

Fruits of the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:20-34

Introduction: Pastor Warren Wiersbe is right when he writes, “The resurrection of the human body is a future event that has compelling implications for our personal lives. If the resurrection is not true, then we can forget about the future and live as we please” (*Be Wise*, 167). At Corinth there were serious misunderstandings and misconceptions both about the necessity of a general resurrection as well as the quality of the resurrected body. Paul has corrected the thinking that you could believe in the resurrection of the Savior, but not the resurrection of the saints (15:12-19). He shows that if there is no general resurrection then one could not possibly believe in a particular resurrection. He shows the devastating consequences of a dead, lifeless non-resurrected Jesus.

Paul now pivots from the gloom and doom of a purely hypothetical situation to the joyfully actuality that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. His resurrection is actually a guarantee of our resurrection. Because He was raised we will be raised too! As we will see, the past resurrection of Jesus guarantees several facets of the future resurrection to come, the fruits of the resurrection.

I. Because Christ was raised from the dead, death has been destroyed 15:20-23

The 7 “if” statements of 15:12-19 are countered by v. 20! “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead...” The phrase “But in fact” (*Message*, “But the truth is;” *CSB*, “But as it is”) is Paul’s way of emphasizing that he is about to introduce some extremely important affirmations that are absolutely true. “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”

Schreiner point out, “In the Old Testament the firstfruits were offered to the Lord (Ex. 23:19; Lev. 23:10; Deut. 18:4; 26:10). They were the first instalments of the harvest...the idea is the same here: Christ’s resurrection certifies that dead believers will be raised later (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-18)” (*1 Cor.*, 312). Paul’s argument here parallels his argument in Romans 5:12-21. Jesus is the new and better 2nd Adam who overcomes sin and death brought into the world by the 1st Adam.

This is a great word of comfort to these Corinthian believers who had seen many loved one precede them in death. Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Hayes points out this is a new element in the resurrection story. It is an aspect of the resurrection of Jesus that was not discussed in Paul’s explanation of the gospel in verses 3-5. His resurrection did not just confirm his identity; it confirms our identification with him! (Hayes, *Interpretation*, 263). Paul draws

on the practice of the Old Testament where the firstfruits, or the first harvest, that came in would be given to the Lord guaranteeing a future harvest to come.

Because Christ was raised from the dead, we will be raised from the dead.

Again, Jesus is not only the firstfruit, he is also the last Adam. The first Adam brought death. The second Adam brought life (vs. 21-22). The first Adam brought sin. The last Adam brought salvation. The first Adam caused separation between humanity and God. The last Adam brought reconciliation between humanity and God. This glorious reality and hope is only true for those who are “in Christ” because these are the only ones who will be resurrected to eternal life. It should be noted here that Paul clearly believed in a literal Adam just as much as he believed in a literal Christ. The same was true for Jesus too (see Matt. 19:4-6)!

Paul adds a military analogy to his agricultural analogy in v. 23. There is a certain priority in the future resurrection. “But each in his own order; Christ the firstfruits, then, at his coming those who belong to Christ” (15:23). The word for “order” is the Greek word *tagma*. It usually refers to a unit of soldiers. This military metaphor dominates verses 23-28 (Hayes, *Interpretation*, 261). Earlier Paul spoke about everything being done in the services of the church, “decently and in order...” (14:40). Ironically, that is exactly what you should find in the military; things are done decently and in order. That will also be true at the

resurrection. There is an interval between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of believers because the resurrection of believers takes place at the Second Coming of Jesus. (The word for “coming,” *parousia*, is commonly used for the Second Coming of Christ). See for example Matthew 24:3, 27, 37; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; II Thess. 2:1, 8; James 5:7. The resurrected Lord will descend from heaven and at that time those who belong to Christ will also be raised and given their new glorified, resurrection bodies. Death and the “death of death” will be on glorious display on resurrection day!

II. Because Christ was raised from the dead, the kingdom will be delivered

15:24-28

The return of the resurrected Lord will set off a chain reaction of eschatological events that brings life and this world as we know it to a close. Paul gets right to the point, “Then comes the end...” (15:24). This refers to the “end of this age or world-order to be followed by the age to come” (Bruce, *I Cor.*, 146). This is “...when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he abolishes all rule and all authority and power” (15:24). “All rule and all authority and all power almost certainly refers to demonic powers” (Schreiner, *TNTC*, 314). Demonic power will not only be simply subjugated; literally they will be annihilated, finally and forever defeated. We need to understand this comprehensively and rejoice that “any kind of structural opposition to God, whether social, political, economic,

ethical, or spiritual” will all be placed under the feet and the authority of Jesus” (Thiselton, *TNIGTC*, 1250).

Until that time, as Paul declares, Jesus must reign. “For he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be abolished is death” (15:25-26). Jesus is reigning today, right now, though the full manifestation of His reign will be made known to all when He comes again, destroys all demonic powers, and ends the tyranny of death. History comes to an end when death comes to an end. What a glorious hope that is for the Christian.

Everything and everyone in everyplace is brought to this grand climatic conclusion: “For God has put all things in subjection under his feet. But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him” (15:27). Just as God has promised over and over, and just as Jesus predicted, everything is put under him, except of course the one who put everything under him, God the Father. There is nothing else to add and nothing to clarify. The climax comes in verse 28, “When everything is subject to Christ, then the Son himself will also be subject to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all” (15:28).

Without question, this verse carries with it some inherent difficulties. It is safe to say nothing in the verse should be construed as even implying ontological or

essential inferiority on the part of the Son to the Father. Any thought of an eternal submission of the Son ontologically and essentially should be rejected. It is rather a “functional subordination” that is in view (Schreiner, *TNTC*, 316). Perhaps Bruce puts it best and most succinctly when he says, “The kingdom of Christ comes to an end in its present phrase, but only to merge in the eternal Kingdom of God, so there is no failure of the prophetic promise that the Messiah’s kingdom will know no end” (Isa. 9:7; Lk. 1:33) (Bruce, *TNCBC*, 148). As the fulfillment of the Abrahamic (Gen.12), Davidic (2 Sam. 7) and New (Jere 31) Covenants; and as the Son of Man who receives an eternal kingdom from the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7; also Ps. 2, 110), Messiah Jesus delivers the kingdom to God, the Son joyfully hands the kingdom to His Father and submits himself to him. Yet, as Schreiner aptly writes, “By virtue of his equality with God, he also reigns equally and for ever with the Father (Rev. 11:15-19) (Schreiner, *I Cor.* 316). Death destroyed! The kingdom delivered! God is all in all! Now, how do we respond to this wonderful news?

III. Because Christ was raised from the dead, believers must be vigilant 15:29-34

Paul now brings the Corinthians back to their present life, the life they live every day. He shows how the reality of their future bodily resurrection impacts the way they should live their lives. Paul leaves the realm of the theological and enters into the realm of the experiential. He begins by addressing a very strange practice.

“Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?” (15:29). Now, whatever this is referring to we should not miss the main point. The practice of baptism (which pictures our death and resurrection) makes no sense if there is no resurrection. Unfortunately, Paul does not explain what he means by “baptism for the dead.” Apparently, the Corinthians knew what he was talking about even if we don’t! This has led to a diversity of interpretation (Thiselton notes at least 13 (*I Cor*, 1242-49). Mormonism, of course, has developed the strange practice of “proxy baptism.” Again, there is no doubt the Corinthians knew what was going on, and Paul’s lack of explanation may actually help us in understanding what he is addressing. I believe the simplest explanation is probably the most likely. Simply put, if there is no resurrection from the dead, it makes no sense at all for Christians to be baptized. As the *NIV Study Bible* puts it, “Christians who deny a future resurrection of the body render baptism, which connects the “dead” sinner with the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, meaningless” (p. 2355). You have been baptized on behalf of the dead and not the living which is theologically useless. You are picturing and portraying something that is not true. But it is also foolish as verses 30-32 make plain.

If there is no resurrection, then to face persecution, enemies of the faith, and even death is senseless. It is utterly and completely foolish.

“Why are we in danger every hour? I face death every day, as surely as I may boast about you, brothers and sisters, in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus as a mere man, what good did that do me? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (15:30-32; *CSB*).

Suffering is senseless if this life is all there is. The only alternative would be “a party it up lifestyle” where you grab all the gusto that you can.

Schreiner notes concerning these verses that Paul “risks his life because he looks forward to the day of resurrection, to the future reward that will be his. Paul recounts a specific instance of risking his life. In Ephesus he fought wild beasts. Paul did not do this with human hopes, for then his exertions would be futile. Paul does not mean here that he literally fought with wild beasts in the arena in Ephesus. As a Roman citizen, Paul would have been spared such an ordeal. Furthermore, it is quite unlikely that he would have survived. In the Old Testament adversaries are depicted as fierce animals wanting to tear God’s people to pieces (Pss. 22:12-13; 35:17; 57:44; 58:6; Isa. 5:29; Jer. 2:15); thus Paul’s opponents are depicted metaphorically as ravening and ferocious animals (cf. 2 Tim. 4:16-17). Perhaps the incident which Paul refers to here is the one mentioned in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, though we cannot locate the event with certainty. In any case, if there is no resurrection, instead of suffering Paul should party. He pick up here the words of Isaiah 22:13. In Isaiah 22 the Lord pronounced judgment on

Jerusalem. Instead of repenting, the people turned to ‘joy and revelry’, and celebrated a feast. Since death was approaching, they decided to ‘eat and drink’ in the present. Paul argues that the decision to eat, drink and party makes sense if there is not a future resurrection. But since the resurrection is clearly true (see 1 Cor. 15:4-10!), risking one’s life and suffering for the sake of Christ is not foolish but wise” (p. 318).

There were obviously people espousing the “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” philosophy in Corinth. Paul scolds them with another proverb: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (15:33). This is probably from a lost comedy of Menander entitled *Thais*. The Corinthian’s doubts about the truth of a future resurrection indicates they are listening to the wrong people and are susceptible to being deceived. They are listening to people with “bad theology” growing out of their “bad morals.” Once again, we are reminded that bad thinking and bad living usually go together. Proverbs 13:20 is worth noting in this context, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.”

Paul’s conclusion of the whole matter is pointedly made in verse 34. “Come to your senses and stop sinning (*ESV*, “wake up from your drunken stupor”); for some people are ignorant about God. I say this to your shame” (15:34). Thiselton states that these two verses (vs. 33-34) expressed the theological heart of the chapter and is the linchpin of Paul’s entire argument (Thiselton, *TNIGTC*, 1253).

To deny the resurrection is to show a breathtaking ignorance of God both in His power and his purpose. To deny the truth of the resurrection is not just ignorance, it also is wickedness. There is no excuse for being seduced into following heresy when the truth of the Word of God is before you. Jesus was right, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32). There is no greater truth than the truth that because Jesus was raised from the dead, we will be raised too. So, don’t be deceived. Keep good company in what you believe and how you behave. Wake up! Stay alert! Run from sin in how you think and live. Avoid those who don’t know God but claim they do. If you don’t, you should be ashamed of yourselves. You act like drunken fools.

Conclusion: Whether or not Jesus was raised from the dead has tremendous implications for our eternal future. It also has tremendous implications for how we live and think today. Just as Paul has shown the foolishness of believing in a dead Jesus, he shows the tremendous benefits of believing in a risen one. His resurrection is the firstfruits that guarantees our future resurrection as well. God has said so. Now, will you believe Him or not? The choice is yours.