

Resurrection or Nothing

1 Corinthians 15

Resurrection Sunday 2016

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RESSURECTION or nothing. That's the message from God to you today. Either Jesus Christ rose from the dead and everything he said is true or he didn't, and he's a liar, I'm a liar, and you're a liar.

And we're wasting our time. And here in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul puts it all on the line. He does that in verses 14 and 17: **if Christ has not been raised.**

Of course the world wants us to think he didn't rise again. Every year the "60 Minutes" or "Dateline NBC" type shows trot out their supposed reasons why Jesus rising is just a myth. "It's impossible." We're asked, "Have you ever seen a dead man raised?" Have you ever seen a Big Bang? No, but we're told it's true. Have you ever seen an animal from the water climb out and become a land animal? No, but we're assured that's what happened. After all, science has never made a mistake.

Paul can put it all on the line, you and I can put it all on the line, because Christianity is a public religion. Its claims are falsifiable or verifiable. We don't have a religion like Islam or Mormonism where we have to believe what one man told us happened to him when no one else was around. We

don't have a religion like Buddhism or Hinduism, which are not historically based religion; they're philosophies you either believe or don't. Our religion makes claims about God creating the world, about our being sinners in need or forgiveness, and of Jesus being the Savior who lived perfectly and died. And all of it either stands or falls with the resurrection.¹

What if Jesus Didn't Rise?

The first thing I want you to consider is *what if Jesus didn't rise?* In verses 12–19 Paul asks us to imagine life without a raised Savior—*if*. There are several things he says would be the result in your life.

If Jesus didn't rise Paul says **our preaching is in vain** (v. 14). Paul spent years and years in training under the great first century rabbi, Gamaliel and then after he was converted to faith in Jesus the Messiah in Acts 9 he spent another three years before going to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles (Gal. 1:16–18). *If* Jesus didn't rise, Paul's preaching would be vain and vacuous, meaningless and substanceless. *If* Jesus was still dead, *if* Jesus was still in that tomb, *if* Jesus was just dust decomposed by the sands of time, what am I doing? And what are you doing showing up, pretending that

¹ See Michael Patton, "Christianity, the World's Most Falsifiable Religion." As found at <http://credohouse.org/blog/christianity-the-worlds-most-falsifiable-religion> (Accessed March 26, 2016).

somehow the event of preaching actually communicates the Word of God? “Oh, but at least you’re sincere; at least you mean well.” Seriously! Do you realize how bad it is for me to be proclaiming the empty tomb if it isn’t empty? Look at verse 15: **We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ.**

If Jesus didn’t rise Paul says **your faith is in vain** (vv. 14; 17). Like my preaching your faith is vain and vacuous, meaningless and substanceless, pointless and purposeless. Why? Let me put it like this: *if* Jesus didn’t rise you are placing your eternal destiny, your hope of living with God in heaven, your faith for life after this life in a guy who is no different than some Joe Schmoe at the local cemetery.

If Jesus didn’t rise Paul says **you are still in your sins** (v. 17). A man who preached that if you trusted in him you would be forgiven, who was crucified and buried, and then remained in the ground would be powerless to free you from sin. If he couldn’t free himself from the grave how could he free you from your sins? He may have said he would die for your sins but without the resurrection there would be no proof.

If Jesus didn’t rise Paul says all those who have died trusting in Jesus

have perished: **those also who have fallen asleep in Christ**—a Christian euphemism for death—**have perished** (v. 18). Just like your faith is now in vain so all those who died placing their faith in Jesus did so in vain. They thought they were going to heaven and we piously think they are there; but this is vanity as they're just in the grave, rotting away.

If Jesus didn't rise Paul says **if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied** (v. 19). Pitied like all those gullible, weak-minded people throughout the ages and in our time who follow some charismatic leader even to the point of death.

What would be different *if* Jesus didn't rise from the tomb? Everything! You wouldn't need to be here to hear the Word read and proclaimed. You wouldn't need to have faith in him. You wouldn't have a Savior to forgive your sins. You wouldn't have hope for your believing loved ones. You wouldn't need to worry about all this because instead of wasting your life on Jesus and missing out on life, you could, as Paul says hypothetically in verse 32, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

Why We Believe He Did Rise

But the second thing I want you to consider is *why we believe he did rise*. Our claim is, **But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead** (v. 20). Jesus of Nazareth, a historical person, died on a real Roman cross. As I mentioned on Good Friday, the historicity of Jesus and his death are the most well attested, verifiable events of the ancient world. I would encourage you to go online and have a listen to the evidence. But why do we claim he then raised? We make this claim not only because God has opened our minds and hearts to but we can also make this claim because of three lines of evidence.

The Evidence of Prophecy

First, we believe Jesus rose from the dead because of *the evidence of prophecy*. Paul writes to these ancient citizens of Corinth, which was the modern equivalent of Las Vegas. They had turned their backs on ancient philosophy, Roman religion, and for some, Judaism. Why? Because Jesus **was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures** (v. 4).

Children, imagine tracing your family tree back one hundred, five hundred, or even one thousand years. And imagine that you discovered letters from several ancestors who lived at different times and in different

places. Imagine in those letters they described a descendent to come—telling you where he or she would be born, what kind of things he or she would do, what kind of death he or she would die, and that he or she would come back to life. This is what the Old Testament does with Jesus.

The greatest proof of the reliability and truthfulness of the Bible and the claim of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the fact that the Scriptures make astounding claims and then backs them all up. In the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, we read about ***two thousand years before the birth of Jesus*** that God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Gen. 22). Why? Not only because Abraham believed God could raise Isaac up from the dead, but as a foreshadowing of what God the Father would do with his own Son, Jesus (Heb. 11:17–19). ***One thousand years before Jesus came***, King David prayed: “For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption” (Ps. 16:10). But he did die and he did disintegrate into ashes and dust. As Peter said in the church’s first sermon, “...his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). Ask yourself, if there was a tomb with a body, why didn’t the Jews or Romans or anti-Christian philosophers just point people to it to prove their point? Because David’s prayer was a prophecy of the resurrection of David’s greater son, the coming King, our Lord Jesus Christ

(Acts 2:22–36). **Seven hundred years before Jesus** Isaiah spoke words of hope to devastated Israel, that one day, God would keep his promise to David to seat his son on the eternal throne. This Isaiah called this “the sure mercies of David” (Isa. 55:3; KJV). Around the same time Hosea preached to Israel as they were in exile, longing for their return: “Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him” (Hos. 6:1–2). All this should strike us as we read the Gospel narrative of how those Jewish leaders upon hearing of Jesus’ resurrection instantaneously gathered and made up a story about his disciples stealing his body. They should have known better because their own Scriptures prophesied this!

The greatest prophecies of all are **Jesus’ own predictions**. All four Gospels record Jesus predicting his death *and* resurrection. Listen to this:

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” (Matt. 17:22–23)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise. (Mark 9:30–31)

The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Luke 9:22)

...I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. (John 10:17-18)

One time, Jesus flipped over the money tables in the temple because the religious leaders were out for money more than serving God. Then we read:

So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:18-22)

To make such claims makes Jesus was either a religious lunatic, a bald-faced liar with a really good poker face, or the Lord over the universe and over your life whether you like it or not. Which one is it?

The Evidence of Eyewitnesses

The second evidence that Jesus rose from the dead is *the evidence of eyewitnesses*. Again, Paul says in our passage:

...he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to

James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (vv. 5–8)

Cephas, or Peter; the twelve disciples as a group; five hundred believers at one time; James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem; then all the apostles; and finally Jesus appeared to Paul. Paul doesn't specifically mention the women mentioned in the Gospel narratives, especially Mary Magdelene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). Why is that so significant? Did you know that a woman's testimony was not allowed in court in ancient Judaism? The importance of that is that if Jesus' followers were making Christianity up, why would they record that the very *first* witnesses of his resurrection were women? That's the opposite of what you would do—unless it really happened that way! Paul also doesn't specifically mention the witness of the tomb guards (Matt. 28:11–15; cf. 27:62–66). Why is their eyewitness so important? Because Roman law said that a centurion who lost what he was guarding or left his guard post was to be executed!

In the recent past a Jewish rabbi, Pinchas Lapide, wrote a book in 1982 entitled, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*.² Now, you have to

² Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1982), .

know that he did not accept that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah of Israel. So he studied the New Testament and ancient documents and here was his conclusion: “I accept the resurrection of Jesus not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as an historical event.”

The Evidence of Transformed Lives

The final evidence here in 1 Corinthians 15 is *the evidence of transformed lives*: **For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain** (vv. 9–10). Saul of Tarsus was one of the up and coming rabbis in Judaism in the early part of the first century. He described his education as “according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3). He described himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:5–6). Yet because of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, Paul the persecutor became Paul the preacher; Paul the opponent became Paul the apostle. What about you? The power of Jesus Christ’s resurrection to

transform humanity over the past two thousand years should not and cannot be discounted so lightly. As Lapidé again said:

When this scared, frightened band of apostles which was just about to throw away everything in order to flee in despair to Galilee; when these peasants, shepherds, and fishermen, who betrayed and denied their master and failed him so miserably, suddenly could be changed overnight into a confident mission society, convinced of salvation and able to work with much more success after Easter than before, then no vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary transformation.³

What explains this transformation? Jesus is Lord and his grace is the invincible power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

Conclusion

It's resurrection or nothing, my friends. Paul asks us to imagine if Jesus didn't rise, but the only conclusion is to believe that he did. And *because* he did our preaching is not in vain, our faith is not in vain, we are not in our sins anymore, those who have died in faith are with the Lord, and we are of all men most to be envied! Because he rose again he is Lord over your life and commands you to turn to him and trust him. "But I have so many questions; I have so many doubts." Bring them with you! And as you follow him he will lead your mind and heart to understand. Amen.

³ Lapidé, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 125.