



What if there were No Resurrection?

Some years ago, a theologian was asked by *The Washington Post*, "What if Christ didn't rise?" The reply: "If the bones of Jesus Christ were found tomorrow, it would make no great difference to me. I would go on going to church as would the majority of Christians." For this person the important thing is not what happens to the body of Jesus, but what happened to the spirits of the apostles. The apostle Paul couldn't disagree more with such an answer. In fact, he would be aghast! We see this very reaction in his first letter to the Corinthians, and the fifteenth chapter, well known as the resurrection passage.

Paul was confronted by the very same attitude toward the resurrection as described above. A group of first century heretics, the Sadducees, provide us with the example. They were the progressive thinkers and enlightened liberals of their day. Anything they couldn't understand with their minds, e.g., the existence of angels, Satan, the resurrection, they rejected, they made reason their god and ridiculed everything that required faith. For example, in the 23rd chapter of Matthew we read of how these Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with their arguments against the resurrection, using a woman who had been widowed seven times after marrying seven brothers. Their question: "Whose wife shall she be in the resurrection?" (Read Matthew 23 to find Jesus' answer.)

The Sadducees were infected with the pagan philosophy of the ancient Greeks. For the Greeks, believing in the resurrection of the body was unthinkable. They believed that the body was like a prison and the source of man's weakness and limitations. For them death was a release, a time when their spirits would be set free into the spirit world, unshackled from their bodies.

Some of the believers at Corinth had bought into the Sadducees' philosophy and denied the resurrection of the body. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul builds his case for the resurrection of the body with a simple, yet powerful and persuasive argument and exposes the Sadducees' heresy. As we follow along, we will see and understand the power of Christ's resurrection.

Denying the resurrection of the body requires that we also deny the Lord's resurrection:

"But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised."

(1 Corinthians 15:13)

But how do those who deny Jesus' resurrection explain the displaced stone and empty tomb? Why were the Roman soldiers, guarding Jesus' tomb, bribed to lie about what happened to His body? (cf. Matthew 28:11-15) Why is His body yet to be found? What about the fact that He appeared to Peter, to the apostles, and to more than 500 people in His resurrected body? (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:5-7) Those who deny the resurrection of the body must also deny the Lord's resurrection.

Like dominos, Paul's second argument follows the first to topple the Corinthian's reasoning: "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain" (empty, void of content) (1 Corinthians 15:14a). Without the Resurrection, the good news of Christ is no news at all. The gospel has no validity because it's based on just another good man who lived and died for just another cause, whose spirit and example lives on. There are many such from which to pick.

Christ is the heart of Christianity. The person and work of Christ are key to the Christian faith, its very foundation. If Christ is not who He said He was, and if He did not do what He said He had come to do, the foundation crumbles and Christianity collapses. Take Christ, the Son of the living God made flesh, out of Christianity, and you gut it; there is practically nothing left!

Without the Resurrection, not only is our preaching this gospel vain, our faith is vain. It, too, is empty, useless, and without content.

As Paul states: *"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain."*

(1 Corinthians 15:17a)

Paul completely destroys the Corinthian's position when he says: *"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"* (1 Corinthians 15:15). In other words, if there is no resurrection, everyone who claimed to have seen the resurrected Lord is a liar. This means Paul, Peter, the apostles, James, the 500, and also, every Christian thinker and leader who has defended that faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), has lied (i.e., Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, Knox, Ursinus, Olevianus, etc.). Yes, even Christ Himself has lied, who clearly predicted His own resurrection and the resurrection of all men:

"Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said."

(John 2:18-22)

In John 10:17, 18 Jesus says: *"Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh 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."*

Speaking of the resurrection of all men, Jesus says in John 5:25-29: *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."*

Christ, who convinced people later to be martyred because they believed He had risen from the dead, even He was a liar if there is no resurrection.

Paul adds another point to his argument: *"And if Christ be not raised, ... ye are yet in your sins"* (1 Corinthians 15:17c). How does this square with what we read in Psalm 103: *"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; ... Who redeemeth thy life from destruction"* (vv. 2, 3). If Christ had remained dead in the tomb, we would still be dead in our sins. It is His resurrection that makes us whole, pardoned, healed, redeemed, and completely free from the guilt and power of sin: *"Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification"* (Romans 4:25).

Furthermore, if there is no resurrection, *"Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished"* (1 Corinthians 15:15). How many times have you, after the death of a loved one, found comfort in the fact that they were with Jesus, where there is no sorrow, no pain, no sickness, no death (cf. Revelation 4:21)? Without the Resurrection, this blessed hope is only a myth.

The bleakness of no resurrection continues in vs. 19: *"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most miserable."* If Christ was not raised from the dead, any hope or expectation of life beyond the grave goes with it. We are left with a false gospel, with just a human Jesus whose ideals are all that live on. If life here on this earth is all that there is, what good does it do to base our hope on the empty promises of one who spoke of all eternity He was unable to effect? If the Christian faith is based on a fraudulent gospel and savior, then the Christian is, indeed, to be pitied above all men.

But the Resurrection is true and it is powerful: *"But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept"* (vs. 20). Because Christ arose, we too, shall arise. Christ has become the first-fruits of an abundant harvest yet to come. The Law (cf. Leviticus 23:10ff.), required that some sheaves of barley be brought to the temple as first-fruits of the harvest. There it was to be threshed, cleaned, and made into flour which was then offered to God. That was the first-fruits. It is interesting to note that not until after that was done could the new barley be bought and sold in the shops and bread he made from the new flour. The first-fruits was a sign of the harvest to follow. So the resurrection of Jesus was a sign of the resurrection of all believers which was to come. Just as the new barley could not be used until the first-fruits had been duly offered, so the new harvest of lives could not come until Jesus had been raised from the dead. He would be the first-fruits of many brethren, of an abundant harvest.

The result of Jesus' resurrection is described in vv. 21, 22:

"For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive, But every man in his own order: Christ the first-fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming."

Whenever Scripture speaks about sin, it also speaks about death. The two are inseparable *"For the wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23a). Adam brought sin and death into the world, but Christ brought resurrection and life: *"but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 6:23b). Like the Jew who took the first-fruits to the temple, Jesus arose and presented Himself to the Father as a sure sign of the harvest to come, i.e., the resurrection of all those who belong to Him.

Whether in Adam or in Christ, all men face eternity. The difference lies in their destinies. Those with Sadducee hearts remain in Adam and will spend eternity in the lake of fire. Those who are in Christ are part of the living harvest, waiting for Christ to come and gather them up to the Father's presence. That is the power of the Resurrection.

The Corinthian believers were being led astray by the false teaching of their religious leaders, the Sadducees, false teaching that would eventually destroy the faith of the people and their children. The Sadducees, in turn, had been influenced by the false intellectualism of their day. Is it any different in our day? When it is suggested by a professor in a Christian college that Adam may have had a primitive mother in an accommodation to the godless theory of evolution; when a seminary professor teaches that the six day creation account in Genesis 1-3 is a literary device to describe long periods of time; when the roles of men and women in the home and in the church are confused in direct conflict with what the Scriptures teach; when homosexualism, as an abomination to the Lord, is questioned, and ministers and theologians teach that they should be accepted as they are and allowed to marry; when the centrality of the preached Word begins to fade and the sermon becomes less important, and worship becomes an area of experimentation, innovation, and entertainment; when men (and women) can sit in judgment over God's Word and determine what is to be shelved or discarded as culturally conditioned; then it must be asked: Can the doctrine of the Resurrection be far behind?

Be warned and be alert! Heresy is still alive and well! The numerous warnings against false teachers and heretics were not just meant for another time. Clearly, they were directed to the church all ages. Hear Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders:

"For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears."

(Acts 20:29-31)

One of the sins for which Christ condemned the religious leaders of his day was their misdirected missions and evangelism program: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves!"* (Matthew 23:15). Church growth, huge membership rolls, consumerism religion is not enough.

Much more important questions are: To what are the listeners being converted? What is the message that is being preached and believed? How long before some will begin to teach that there is no resurrection from the dead? *"And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your, faith is also vain."*(1 Corinthians 15:13, 14).

Let me put it in terms we can all understand. It's very late at night. The phone startles you awake, and before you even realize, you've picked it up. You hear a familiar, hut grief-stricken voice struggling to get the news out: "She's dead." Death, that Grim Reaper, has struck, leaving an empty place. It knows no hour, respects no person. All of us, some more intensely than others, have felt its sting. That's when we need the comforting truth and power of the Resurrection: that because Christ arose, all those who die in Christ will also arise, and together we can shout triumphantly:

*"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?
Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

(1 Corinthians 15:55, 57)

Vernon Pollema

© 2014 Copyright by the **Reformed Church in die U.S.** All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.
The views expressed are not necessarily those of the editors or official positions of the RCUS.
www.christianstudylibrary.org