



Believing the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:1-23

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It is significant that the NT gives quite a bit of attention to making the case for the historicity of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. There is quite a bit in the NT that is designed to convince the reader that the resurrection actually happened. Many things in the Bible we have to accept because the Bible claims to be the word of God. The Bible speaks to us authoritatively as God's word and God expects us to receive it as such. There is not a lot of time spent trying to prove that what the Bible teaches is true. The Bible is true because it is God speaking and God expects us to believe him when he speaks. The evidence of its truthfulness is in its inherent authority which is obvious to those whose eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit and which cannot be seen by those who are still blind because of their sinful natures. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul writes, "...the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...."

It is interesting therefore that a fair bit of attention is given in the NT to convince the reader that Jesus actually rose from the dead. In the end we accept that or not based on whether or not we accept the Bible as God's word. And the certainty that believers have concerning the resurrection comes from the Holy Spirit who opens our hearts to receive the Bible as God's word. But there is still a place for rational arguments to confirm our faith or in the case of unbelievers to move them towards faith.

So, the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the four gospels are all about simply making the case that Jesus rose from the dead. They say very little, if anything, about the meaning of the resurrection. The concern is to convince the reader that the tomb in which Jesus' dead

body had been laid was empty and, because it was guarded by soldiers, no one could have stolen the dead body of Jesus and hidden it even if they had wanted to. The fact that it was women who first found the empty tomb also supports the authenticity of the story because no one making up such a story would have made women the first witnesses, because in that culture, women were not considered to be credible witnesses. The fact of the empty tomb and the fact that Jesus' dead body was never produced is powerful support for the claim that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.

We see this same interest in supporting the claim of the resurrection of Jesus in the first part of 1 Corinthians 15. In verses 12-15, Paul addresses the conviction of some in the congregation who did not believe in the general resurrection at the end of the age. Verse 12, "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" It seems that these people were not doubting the resurrection of Jesus, but the resurrection of everyone else at the end of the age. And Paul in his response to that doubt makes the point that Christ's resurrection from the dead is the guarantee of the general resurrection at the end of the age. There is an unbreakable connection between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. Verse 13, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." The point Paul is making is this wonderful point that the resurrection of Christ guarantees the general resurrection. In verse 23 he refers to the resurrection of Christ as the first fruits of the general resurrection. "But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."

It is as part of this discussion that Paul speaks of the absolute necessity of the resurrection of Christ for the Christian message. Verses 17-19, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

The general resurrection at the end of the world and the resurrection of Christ from the dead are tied together with an unbreakable bond. If one

of them is true, they are both true and if one of them is false they are both false. If there is no resurrection at the end of the age, then the resurrection of Christ is impossible. And if Christ did not rise from the dead then the general resurrection is impossible. Both resurrections stand and fall together. They are really one resurrection. And the point that Paul stresses in these verses is the absolute necessity of Jesus' resurrection for the gospel. If Christ did not rise from the dead, we might as well pack it up and go home. If Christ did not rise from the dead, Riverside church might as well disband because our faith is futile, and we are still in our sins. If Christ did not rise from the dead, we have no hope for our beloved loved ones who have died as believers. They have perished, and both their faith and our faith are pathetic. "[W]e are of all people most to be pitied."

Now Paul gives three grounds for believing in the resurrection in verses 1-11. First, he refers to his own preaching. He speaks of "the gospel I preached to you." He speaks of "the word I preached to you." And he "delivered to [them] of first importance what [he] also received." Paul was conscious of having received his message from God. This is really the main thing as I have said already. Paul and the other apostles, as well as the prophets, spoke and wrote as they were guided by the Holy Spirit. That message comes from God and is to be accepted as such. Some people do. Some people don't. The difference is the difference between our natural spiritual blindness and supernaturally given sight. So, Paul proclaimed the resurrection of Christ from the dead. That is the main reason we are to believe it.

Paul also mentions that Jesus "was raised on the first day in accordance with the Scriptures." This is intended to strengthen our faith in the resurrection. The Old Testament has a number of hints concerning the resurrection which are fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection. And the connection between foreshadowing and fulfillment is intended to strengthen our faith in the fulfillment.

A key verse here is Psalm 16:10 which says, "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol or let your holy one see corruption." Now these words apply initially to David. But in his sermon in Acts 2, Peter sees them as being fulfilled in Jesus. The same is the case with the Psalms of the

righteous sufferer that we looked at last week. Jesus clearly identified with them. And at the end of each of them is the righteous sufferer is vindicated. The Psalms that Jesus fulfilled by his unjust suffering end with the righteous sufferer being vindicated. Psalm 22:22 says “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” And Psalm 69:30, “I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.” Reflecting on these Psalms in the light of Jesus Christ leads to the conclusion that these vindications are foreshadowings of the ultimate vindication, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

There is not much in the Old Testament that refers explicitly to the resurrection of Christ, but what there are, are passages that can be seen as foreshadowings of Jesus’ resurrection. And there are enough of these that Paul can say that Jesus rose from the dead according to the Scriptures. These connections are intended to strengthen our faith.

There is also a biblical logic that leads to Jesus’ resurrection. There is a way that the whole of the Old Testament points to Jesus’ resurrection not only by way of explicit prediction, but by the logic and the meaning of the history of salvation. The logic goes like this: First there is the fact that sin leads to death. Adam and Eve sinned and the curse for that sin was death. Death entered the world through the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. God’s mission of salvation is to undo the curse of sin. The whole history of salvation is the unfolding of God’s plan to defeat sin and its consequences. The consequence of sin that sums up them all is death. So, the whole mission of God is about the defeat of death.

That is what the whole Biblical story is about. Jesus came to deal with sin. He came to pay the penalty of sin. He came to save his people from their sins. That means that he came to defeat death. Victory over sin and death = life. Sin and death go together. Salvation and life go together. That means that once Jesus paid the penalty for sin, his resurrection had to follow. The justice of God required that paying the penalty for sin would lead to life. And so, one of the ways that the whole Old Testament anticipates the resurrection of Jesus is the logic of the history of salvation. Salvation is about being delivered from sin and death. That means it is about life from the dead. This is another reason

that Paul can say that Jesus rose from the dead according to the Scriptures.

That does not mean that many people understood this before it happened. But some of the Old Testament saints understood enough of this idea that they looked forward to their own resurrection. And so, we find a verse like Psalm 16:10 where David says, "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol or let your holy one to see corruption." No doubt David was thinking about himself. But after Jesus' resurrection, Peter saw that this was an anticipation of the resurrection of David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Anyway, the point of all this is to sustain our faith in the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul says in our text, that Jesus "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." We can examine those Scriptures and see how they require Jesus' resurrection from the dead. No promise of God could come true apart from Jesus' resurrection. Even though the OT says very little if anything explicitly about Jesus' resurrection, without Jesus' resurrection, it is a dead end. It is all about salvation and without resurrection there is no salvation. That is why Paul writes in verse 17 here in 1 Corinthians 15, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins." So, seeing Jesus' resurrection in its organic relationship with the whole OT is a powerful support for our faith in the factuality of the resurrection. Without the literal bodily physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, the whole edifice of Scripture comes tumbling down.

The third way that Paul in these verses at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, seeks to sustain our faith in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus is his reference to eyewitnesses. Verses 5-8, "... and that 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." (1 Corinthians 15:5-8, ESV)

This is part of the gospel as Paul summarizes it here. The message that he had delivered to the Corinthians was that Jesus died and that he was buried and that he was raised the third day and that he appeared to

these various eyewitnesses. This is part of the gospel. This is part of the good news. It is not only that Jesus died and rose from the dead, but that the risen Christ appeared to eyewitnesses.

What this means is that the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus is a necessary part of the gospel. The showing of his risen self to eyewitnesses makes it impossible to interpret Jesus' resurrection as something that only happened in the disciples' minds. This interpretation has been suggested, but it cannot be plausible in the light of the prominence of a wide variety of eye-witnesses in the biblical accounts. Paul here is clearly stressing the great significance of the eye-witnesses. There was Cephas, also known as Peter. There were the twelve disciples altogether. There were five hundred other brothers at one time, most of whom were still living as Paul was writing. Then James is mentioned and all of the apostles again and finally Paul himself in the encounter that he had with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Paul is saying: "There are a large number of eye-witnesses – there are a large number of people who saw Jesus after he had risen from the dead. Most of those people are still alive so you can go and ask them." He is making the point that besides his own inspired testimony and besides the testimony of the OT Scriptures, there were people alive who could confirm his claims concerning the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ – many people. There were a great number of people who could confirm that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. This is a powerful confirmation of its reality. This was a powerful confirmation that the resurrection of Jesus was not just a figment of the imagination of some mystically inclined disciple. Paul is providing powerful evidence for the actual physical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Why does Paul make such a point of this? It is to strengthen the faith of believers and it is to help convince unbelievers of the reality of the resurrection. This epistle was written to the believers at Corinth. And so clearly Paul is seeking to bolster their faith in the truth of Jesus' resurrection. But the gospel is also intended to be proclaimed to the world and so presenting this evidence for the reality of Jesus'

resurrection is an important part of seeking to persuade unbelievers to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Now I want to say a few words about the importance of these thoughts for us who are believers. Our faith is challenged every day. There used to be a time in the western world, at least, that the surrounding culture supported belief in God and the supernatural and thus also the resurrection. Most people believed that it had really happened. You were odd and out of step with the culture if you denied the resurrection. That is no longer the case.

We live in a culture where believing in the literal resurrection of Jesus is considered to be naïve and foolish and unsophisticated and even dangerous. Belief in God and the supernatural are considered to be outmoded, relics of the past, no longer credible in the light of modern science and the theory of evolution. Believing something like the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is placed on the same level as believing in Santa Claus or the Easter bunny. The people who are smart and sophisticated believe in things that can be tested and verified scientifically and not in the fabulous stories of God and demons and miracles found in an old book which was completed more than 2000 years ago. That is the way that many of the people around us look at the claims of orthodox Christianity, including the claim of the resurrection.

And that is a challenge for us. We are naïve if we think that it is not. The fact is that an awful lot of people have succumbed to the spirit of the age on this and many other matters. Supernatural religion is no longer credible to many of the people around us – especially the elites and the opinion makers. Sociologists and psychologists and philosophers speak of plausibility structures. By that term they mean certain beliefs are plausible in a culture and other beliefs are implausible. For most people in our culture the idea that Jesus rose from the dead is very implausible. For many of the opinion-makers in our society, a resurrection from the dead is obviously impossible. It is something that cannot happen. And so, it is rejected out of hand. We live in the 21st century. We do not believe in people rising from the dead.

This kind of thinking is around us like the air that we breathe. It is everywhere, explicitly or implicitly. And that is a challenge for our faith.

We are out of step with the culture in which we live. We are seen as out-of-date and simplistic and naïve for believing that Jesus actually rose from the dead.

This is why it is important to be thoughtful about our Christianity and ponder the many reasons that belief in the Bible is not naïve and superficial, but actually profound and well grounded. In Peter 3:15 says that we must always be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” That assumes that there are reasons to believe. The case for Christianity is actually a very strong case. There is nothing irrational about believing that Jesus rose from the dead. And here in this passage that we are studying, along with the gospel accounts of the resurrection, we are given good reasons to support the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. And part of that picture is the evidence of a large number of eye-witnesses. After Jesus rose from the dead, he showed himself to many people. Acts 1:3 says that Jesus “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during the forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”

Now as I said before, the Bible claims to be the word of God and expects us to perceive its innate authority. Ultimately, we can only believe through the conviction given by the Holy Spirit. The truthfulness of the Bible is supported by the wonderful way that earlier Scriptures are fulfilled in amazing and profound ways by Jesus and his mission. But we also have the evidence of a large number of people who saw and spoke to Jesus after he had risen from the dead. Belief in the resurrection is anything but naïve and superficial. The real reason it is rejected by so many is not that there are not good reasons for believing it; it is that people suppress the truth in unrighteousness according to Romans 1:18.

Anyway, Paul gives these reasons to believe in the resurrection to strengthen our faith. He himself, had seen the risen Christ and there were a large group of others who had seen him as well. And some of those people, including Paul, remained faithful to their confession of Christ even though it cost them their lives.

Most of the 12 disciples, as well as Paul, were eventually killed because they would not deny the risen and exalted Christ. And Paul was OK with

that. What Paul was most passionate about was that “Christ [would] be honored in [his] body, whether by life or by death.” That is Philippians 1:20. Paul goes on to say in verse 21 “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” How could Paul be so unconcerned whether he lived or died?

It was because of the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus means that believers are no longer in their sins. 1 Corinthians 15:17 says “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.” Of course, the opposite of that is also true. Since Christ has been raised your faith is not in vain and you have been delivered from your sins. The resurrection of Jesus means that those who are united to him by faith are no longer in their sins. Jesus died the death we deserve to die and having done that, death could no longer hold him – it had been conquered – for him and for us.

Sin and death go together. And righteousness and life go together. Christ has exhausted the penalty of sin for his people and he fulfilled all righteousness for his people and so he must have life for himself and for his people. That is why the resurrection of Christ is unalterably linked to the resurrection of his people. Verse 20 “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Christ has overcome death and so life must follow.

That is why Paul and the other martyrs could go to their deaths with courage and hope. They believed in the resurrection of Jesus and they believed in the resurrection of all who are in Christ at the end of the age. One of the great evidences for the truth of the resurrection is the willingness of the early Christians to die for their faith. They died with courage and kept the faith because they knew that Jesus’ resurrection had changed everything. Death itself had been overcome. The meaning of physical death had changed for those who were united to Christ by faith. They could go to their graves knowing that one day they would rise from the dead. They could have that confidence because Jesus had risen from the dead, “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Death is the great enemy of the human race. And death exists because of sin. It is vital to see the relationship between sin and death. Sin leads to death. Sin is destructive. Sin is rebellion against God and rebellion against God is death that leads to death. We see it in our own lives. We

see it in the world around us. Rebellion against God leads to chaos and brokenness and alienation and misery which are all manifestations of spiritual death leading to physical death leading to eternal death. This is what we are rescued from if we are in Christ. The resurrection of Christ was the result of Jesus' victory over death. And we share in that if we belong to Christ.

That will show up in our lives by seeing sin for what it is and turning from it. To be delivered from death is to be delivered from the power of sin. Through faith in Christ we are given the new life already here and now and that new life manifests itself as a growing obedience. These things are all connected: Sin and death; life and obedience and finally the culmination of eternal life, the resurrection of the body and life with God and for God forever.

This is the gospel. This is the good news. To celebrate the resurrection of Christ is to celebrate Christ's victory over death. The curse has been overcome. Eternal life has begun. And broken people suffering the horrific consequences of sin are invited to believe in Jesus and receive life that begins now in abundant living and which will come to its fullness in the resurrection of the body and life in the presence of God forever.

The way that Paul begun this chapter is the way I will end this sermon. "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you...."