

The Basics of Christianity

What If Jesus was not Raised from the Dead?

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

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INTRODUCTION:

This morning I want to ask the question along with Paul "What if Jesus was not raised from the dead?"

What difference does it make that Jesus rose from the dead?

The years pass, decades and generations and centuries came and went, and every time across the centuries, the ultimate point of attack has always right here, at the empty tomb, the resurrection: the truth behind Resurrection Sunday.

The crucifixion doesn't pose this sort of problem because the world understands death. Read the newspaper, turn on the TV. Death is forever with us. The funeral homes never go out of business because we are a death-sentenced generation. The world does not struggle with the notion that 2000 years ago, in a remote province at the edge of the Roman Empire, a man named Jesus died. Death happens to all of us eventually. That Jesus died is no problem for most people. But the world has enormous problems with His resurrection because the world knows nothing about resurrection.

Let me ask the question again. What difference does His resurrection make? Suppose we switch the question around and ask it this way. **What difference would it make if Jesus had not risen from the dead?**

The question is a biblical question that Paul asked. It may sound shocking and even blasphemous, but I, along with Paul, still want to ask it. What if Jesus did not rise from the dead?

All Stand and Read Scripture

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 (NASB95)

¹² Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ¹⁵ Moreover we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

²⁰ But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

Prayer

This is not a new question. The question "What if" has been asked for nearly 2,000 years. Seven times in these verses Paul uses the little word "if." He is raising the question in order to show us how much hangs on the bodily resurrection of our Lord. As we would say today, "This is the whole ballgame right here." **We need to be reminded that an astounding miracle lies at the heart of our faith!** We believe something absolutely incredible...that a man who was dead came back to life on the third day. We believe that God raised Him from the dead. That is an **extraordinary** thing to say! Sometimes we Christians forget how amazing this sounds. After all, if you go to the cemetery and stay there waiting for a resurrection, you will wait a long time. There are lots of people going in and no one coming out. You will see plenty of funerals and no resurrections. What are the chances that a man who had been tortured and then crucified and then buried in a tomb would be raised from the dead? The odds would seem impossible.

So when we come to this passage we need to be calm and clearheaded as we read it. It is as if, just for a moment, Paul says, "Let me leave the church and let me stand on the outside looking in and let me ask the question "What if Jesus didn't rise from the dead?" What if? What if the resurrection is not really true?"

It is a well known fact that from the beginning there were those who doubted. The Pharisees came to Pilate and told him that Jesus had claimed that after three days He would rise again. Pilate told them to use their guards and secure the grave by placing a stone in front of it and put a seal on the stone. But it was to no avail. On Resurrection Sunday the guards came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. A severe earthquake occurred as an angel with appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow descended from heaven and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. We were scared to death and could do nothing to prevent it from happening. **And the tomb was empty!** When the chief priests heard that the tomb was empty, they sent the guards away as they decided what they would do. Then they called the men who had been guarding the tomb and offered them a large sum of money to say that the disciples of Jesus had stolen his body during the night while you were sleeping.

Now, if you think about it, the story about them sleeping made no sense. If the soldiers were all asleep, they could not have known that it was Jesus' disciples that stole the body. Furthermore, it is extremely unlikely that all of the soldiers would have slept at the same time. Finally, soldiers were severely punished or even executed for sleeping on duty.

Now, what is amazing to me is that even though they had been told that Jesus had claimed that He was raised from the dead and they experienced it right before their eyes they still took the large sum of money and did as they had been instructed.

This reminds me of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man and Lazarus both died. The rich man was in torment and could see across a great gulf and saw Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers so they also would not come to this place of torment.

Then listen to what Abraham said:

Luke 16:31 (NASB95)

³¹ But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'

We can call it the original resurrection conspiracy. It was the first but it certainly was not the last.

What if ... What if ... What if ... What if ... Paul answers that question by showing us four disastrous consequences that would happen if Christ did not rise from the dead. Each one deserves our careful attention because these things **are** true **if** the resurrection is false.

I. If There is No Resurrection, our Preaching is Without Purpose.

1 Corinthians 15:14-15 (NASB95)

¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.
¹⁵ Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

Focus on just one word—"vain." The word means "without content." It means that all that we have learned has come to nothing.

That is what Paul means. Preach until you pass out. Build the biggest church in the world. Fill huge stadiums with great throngs. Put your name in the headlights. If the tomb is not empty, you are wasting your time.

What are we preaching?

We are preaching that Jesus died on the cross to bring salvation to mankind. So **technically** Jesus did not have to resurrect in order to bring that to pass. But we also know that everything that he **taught** was true. Listen to a couple of things He taught.

John 14:1-6 (NASB95)

¹⁴ "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ² In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³ If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way where I am going."
⁵ Thomas *said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus *said to him, "**I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.**"

You see, everything that Jesus said was **truth**. So **everything** that He taught had to be true. Listen to what He was teaching His disciples:

Mark 9:31-32 (NASB95)

³¹ For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." ³² But they did not understand *this* statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

The resurrection was for **our** benefit so that we would know with certainty that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah of the Old Testament. That all that He had taught was truth from His Father and had His stamp of approval.

II. If There is No Resurrection, our Faith is Worthless.

1 Corinthians 15:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.

The word “worthless” means that our faith would have no value.

It is an education that is never used.

It is a road that leads to nowhere.

It is a promise that never comes true.

It is a story that has no ending.

It is a trip that is never finished.

It is a game that never has a winner.

It is a company that has no products to sell.

It is a seed that never produces a crop.

Think of it this way. We like to say that Christ died for our sins. But how do we **know** that his death actually accomplished anything? **If Christ had remained in the tomb, we could never be sure that God had accepted his sacrifice!** That would be the greatest misery of all—not knowing with certainty that our sins have been forgiven. During that long weekend in Jerusalem, no one in all the world could be certain that the death of Christ had truly been sufficient. As long as he was in the tomb, it looked as if Satan had won and Jesus had lost the great battle. Just before Jesus died on the cross Jesus said, **“It is finished”**

What was finished? If he does not rise from the dead, then Jesus is finished, the story is over, and we are still in our sins.

That is why the resurrection is most important. Resurrection Sunday is God’s great “Amen!” to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ!

That’s the great issue in Paul’s mind. Are we truly forgiven or not? If Christ has been raised, the answer is yes. If Christ is still in the tomb, the answer is no.

III. If There is No Resurrection, our Death Leaves us Lost in Sin.

1 Corinthians 15:18 (NASB95)

¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

Paul says that Christians who have died have “fallen asleep in Christ.”

Why did they say that?

Because when you go to sleep, you expect to wake up eventually. Even so, Christians have always believed that one day those who have died in Christ will wake up in the coming great day of resurrection.

Why would the dead in Christ have perished? Paul’s answer is very clear. If Jesus is still in the tomb, death wins. There is no hope for anyone, this life is all there is, and all who are dead will perish in their sins.

IV. If There is No Resurrection, Our Service is a Waste of Time.

1 Corinthians 15:19 (NASB95)

¹⁹ If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

For Paul this is the ultimate argument because he means that if Christ is not raised, we are just fooling ourselves. If Christ is still in the tomb, then Richard Dawkins and all the rest of the skeptics are right. If there is no foundation to our faith, then we are nothing but self-deluded fools.

If Christ is not raised...

- Then we have no message to preach.
- There is no God to hear our prayers.
- We are not saved.
- You have no hope for the future.
- You are just playing religious games.
- Let's eat, drink, and be merry.

If Christ is not raised...then every Christian for 2000 years has been wrong.

I have put it in stark terms because that is how Paul puts it. He does not want to play games, and neither do I. I do not want to come to the end of my life and discover that I have preached something that is not true. And I do not want to mislead others into thinking that something is true when it is not. If Christ is still dead, then we deserve the pity of thoughtful men and women because we have believed a lie.

CONCLUSION:

And so we come to the end of Paul's "if"s. If Christ has not been raised...

- Our preaching is without purpose,
- Our faith is worthless.
- Our death leaves us lost in sin.
- Our service is a waste of time.

If ... If ... If ... If... Is there any answer, any hope, any reason to believe in the resurrection of the dead?

But Now! Here is Paul's answer, clear as a bell, bright as the sun, **truth**, as Christ taught and demonstrated to us, with no concern or doubt.

1 Corinthians 15:20 (NASB95)

²⁰ **But now** Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

Consider how much hangs on those two little words—"But now." The resurrection of Jesus, our coming resurrection, and the resurrection of all those who those died in faith, all depends on those two little words.

But now!

Sing: Up from the grave he arose,

But now!

With a mighty triumph o'er his foes.

But now!

He arose a victor o'er the dark domain,

But now!
And he lives forever, with his saints to reign!
But now!
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!

The term “firstfruits” refers to the first part of any harvest. Jesus was the firstfruit of the harvest of God's family. The resurrection of Jesus 2000 years ago is God’s way of saying, “One day all my children will rise from the dead.”

Where...

- We will be in the glory and presence of God our Father Who adopted us.
- We will see Jesus and bow down before him.
- We will be Immortal, Perfected, and Glorified.
- We will be free from all pain and sickness and there will be no more death.
- We will no longer have to deal with sin.
- We will be in company with all the saints of all the ages.
- We will get to know and talk with saints like Abraham, Moses, Peter, Paul, and John.
- And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

This is our hope, our faith, and our confidence. This is the faith of our ancestors who believed then what we believe now. This is what the earliest Christians believed, and this is what Christians around the world believe. It is no small thing to say that a person now dead will someday rise and live again. As I said at the beginning, all that we see with our eyes seems to argue against it. But it does not depend on what we see with our eyes because **OUR eyes** can only see the present and the things we have personally experienced. They cannot see what will be in the future.

We see the present. God sees the past, present, and future.

Two thousand years ago Jesus came back from the dead never to die again. He was taken up to heaven where he now sits at the right hand of God the Father. One day soon he will return to the earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And in that great day, the dead in Christ will rise first and those who are still alive will follow behind them.

Let the doubters doubt if they will. We gladly join with Christians everywhere in declaring that Jesus Christ is alive forevermore. Because he rose, we too shall rise. Death will not have the last word. The grave will not win in the end. Though we do not yet see it, one day the cemetery will become resurrection territory. Therefore...

**Our preaching has purpose,
Our faith has forgiveness,
Our death has deliverance,
and Our service has significance.**

In that “great getting-up morning,” we will all rejoice together, with our tears gone forever and physical death a distant memory. What a happy day that will be!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is risen! And the people said **(PAUSE)** He is risen indeed!

Amen.

He is Lord.