of the Christian is not to lie under six feet of dirt that will cover him or her. The Lord himself covers His people. To put it another way, as saint Paul does, “To be absent is to be present” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

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Paul, in these verses before us, is talking about this sober reality of death. And about the great reality of resurrection. He's telling us about what Christ's resurrection could mean to us. As I've looked at this passage, I basically see Paul saying two things about what the Lord's resurrection means for you and me.

I. First of all, the Lord's resurrection means for me that I can face death with confidence (verses 20–28).

I can face death with confidence. There are two reasons for this.

One, because of Christ, my own resurrection is guaranteed. And the second reason is Christ's triumph is assured.

A. First, my resurrection is guaranteed. "If Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, He is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). There are two beautiful symbols that Paul gives in verses 20–23, beautiful examples which show us how Christ guarantees our resurrection.

The first example which he uses is the word "firstfruit." We're not an agricultural people, by and large, so this may not have a lot of meaning to us initially. It may take us a moment to go back to the Old Testament and flesh out the meaning, in order to really appreciate what is really being said here. In Leviticus 23:10–14, we have a description of the feast of firstfruits. It was one of the seven feasts that were to be celebrated in Israel every year. The feast of firstfruits was a spring feast. It had agricultural significance. It had historical significance. It had spiritual significance. It represented, agriculturally, the fact that the spring barley harvest had grown and was ready to be reaped. But before anyone could reap of that harvest, it was necessary that a portion of that harvest, a bundle or sheaf of barley grain, be set aside and be brought as a wave offering to the Lord. It means that they simply took the grain, the high priest would go out into

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this field that had been preselected, and on the first day of the week, following Passover Sabbath, would cut the grain at the sunrise, bring it into the temple, and wave it before the Lord. It was a sign of giving the first of the crop to God. It also came with the instruction that none of the crop could be harvested nor could its fruits be partaken of by anyone, until God had been given the first portion. When the wave offering of the firstfruit was made, then it was alright for the crop to be harvested, and it was a certainty now that the crop had God's blessing and it could be harvested and put to our own use. That's the agricultural significance.

B. The historical significance is twofold. In the Book of Joshua, chapter 5, the first time the feast of firstfruits was ever celebrated was the first year the Children of Israel were in Canaan. They had planted their first crop, and when that crop came up, the day they offered the firstfruit was the day the manna ended. The manna fed them no more. God withdrew His temporary provision, in order that they might now have the permanent provision.

The second historical reference to the feast of firstfruits is Jesus himself, who rose the day of the feast of firstfruits. The morning that Christ was breaking forth out of the tomb, that same morning, in another sector of town, the high priest had gone with his officials out to a preselected field, had cut down the barley crop at sunrise and come back to offer it to God as the feast of firstfruits. But in fact, Jesus is the firstfruit, and He rose that very day. That prophetic day in the Old Testament looked forward to Him. Why was that feast given to prefigure Christ? It was given to remind us that there was a harvest of humanity which God wants to reap unto himself. That before the benefits of that harvest accrued to anyone, the firstfruit was brought to God. Jesus is the firstfruit. His being offered to God and being raised from the dead as the firstfruit is a guarantee that all the crop left standing in the field, which is you and me, and all the Christian body still standing in the field, that they're harvesting, is certain as well. If Jesus, as the firstfruit,

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is risen from the dead, then all the rest of us that are waiting are going to be embraced by that act. Because He is alive unto God, we shall be also.

So Paul is saying our resurrection is guaranteed because of what has happened to Christ as the firstfruit. Our resurrection is tied into His. The presentation of Jesus to God is a guarantee that the rest of the crop is going to be reaped. Isn't that a marvelous thought? Someday, we'll enjoy the same experience that Christ enjoyed.

The second illustration that Paul uses, that guarantees our resurrection, is the illustration that Christ reverses Adam's heritage. "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Remember when the astronauts went to the moon? When they came back, they put them in quarantine because they were afraid they'd bring back some organism from the moon that would have communicable aspects, be passed on and perhaps affect the whole of mankind.

We have the same picture in the Bible of Adam—the perfect person, the perfect environment who let in the virus of sin which taints all of mankind. Adam has let in the virus of sin which we all come to participate in, which brings us all unto death. Since that time, all mankind who has ever thought seriously has asked about death.

This certainty is given to us by the Scripture, as we all have shared in Adam's heritage, so in Christ, we will all share in Christ's heritage. As in Adam, all die, so in Christ, all will be made alive. Is Paul here giving a universal text— "All mankind was lost but now everybody, regardless of their individual response to Christ, is ultimately going to be saved in Christ"? No, what he is saying, at this point, is that in Adam, all share his death. All in Adam participate in what Adam wrought. But all who are in Christ, participate in what Christ wrought. Adam wrought death, Christ wrought life. There is death for one side of humanity, but there are those

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within humanity who have chosen Christ and have chosen his life. Therefore, what Adam undid, Christ will redo, and Christ will change. He is the firstfruit of those risen from the dead. Then the text says, “Each in his own turn: Christ the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to Him” (1 Corinthians 15:23). The phrase “each in his own turn” may be translated “each in his own rank.”

The word “rank” was employed in the Greek world to symbolize divisions in an army. Christ belongs to one order, to one rank. He is resurrected first, and then we, according to our rank.

Paul gives the ranking in Thessalonians. The dead in Christ will be the rank that rises first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and so will we ever be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:15–16).

Not only is my resurrection guaranteed, but Christ's triumph is assured. Therefore, I can face death with confidence whenever it comes (verses 24–28).

“Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Corinthians 15:24). We need to make some observations on these verses.

One observation, of course, is very clear. Christ has not yet destroyed all He is going to destroy. There is a sequence of events. He has begun His reign as we will see. The Scriptures do not talk about “someday he will destroy everything, then He will begin to reign.” But rather, it is saying, “He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25). So Jesus Christ has started to reign. But He has not yet destroyed all that He is going to destroy. He has not yet subdued all the enemies He's going to subdue. That's why we are wrestling with the problem of evil. That's why we are wrestling with death. That's why we are wrestling with illness. That's why we are wrestling with the devil. That's why we are wrestling with the flesh. That's why we are wrestling with supernatural powers that are evil and sinister in high places. It

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is because He has not yet destroyed all He is going to destroy. He is going to take the enemy of death and destroy it one day, and it is going to be the last thing He destroys. It's interesting that He's going to destroy the earth after He destroys the devil. He will destroy death. Death is our enemy.

This raises a very interesting perspective. If, as Christians, we have a certain knowledge that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, why don't we welcome death? Why don't we say, "Death is a wonderful thing"? When I come down with an illness, why pray for healing? Why not embrace it immediately and go to be with the Lord? Why not treat death like a friend? Death is treated in Scripture as an enemy. It's paradoxical. We have such certainty in the face of death, and yet it is our enemy. Death is an enemy for us because it is so unlike the character of God. It is antithetical to everything God stands for. He is life eternal and death is an abomination to Him. Therefore, as a Christian, we recognize—as we face death—that at one time it is the boundary line which allows us to be present with the Lord, whereas, now in the body, we are absent from Him, one day we will be present with Him. Death is the vehicle which He uses to accomplish that. He overrules that abomination, which has been let into the world. But on the other hand, death is our enemy. Any of you who have ever faced death know what an enemy it is.

Christ is going to destroy it one day, but not yet. That's why we still go through grief, it's why we still go through sorrow, through difficulty in our life. Because we live with two words—not yet...but wait.

There are three critical moments of the Lord's triumph that Paul traces here in 1 Corinthians—Christ as firstfruits (verse 23). That's the first moment of victory when He rises. Then when He comes—those who belong to Him. That's the second benchmark. His coming. Then the end.

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Three great moments. Christ's resurrection, His coming and then the end. If Paul had been an expert prophetic writer here, he would've filled in the details. Christ's the firstfruit, then two thousand years of Christian history. Then the rapture. Then the tribulation. Then the revelation. Then the millennium. Then the end of the millennium. Then the end. He's raised, He's coming, then the end.

I'll be most happy with any plan He adopts. Any sequence He chooses. We are let into some marvelous perspectives on the future. The statement about the Lord's coming and His kingdom. We are told that Christ is going to hand the kingdom over to the Father. When He has defeated all authority and power, and the last enemy—death—then He's going to hand the kingdom over to the Father. What is the kingdom? Is the kingdom planet earth? Obviously not, because when the end comes, the heavens and the earth themselves will dissolve with a fervent heat. So the kingdom is not planet earth. What's going to survive out of planet earth? When everything is burned up, what is left? We are left. We are the kingdom. The kingdom of God is within you. What is Christ, in effect, going to turn over to the Father as the trophy of His work on earth? He'll deliver the kingdom to the Father.

At this point, Paul gets into water that's over my head. I think, for right now, verses 27 and some of verse 28 is over my head. When Paul talks about Christ being subject to the Father. There are some things about the doctrine of the Trinity I don't fully understand, yet I completely believe. I don't have to understand it, because the nature of God is far more complex than my own human personality. I'm quite willing to receive it. I'd be very troubled with a God whose nature I completely understood. I'd have just a little fear that I was a little too inventive of my own theology if I could completely understand every facet of His being. I'd get a little worried that somebody had made Him up in a dictionary. Thou shalt make no image of God—even no mental

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image as well as no metal image. So, on the one hand, we're taught that God is Father, Son, and Spirit; and all in equality. Yet we have this phrase, that He will become subject to the Father. Then Paul realizes that he's leading us out in water over our head in terms of our being able to understand how this is going to happen. He closes that phrase with this line "Then the Son himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him so that God may be all in all" (Colossians 3:11). That's a beautiful phrase. I don't understand, at this moment in my experience in time and space, the "all" of God. I don't get to know everything in God. And there is not everything in me which is completely open to the knowledge of God. But one day, God will be all in all. That is, all of me will have all of God. And all of God will be all in me. Then I'll understand.

I can face death with confidence, because my resurrection is guaranteed and because Christ's triumph is certain.

II. Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians a second line of truth. Not only can we face death with confidence, but our present-day behavior is shaped by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Not only does the resurrection have an impact on the future, it has an impact on the present moment (verses 29–34). Paul is still dealing, in this chapter, with the heresy of some at Corinth who deny the resurrection of the body—the Greek idea they've carried with them into the church. He has thus far shown us in Corinthians that the resurrection is a vital element of the gospel that we have received.

The denial of the resurrection brings disastrous consequences and affirmation of the resurrection brings glorious consequences. The disastrous consequences are in the verse 12–19. The glorious consequences are in verses 20–28. He's still commenting, at this point, that some of the

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Corinthians are denying the resurrection of the body. He is going to appeal to them with what we call an “ad hominem argument.” It is used in a court of law or in legal disputes. It is a type of argument which appeals to a person’s feelings or experience rather than to their reason. What Paul is going to do, as he approaches the Corinthians, is to say to them, “In your own practice, in your own experience, you give testimony to the fact that you don’t really believe this heresy that you’ve been promulgating. In your own experience you’re demonstrating a belief in the resurrection.”

What is that experience? Verse 29, “Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?” A verse that some Christians don’t know is in the Bible. Some who do prefer to forget it’s there. The Mormons have had a field day with this verse, building a whole elaborate theology on it. So that, in a Mormon Temple, for example, there will be proxy baptisms for the dead. That’s one of the reasons why there is a heavy emphasis on genealogical research in the Mormon faith—to trace one’s family line so as to include in the scope of salvation all those in the past who hadn’t had the chance to hear the Mormon gospel, so they could be baptized. So it’s literally possible to save more persons by going to the temple and being baptized for the dead than to witness to living people about Jesus Christ. You could be a marvelous evangelist that way.

Have the Mormons got the Scripture understood right? The first thing we have to say is that we do not know a lot about the specific practice Paul’s referring to here. For example, we don’t know who is doing it. We don’t know for whom it’s being done. And we don’t know what results were expected of the people that were doing it. But we do know that we are to compare any obscure Scripture with clear Scripture. That clear Scripture will always give us direction as to what a passage that initially seems unclear might mean.

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It's obvious that the Scriptures know nothing about repentance after death. It's obvious that the Scriptures don't know anything about a second-chance theology. "It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). It is also obvious that Paul has an emphasis on baptism that doesn't at all square with the practice here. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 1:17, that Christ didn't send him to baptize. If Paul actually believed that this was a valid practice—he would have been better off to lay down his evangelism chores and just start waiting for people to die and then be baptized for them. To stand in their place. He himself sees baptism, not as a saving act, but as a witnessing act to our salvation. That's why he himself can count, on one hand, the number of people he baptized at Corinth. To Paul, proxy baptism is a matter of indifference. He doesn't condemn it. He doesn't condone it. Salvation by faith is not a matter of indifference to him, though. We recognize that Paul is simply using Corinthian practice here to illustrate the contradiction they were demonstrating. On the one hand, they were saying the body is not raised. Then they were turning right around and being baptized on behalf of the dead. Baptism is a symbol of the resurrection of the body. So he's saying, "You're inconsistent." I personally think that what baptism for the dead meant at Corinth was that it was a proxy baptism for believers who had died unbaptized. There were some in the Christian church who had an unbaptized relative or friend who had come to believe in Christ and had not yet been baptized, and then they had died and perhaps the Christian, not having a great knowledge of the word, had to be very concerned that maybe they hadn't fulfilled the Word, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). So perhaps that's what's going on here.

Paul says, "You believe in the resurrection. You bear witness to it."

Paul further appeals, in his argument, to his own experience of perilous preaching. He's saying, "I put my life on the line every single day and I'd never do this if I didn't believe in the

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resurrection” (1 Corinthians 15:30). What’s the use of this dangerous life if the dead are not raised? What’s the use of our fighting with wild beasts at Ephesus? This probably does not mean that he was actually in the ring with the wild beasts. It’s probably a metaphorical kind of term that says that, in a spiritual sense and a psychological sense, he wrestled with the beasts. His life at Ephesus was always in danger. “What’s the use? If the dead are not raised, I might as well eat and drink and be merry. Tomorrow I may die. I might as well be a hedonist if the dead are not raised.”

Then he goes on to give a word of severe spiritual reproof and warning. “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’ 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” (1 Corinthians 15:33–34, NIV).

Many in the Corinthian church regarded themselves as knowledgeable Christians. They used the term *gnosis*, the Greek word for “knowledge.” They were the super-spiritual Christians, because they had knowledge. They were the same ones that were denying the resurrection of the body. Paul says, “You’re not *gnosis* Christians, you’re *agnosis* Christians. You’re ignorant rather than knowledgeable.” He uses a play on words against them. He says, in fact, when you take away the resurrection from the Christian faith, you don’t have anything left. You have no basis for morality, no basis for conduct. If you let this kind of teaching infiltrate the church, then bad company is going to corrupt good character. Sin is going to be the result.

Paul has already said, in verse 19, that if we have hope in Christ only in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied. Paul never buys the view that some liberal theologians have tried to buy in the twentieth century, that tell us that it really matters not that Christ rose from the dead. What is important is that He came to teach us an ethical way and a responsible way of living. The

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denial of the resurrection cuts the roots out of moral behavior. It results in what some people call “a cut-flower generation.” Like a cut flower put in a vase, they’ll look good and live for a while, but they cannot maintain their existence, because they have been cut from their roots. They will die.

Much of western civilization in Europe and America had its roots in a biblical and a God-oriented kind of context. In a legal sense, this is most likely true. But as civilization moves away, it may give the manifestation of being a Christian culture, but ultimately, it leads to the death of the culture. A cut flower. If Christ has risen from the dead, it means He’s risen for everyone who will receive. Whether they are rich or poor, black or white. Whatever the context, whatever the background, Christ has risen and is available. His whole resurrection means we treat people differently, on an individual basis, and we treat them differently, as we look at a larger view of society.

The resurrection should make a difference. A person who believes in the resurrection of Jesus Christ has changed their behavior. And the proof is in the test of character. How deeply has the good news of Christ’s resurrection infiltrated my daily life? How has it impacted the way I treat my family? How has it impacted the way I respond to the body of Christ? How does it impact the way I live and relate to the world? How does it impact my morals and my responsibilities as a human being? In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I have a fix, a compass. I know that when I fail, I have an atonement that has been provided for me. I have an anchor. Where are you in respect to the risen Christ? Has He risen indeed, in your heart and life?

Closing Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for walking the lonesome valley of life for us. You have been in every trail and every bog and every by-place and every dangerous place, on the trial that we ourselves

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have been. You confronted all sorts of potential fears and enemies. You have come through and opened a way for us in the heavens. We're thankful that we have the good news of Your life.

That life for us is not a dead-end street, it is not meeting a brick wall for the finish line. It is not the closed-in room with no exit—where we're hopelessly trapped. But Your resurrection means that You've come into the rooms of our life and opened up the door for us to come to God. You came to save us, to lead us out of the perishing world, into Your imperishable presence. Lead us out of the prison of time, into the passageway of eternity. We praise You for what You've wrought on our behalf. I simply pray for every heart here that has, up to this point, not embraced the reality of Your resurrection, and does not have any certainty in facing life today or tomorrow, that You are going to be with them and You're going to make a way for them. I pray, even now, that their heart would open to You and that they, from within their spirit, would cry forth to You, "My Lord and my God!" I pray that all of us here would make the confession—in our heart, on our lips and in our life—that "Jesus Christ is Lord." Amen.