

Christ, the Firstfruits

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[0 : 00] And there are many different beliefs about what happens after we die. And it was interesting as I walked around out there just to see that reflected on some of the stones.

Some of them you could see very obviously they were people of faith. They believed that that wasn't the end for them. Others, there was no indication of anything.

I saw some pictures of combines and golf clubs and stuff on the stone. And that's about it. This person is rested here. What happens after we die?

There are all kinds of views in our world today about what happens after we die. There are people who believe in reincarnation. That after we die, we come back. We get kind of the chance to do a redo.

Maybe in a different form. Maybe as a human being. Maybe as an animal. Maybe as something else. There are people who believe in the afterlife.

[1 : 00] But that we can't really know what that will be like until we get there. There's something. I believe there's something. But I'm not really sure what it will be like. And I don't think we really can know.

And then there are some people who just all together deny that there is any afterlife. That, you know, once your body's dead, that's it.

That's the end. They put you in the ground and you cease to exist. Some of the people are atheists or naturalists who just really believe in what we see.

That's what we have. There's no soul. There's no spirit. That's what they believe. Well, this morning we want to listen in on a conversation between the Apostle Paul and the church at Corinth where he talks about the afterlife.

And what happens after we die. And as we listen to him and what he says under the inspiration of God's spirit, my hope is that we'll get a little bit of an idea about what we might like written on our gravestone when we die.

[2 : 12] So if you have your Bibles, please open them to 1 Corinthians 15, verse 12. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 12. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 12.

1 Corinthians 15, verse 12. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 12. He says in verse 11, 1 Corinthians 15, verse 12. Whether it's myself or the others who saw him alive, this is what we preach and this is what you believed. And now in verse 12 he says, 1 Corinthians 15, verse 12.

But if it is preached, if it is being preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

There's a bit of an inconsistency here. And as we're about to see an incompatibility with the gospel for those who hold to this idea, this view.

If we look closely at the words that Paul uses to describe what they are saying in verse 12, some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead.

[3 : 44] And throughout this passage, that the dead are not raised. And we get a little bit of a clue down in verse 29 as to what they really mean here. He says, If the dead are not raised at all.

Some of the Corinthians are categorically denying that there is resurrection of the dead. And whether that's even a thing that ever happens at all.

There is no afterlife. There's nothing. It's not something that happens. It's not something that will happen. Who are these people?

And what's really brought them to think like this? I think this is a question that many have been asking over the centuries. Scholars and commentators. They've kind of come to three theories.

The first theory is that this group of believers, they believe that the resurrection has already taken place. And this kind of goes back to Paul's letter to Timothy, in which he warns them about

Hymenaeus and Philetus, two men who were saying and teaching that the resurrection has already happened.

[4 : 58] And so that's one of the possibilities, is that these Corinthians, they believe that it's already happened. And if we look throughout history, we see evidence of people who actually believe this.

One line of thinking is that the resurrection is just a spiritual thing. You're resurrected inside. Your spirit is brought to life. And when you die, you're just essentially shedding the dead husk of your body and your spirit continues to live forever.

That's what some people have believed. Another line of thinking, which might surprise you, there was some who actually believed that the resurrection happened and after that point, they were immortal and that they weren't ever going to die, that they were just going to keep living forever. Kind of like Highlander, if you've ever seen that. I'm not going to say any more about that, but this theory, the problem with it is that Paul says that these are those who are saying that there is no resurrection.

Not those that are saying it has already taken place. So it's probably not who he's referring to. The second theory is that these people are people who are essentially denying that there is any life after death at all.

[6 : 26] That there's no existence after we die. And when we think back to ancient Greek and Roman religious culture, we kind of think, well, did they ever really believe that back then?

Didn't they all kind of worship spirits and gods and temples and all that stuff? But actually there's a fair bit of evidence that even people back in Paul's day, some of them believe that there was no afterlife.

And I was shocked to find this out, but apparently there's the tombstones that they found that have an inscription on them.

And the inscription goes like this, I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care.

And this was actually common, apparently so common that they abbreviated that into just the first letters of those statements. And this was on people's tombstones. I was kind of shocked to find that out.

[7 : 31] The idea that there's nothing. You live and after that, it's over. Some people think that perhaps that's what the Corinthians that he's talking to were about believed.

And then the final theory is that the Corinthians here, when they said that there's no resurrection, it's that they had a problem with the idea of a bodily resurrection.

Ancient Greek and Roman culture, the religious views and beliefs that they had were kind of very much this idea that when you die, your soul is separated from your body.

And you can almost think of it in terms of like the bird being let out of the cage, you know, where it's kind of a, it's a good thing. It's like you're ascending.

It's like you're going to the next level. And you're stepping out of that primitive existence with the body. And so the thought here is that there might have been some confusion by some of these people.

[8 : 37] Like, well, how can there be a resurrection? Like, is God really going to take my dead corpse out of the ground and put my spirit or my soul back into that or my bones?

What happens if my body was, you know, it was destroyed? It's just ashes. Like, how is that going to happen? Isn't that like a downgrade?

You know, isn't that like putting the bird back in the cage? Like, that doesn't make sense. So there's some that would believe that that was really what they were saying. Well, there's no resurrection.

You know, not like that. Not that kind of a resurrection. Um, so with these theories, I mean, which of them is right? Uh, good scholars over the years, they admit, we don't have enough today to pin it down precisely.

Um, Martin Luther, 500 years ago, he said, um, maybe it's that there was, there was more than one different group of people who believe different things about this.

[9 : 39] Um, more than one different kind of resurrection denier. And, perhaps Paul is actually writing less specifically here and leaving out some of the details just to try to catch all of them and to, uh, bring the word of correction that they need.

So he says, if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless. And so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God.

For we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

[10 : 55] If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. So Paul's first question is, is essentially a challenge to what they believe.

He says, we're preaching that Christ has been raised from the dead. And some of you are saying that there is no resurrection of the dead, ever, at all. It's not a thing. That's, those things can't, you can't believe both of those at the same time.

They're incompatible. The good news, the gospel that we proclaim to you, is not compatible with that idea. You can't say, the resurrection never happens.

And say, I believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. It's one or the other. But let's think about the implications. Hypothetically, if it's true that there is no resurrection of the dead at all, then Jesus hasn't been raised from the dead.

This is the first big implication that he gives. If this is not a thing that ever happens, he says it three times. In verse 14, he says, sorry, 13, he says, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

[12 : 20] He says it again in 15, but he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16, for if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

Paul wants there to be no confusion. These two things are incompatible. If the dead are not raised, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Now, let's think about the implications of that. If Jesus hasn't been raised from the dead, and now Paul gives us, he gives the church there, seven implications.

The first implication is verse 14. If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless. We've spent the last years of our life going from city to city to town to town to synagogue to synagogue for nothing.

The word useless there, it literally means empty. For nothing. The second implication, also there, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith.

[13 : 39] Your belief, what you believed back at the beginning when we came to you and brought you the message, it's for nothing. It's empty.

It's hollow. It has no value. The third implication, verse 15. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, he says, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.

In other words, if Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, then we're all a bunch of liars. every last one of us who said that we saw him alive, we're deliberately lying to you.

And you believed us. Implication number four, verse 17. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.

It's a very similar word to the one he used before, your faith is empty, but it essentially means that it's pointless. The years of your life that you spent believing this and doing stuff based on your belief in this, it was wasted.

[14 : 56] It was for nothing. It has no effect. The news that we gave you is no good to you at all. It brings no benefit to your life.

Implication number five, also in verse 17, he says, you are still in your sins. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, you are still in your sins. Now this is kind of one of those ones where I thought it was the death of Jesus that dealt with our sin problem, but Paul is actually saying that our salvation is dependent upon the resurrection of Jesus as well.

He doesn't explain why. He simply states that it is, and if we want to explore the why, we can, but that would be a whole other sermon. So for this morning, I think we just need to take Paul and the Lord at his word.

Our salvation depends on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Implication number six, verse 18.

If Christ has not been raised from the dead, those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, you are still in your sins.

[16:19] You are liable before God for everything you have done against him. You're still guilty. And not only that, but everybody else who has believed in him and has died is now lost.

They've perished. They're facing the same end as the rest of us. And the final implication, implication number seven, verse 19.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. If Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, then it is right for the people in our world to look at us and say, oh, those poor people.

Those poor people. I mean, look, they wasted their lives believing a lie. They were scorned. They were mocked. They, in some cases, suffered and were even killed for nothing. And it is right for us to pity them if we only have hope for this life.

[17:41] Because what do we get in this life if Christ hasn't been raised from the dead? We get a bit of a sense of joy, a sense of peace, a sense of security.

But if Jesus hasn't been raised from the dead, then all of that is just a false hope, a false sense of security, a false sense of peace. We get that with a bunch of trouble for what we've believed.

And oh, if that's the case, then it is right for the people to look at us and think, those poor people, they were duped to the nth degree.

Verse 20. Actually, before we get there, I mean, summing these things all up, bringing this all together, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we should all just go home right now. We should liquidate the church's assets, we should divide it up amongst the members, and we should stop wasting our time. Next Sunday, we shouldn't come here.

[18:52] Because if this is all just a sham, then we're to be pitied more than anyone. I mean, think of this. God, it turns out, is a liar.

His word isn't true. Jesus is not really who God said that he would be, the king that reigns forever on the throne of David.

David, Jesus himself is a liar. He promised and offered eternal life, but if there's no resurrection, if not even Jesus was raised from the dead, then why should we think that we should get that?

You know, the implications of this go right to the end. We're just wasting our time here if Jesus hasn't been raised from the dead. Verse 20. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. We learned at Promise Keepers, was it last weekend?

[20:05] the meaning of the word but. And the guy there had some really colorful illustrations, but essentially he said, when you hear the word but, it means that everything that came before it is negated.

I owe you a lot of money, but. I really like you. I like, you know, spending time with you, but. It's really powerful the way he phrased it, but that's essentially what Paul is saying.

Some of you are saying that there's no resurrection, and these are the implications of that, but. To say it another way, you're wrong.

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. It's a fact. And I love the way Paul just states it.

He doesn't say, I believe that Christ was raised from the dead. He says he was indeed. Yes, God did raise him from the dead. Notice that he doesn't say, therefore, Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

[21:19] We might think after this big list of implications, well, yeah, I mean, we sure hope that Jesus was raised from the dead, because the implications of that for me, as somebody who's been going to church for all my life, and believing this for my whole life, would be terrible.

But Paul doesn't say, you know, these are the implications. Therefore, Christ has been raised from the dead, because I can't imagine, like, if that was true, that would be like the end of my life. On what basis does Paul say, does he assert, that Christ has been raised from the dead?

Back in verse 4 to 8. The scriptures foretold it, and I myself saw Jesus alive after he was dead.

Not only me, but countless others, some of whom are still alive. You want to go check with them? You can. It's a fact. You're saying that there's no resurrection.

It's not a thing. But I have seen a man raised from the dead myself. He appeared to me. We were with him. Paul has no reason to doubt.

[22:36] He has no reason to say, well, I believe, but your belief that there is no resurrection is valid. No, it's not. And so he simply asserts it.

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. You Corinthians who believe that there's no resurrection, you're wrong. continuing on in verse 20, he says, he's been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

That's kind of an odd expression to us today. The first fruits. We don't really say that ever. We don't really say that ever. What does that mean? The first fruits were essentially the first portion of the harvest that was then offered to God back in the Old Testament.

The Israelites did this. And essentially what Paul means to say, he uses some of that meaning, is that Christ has been raised from the dead, and his resurrection is like the first portion of a greater resurrection that is yet to come.

It's like the first installment. You can't have a first installment unless there's more coming. It's the down payment. It's the guarantee.

[24 : 00] It's the pledge. It's the proof that there's more where that came from. He's the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Who are these people that are yet to come? They're those who are dead. Some of them are in the cemetery west of town here. Those are the people who have fallen asleep.

That's Paul's, they're those who have died. It's from among the dead. That this great harvest will come.

And Christ is the proof. He's the guarantee of that. Verse 21. 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. Paul is essentially just making it clear. Yes, first fruits.

[25 : 03] I'm saying that there is going to be resurrection, not just for Jesus, but for others. In the same way as death became a reality for humanity through a man, Adam.

Resurrection from the dead becomes a reality for humanity. Through a man. Jesus. Jesus. And then he states it so clearly, so powerfully, in verse 22.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. We need to be careful with this statement. I had a friend back in the day who would point to that verse and say, see, everyone is going to be saved. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Everyone's going to be saved. Despite the fact that Jesus taught to the contrary and so did the apostles in other places. That's not what Paul's saying here. He's saying that in Adam all die.

[26 : 16] All who are in Adam die. And all of humanity is in Adam. We're all descended from him, so we all die. But all who are in Christ shall be brought to life.

Only those who are in Christ have that guarantee, that promise, and that hope. In Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

We're going to cut it off at that point. Paul just keeps going, but we're going to get to that next week. But a couple things that I want to say in closing.

How does this apply to us? I mean, we've heard the logic of Paul as he reasons with these people who don't believe in the afterlife. I'm going to guess that most of us believe in the resurrection of the dead and the afterlife.

And so, how does this apply to us today? There's three things that really kind of came to my mind as I was thinking about that this week. We've heard the logic of Paul, but do we hear the heart of Paul here?

[27 : 38] Why is he warning them? Why is he laying this out so carefully for them? Because he loves them. And he doesn't want to see any single one of them perish.

Think back to verse 2 that we looked at last Sunday. By this good news, you are saved if you hold firmly to the word of truth, to the word I preach to you.

If you move on from this and you embrace this other idea that there is no resurrection, you're in spiritual danger. And I don't want any of you to face God without Christ.

Do you hear the heart of Paul? That he takes the time to say to them in love, you guys are wrong. But there's a flip side to that too.

It's not just the warning out of desperation, but it's the assurance. Do you hear those words? As in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive.

[28 : 48] That's a promise. And I want you to know the joy, the certainty that you can face the rest of your journey to the cemetery with.

That's not the final destination. They will lay you in the ground someday unless the Lord returns first. But you will be coming up if you are in Christ.

And you can be confident of that because he is the first fruits. He's the first installment. And there's more where that came from. The second thing that really struck me is the simple weight of these words.

In Adam all die. It's not even Paul's main point. It's just part of the statement. In Adam all die.

We live in a community that is full of people who are headed to the cemetery with us. But it's only in Christ that they will be made alive, that they have any hope of being resurrected to life rather than eternal punishment.

[30 : 04] For Paul, this is not a matter of life and death. This is a matter of eternal life and eternal death. We're surrounded by people in this community, in the neighboring communities, who need to know that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

And there is a way that they can beat the grave. What are we going to do about it? The final thing that struck me from this is the way that Paul communicates the gospel.

Notice that he doesn't say, I see that some of you guys are believing something that's of concern to me. And I would suggest that you consider altering your view because if you don't, there's the possibility that something bad might happen to you.

Look at how he says it. Right back from verse 1. Now, I want to make known to you the good news. And what is it? Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

This is how it is. This is the reality. And I want to suggest to you this morning that this is how our neighbors need to hear it from us. This is the truth.

[31 : 31] We need to be the lighthouse, the church in this community that warns people of the danger of the rocks that they are going to crash against. It won't do them any good for us to say, well, I believe that there's rocks that you're going to crash against.

But your viewpoint is valid too. Was Paul disrespectful when he said as matter-of-factly as he did, you guys are wrong.

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. Was that rude? Was that arrogant? It wasn't. It was the truth.

And the truth is what people need to hear in love, with gentleness, but with firmness and commitment to it.

we need to speak as though we really are ambassadors of Christ. And so I want to leave you with this encouragement.

[32 : 36] Let's hold fast to the good news of Jesus, the gospel. But let's not stop there. let's hold forth the good news of Jesus.

It's what people need to hear to be saved. I don't know what I'm going to put on my gravestone. I haven't decided that yet. but I want to say something to point people to Jesus that if someone's wandering around in there and they come across my stone, it'll say something that will point people to Jesus.

And I hope that that's your heart too. But let's not wait till then to tell them. Let's use what we have now to make it known.

Father in heaven, thank you for your word. Thank you for the good news. We praise you that you raised Jesus from the dead.

[33 : 41] You did what is impossible, what doesn't even make sense to many of us, but what's beautiful and amazing. And we can't wait for that day, Lord, when we too will be called out of our graves and when we will meet you in the air at your return.

In Christ's name, Amen.