

“Resurrection Hope”

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

I read something recently that caught my attention, there is a branch historiography (study of historical methods) that is referred to as ‘counterfactual history.’ Basically, it attempts to answer ‘what if’ questions known as counterfactuals, or alternate outcomes. It tries to imagine various scenarios if certain key events in history did not happen. For example:

- what if Napoleon defeated Wellington at Waterloo
- what if Robert E. Lee won the battle at Gettysburg
- what if Martin Luther decided against the reformation
- what if Truett Cathy didn’t invent the chicken sandwich

Now, we all know that ‘counterfactual’ history isn’t really history because history has already happened. It can’t be rewritten no matter how hard some may try. Yet we know that history is full of decisive moments or decisive victories that inevitably changed the course of human history. Let me give you another ‘what if’ question—“What if Jesus had not been raised from the dead?” What would the world be like if His resurrection had not happened? What if the women who went to the tomb on resurrection Sunday had found the stone unmoved, the soldiers still at their post? What if the body of Jesus still lay lifeless in the darkness of the tomb? That’s a terrible scenario to imagine, but that’s exactly what Paul does here in 1 Corinthians 15. This chapter is often referred to as the ‘resurrection’ chapter of the Bible. More than any other text, it presents the most detailed teaching on the subject of the resurrection. Not only is this chapter about the resurrection of Jesus, but most of it deals with the future bodily resurrection of

the believer. Our contemporary culture and its secular worldview would have you believe that there is nothing beyond the grave, or that when your life ends on earth, you cease to exist at that point. However, that is not the truth of the Bible. The Word of God clearly says that the dead are still alive. Everyone who dies is still alive somewhere, because death does not terminate human existence. Yes, the body experiences physical death. But a person is more than a body. You've been created with a soul. You are not a body with a soul—you are a soul with a body. You will live on somewhere after you die. Death is a change in state, a change in place. Why is this?

Ecclesiastes 12:5-7—“...because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets, before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

The reason for physical death is because of the curse of sin. Ezekiel 18:20 says the soul that sins shall die. Romans 3:10 says, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” Isaiah 64:6 says that the very best of my righteousness is like a filthy garment. All have sinned have come short of the glory of God. That's me, that's you, that's everybody. How then can those who are under the curse of sin and sentenced to die be raised to eternal life? This is the very question that gets to the heart of the Bible. Listen—it is only through Christ's death on the cross that the penalty for my sin has been paid. And by His own bodily resurrection from the dead, He has conquered death for all who believe in Him and come to Him in faith. Jesus said:

John 6:40—“For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

That’s why the believer has no guilt in life and no fear in death! For a believer, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. When Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise and receive a glorified resurrection body. That body will be patterned after His. This is our hope!

1 Peter 1:3—“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

David Jeremiah—*“Biblical hope is not wishful thinking. It’s not a lucky chance. It’s not ungrounded optimism. No, it’s a rock-solid belief in the character of God.”*

Biblical hope is not hope in the sense of mere optimism or a positive outlook. The biblical word speaks of a profound certainty. The hope of the believer is a resurrection hope. It is a hope that centers on one explosive event—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is what the gospel alone offers a world that has lost all hope. Without the the resurrection, life would have no hope and no meaning. Darkness would prevail and death would be enthroned. To deny the truth of a bodily resurrection is to deal a death blow to Christianity. There is no gospel without the resurrection.

Here in this wonderful text, the apostle Paul shows us how the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an indisputable fact of history, as well as the guarantee of our own future bodily resurrection. In verses 12-19, Paul presents the Corinthian church with a hypothetical situation in which he imagines the resurrection were not true. If there is no resurrection, if it were all just a bunch of make believe,

then several things would be tragically true. Paul mentions at least six terrible consequences were there no resurrection:

1 – Our savior would be POWERLESS (15:12-13)

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ is raised.”

If there were no resurrection, the first logical conclusion is that Jesus would still be in His tomb. And if Jesus were still in His tomb, then you and I would not be in possession of a living hope like Peter describes. A lifeless Savior cannot provide living hope. Without the resurrection, Jesus would have been a mere man who died the same as other men have died. He could not have saved anyone from the clutches of death.

Evidently, there were some in Corinth who had denied the truth of bodily resurrection. Corinth was a Greek city, and Greek philosophy did not allow for the resurrection of the dead. When Paul had preached the resurrection at Athens, 45 miles to the east of Corinth, his message was met with a skeptical response.

Acts 17:31-32—“He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.’ Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.”

The Greeks held to a philosophy believing that the body was material, temporary, and a distraction from one’s true being—the soul. Thus, what happened to the body was irrelevant to the soul. And because it was located near Athens, Corinth

was greatly influenced by this Greek mind-set. Being a city that valued pleasure above learning, Corinth left the thinking to her Athenian neighbors and adopted without question their same attitudes toward the resurrection of the body.

The desire to appear 'wise' in the eyes of the world had been a constant snare for the Corinthian church. Some of those in the church were tempted to 'cave in' to the pressure of philosophical respectability by going along with the culture and denying the truth of bodily resurrection. Refusal to be swept up by the leading philosophies of the day is still a constant battle for the church that prioritizes the gospel.

Colossians 2:8—“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

Paul's point is that if men don't rise from the dead, if the Greek philosophers were right, neither did Jesus because Jesus was a man. However, Paul takes on this idea and exposes it for the falsehood that it is. In the first 11 verses of this chapter, he says the facts speak for themselves. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Those who were eyewitnesses to this monumental fact were abundant. Which is why Paul's argument here in 1 Corinthians 15 is so compelling. So if there were no resurrection, our Savior would be lifeless in the grave and unable to save. He then mentions a second consequence:

2—Our preaching would be POINTLESS (15:14a)

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain...”

Like a big game of dominoes, this second consequence logically follows the first. If there is no resurrection, it sets off a chain of events. If there were no resurrection, then Jesus is not raised. If Jesus had not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and totally pointless.

“Vain” — *Greek adjective; word is ‘kenos’ and means empty*

Several places in the New Testament, this same word is translated as ‘empty-handed.’ The idea is that there is no substance to give. It is descriptive of an empty container with nothing inside to pour out. That’s what Paul says our preaching would be apart from the truth of resurrection. It would be a message with no substance, void of power and content. It takes the ‘good’ out the good news.

John Stott — *“The person and work of Christ are the rock upon which Christianity is built. If He is not who He said He was, and if He did not do what He said He had come to do, the foundation is undermined and the whole superstructure will collapse.”*

The central message of Christianity then becomes nothing but moralism. Worse, it is moralism with no purpose. Why bother with the ethics of Christianity if the founder of our faith is still in the grave? Preaching would be a waste of time. Church would be non-essential. Singing would be an empty thing. It would all be one big wasted effort if Jesus were still in His grave. It leads to a third consequence:

3—Our faith would be USELESS (15:14b)

“...and your faith is in vain.”

Not only would our preaching be empty, but faith would suffer the same fate. Again, what would be the purpose of attending church, reading the Bible, giving of our time and energy and resources? It would all be one bit meaningless religious exercise. One of the leading atheist thinkers of the last century said it this way:

Bertrand Russell — *“The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach and where none can tarry long. Along the way, our companions disappear one by one, taken suddenly by the quiet but unstoppable power of death. Life is short and fragile, and both individuals and all humanity face a slow and certain end that is harsh and unfeeling. Unaware of right or wrong and indifferent to destruction, the forces of the universe continue forward without mercy. For each person—who must endure the loss of loved ones today and eventually face death themselves—the only real response is to hold tightly, while there is still time, to the noble thoughts that give meaning and dignity to their brief life.”*

That’s one of the most hopeless and bleak statements that I have ever read. Yet were the resurrection not true, that is exactly what the outcome of life and faith would be. Take the resurrection of Jesus Christ away and that is all you have left. Your life would be nothing more than one long dark march through the night. Were the resurrection not true, our Savior would be powerless, our preaching would be pointless, our faith would be useless.

Notice a fourth consequence:

4—Our witness would be TRUTHLESS (15:15-16)

“We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.”

If there were no resurrection, the apostles would be nothing more than con-men, the world’s greatest liars. It is quite evident from Scripture that the resurrection was central to the message that the apostles preached. To be an apostle required that one be a witness of the resurrection. Why is that? Well, they were going to be the first proclaimers of the gospel. Therefore, they needed to have seen the risen Christ. Whether it was Peter, James, John, or Paul. They were all eyewitnesses to the resurrection.

Sir Edward Clarke — *“As a lawyer, I have carefully studied the evidence surrounding the first Easter. To me, the evidence is convincing and conclusive. Many times in court, I have won cases based on evidence that was far less persuasive than this. Conclusions are drawn from evidence, and honest witnesses usually speak plainly without trying to impress. The Gospel accounts of the resurrection fit this pattern. Therefore, as a lawyer, I fully accept them as the testimony of truthful people reporting facts they were able to confirm.”*

Charles Hodge — *“Since the resurrection of Christ is a historical event, it must be proven by historical evidence. The apostle, therefore, points to the testimony of reliable witnesses. For such testimony to be convincing, several conditions must be met: first, the event must be something that can be clearly known; second, the witnesses must have had enough opportunity to understand what happened and be sure it was true; third, the witnesses must be mentally sound and capable of good judgment; and fourth, they must be people of honesty and integrity. When these conditions are met, human testimony can prove something beyond a reasonable doubt. However, if the witnesses not only meet these standards but*

also give their testimony at great personal cost—even suffering or dying for it—then it would be unreasonable and wrong to doubt them. All of these factors come together in the case of Christ’s resurrection, making it one of the most well-attested events in all of history.

And so Paul says that if there were no resurrection, he and the rest of the apostles were all liars and deceivers. They claimed to see someone that they didn’t see, saying He did something that He didn’t do. That makes them charlatans of the worst possible kind. Christianity would then fall like a house of cards. And ultimately, it would make Jesus a liar because no less than seven times in the gospel record, He Himself made the claim that He would rise from the dead:

Matthew 12:14—“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Matthew 16:21—“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Matthew 20:18-19—“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life!”

Matthew 26:32—“But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

Luke 9:22—“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and He must be killed and on the third day raised to life.”

John 2:19-22—“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and You are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple He had spoken of was His body. After He was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said.”

John 10:17-18—“The reason My Father loves Me is that I lay down My life only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”

Without the resurrection, our savior would be lifeless, our preaching would be powerless, our faith would be useless, our witness would be truthless. And then notice there would be a fifth consequence:

5—Our separation would be ENDLESS (15:17-18)

“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.”

Again, notice Paul says that our faith would be futile and worthless. The power of sin would remain unbroken in my life were Christ not risen. If Jesus didn't rise, then sin got the best of Him and death has held Him in the grave. His death on the cross would be meaningless and ineffective. It was the resurrection that validated His redemptive work on the cross, serving as verifiable proof that God accepted His sacrifice. Paul says as much in Romans:

Romans 4:25—“[Christ] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, but now having been reconciled, we're saved by His endless life. We've been brought into union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Baptism is a picture of this truth. The old me has been crucified with Christ, and the new me has been raised with Christ to endless life. Paul says as much in Galatians 2:20, “I am crucified with Christ, and yet I live, yet not I but Christ who lives within me. And the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Without this, there would be no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, no eternal life, and no hope for those who have died in Christ. That means we could never come to the funeral service of a Christian and say with confidence, “I'll see you again!” Were there no resurrection, death would be final and the grave absolute.

There is not a person here this morning who has not at some point felt the pain of death, perhaps while standing beside and looking down into a gaping hole in the ground, soon to be a loved one's grave. Imagine staring into that hole with no promise of resurrection, with no guarantee that our loved ones who have died in Christ are secure and that we will ever see them again. When tragedy strikes, it is the truth of resurrection that gives us solid hope. In a world full of death and sadness, this is our only consolation as the people of God.

Jesus Himself said:

John 11:25—“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live.”

The promise upon which we stake our lives and hope is a Person. Jesus is my resurrection life, and no matter what happens to me in this life, or to the ones I

love who are in Christ, I am saved and eternally secure. It is important that we understand the very practical implications this has for our lives. What does it mean? It means everything. It is the power of Christ that is at work in us even now.

The fact that Jesus is risen brings great confidence to my life as a Christian. It means that Christianity is not simply some religious system that was founded by someone who lived, died, and convinced His followers of a lie. The truth of Christ's resurrection makes Christianity unique. You can pretty much visit the grave of every other world religion's founder, and there you will find his remains. Buddha? Dead. Muhammed? Dead. Stalin, Lenin, Marx? Dead, dead, dead. All the religions and philosophical systems of this world are dependent upon their founder's ideas, not his resurrection. Yet without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have no Christianity. You have no gospel.

So, without the truth of the resurrection, our Savior would be lifeless, our preaching would be powerless, our faith would be useless, our witness would be truthless, and our separation would be endless. Paul then sums it all up with one final consequence:

6—Our situation would be HOPELESS (15:19)

"If in Christ we have hope in the life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

In other words, if Christianity only involved the ethical and moral teachings with no hope beyond the grave, we would be of all people the most to be pitied. We would all be on our way to the grave perhaps a bit more moral, but not with one shred of hope for anything more. In fact, such moral obligations would be nothing more than repressive ideas, like so many in our culture now believe. We

should all just eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses:

The Message—*“Now, let me ask you something profound yet troubling. If you became believers because you trusted the proclamation that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, how can you let people say that there is no such thing as a resurrection? If there’s no resurrection, there’s no living Christ. And face it—if there’s no resurrection for Christ, everything we’ve told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you’ve staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ—sheer fabrications, if there’s no resurrection. If corpses can’t be raised, then Christ wasn’t, because he was indeed dead. And if Christ weren’t raised, then all you’re doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. It’s even worse for those who died hoping in Christ and resurrection, because they’re already in their graves. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot.”*

Several years ago, there was a movie released called “The Theory of Everything” that was based on the life of Stephen Hawking, the world renowned physicist. As a young man, he was diagnosed with ALS, a debilitating disease which left him paralyzed and without motor skills. But despite such a condition, Hawking became an icon in the scientific community due to his work in the field of cosmology and the study of black holes and his pursuit of how everything in the universe works. He was awarded a PhD in the field. When he stood before the committee to receive the honor, he said, “It would be wonderful if we could find one simple, elegant way to explain everything.” It was his quest in life to find a theory that would explain everything.

One of the most regularly asked questions of Dr. Hawking was this one:

“Professor Hawking, can you prove that God does not exist?” He replied in this way:

“We are such insignificant creatures on a minor planet of a very average star in the outer suburbs of one of a thousand million other galaxies, so it is difficult to believe in a God that would care about us or even notice our existence... We are each free to believe what we want, and it’s my view that the simplest explanation is there is no God. No one created our universe, and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization—there is probably no heaven, and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe, and for that I am extremely grateful.”

In other words, you and I are nothing more than a speck of interstellar dust. And yet ironically he lived with a personal quest to discover the theory of everything, the explanation behind his own existence. Even his own conscience told him otherwise. Compare that to what someone else said long before him, the King of Israel. It was David who said:

Psalm 139:1-6—“O Lord, You have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.”

Both of these men say, “It is beyond me.” Hawking said, “This is beyond me, and I don’t believe.” King David says, “This is beyond me, and I do believe.” The one man looks around at life in a complex universe and says, “There is no God,”

while the other looks around at the same evidence and says, “I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!” Saving grace alone makes the difference.

Men and women, when it comes to life in the universe, we are not left with a theory upon which to stake our hope. The truth of the Bible is that there is an omnipotent God who has made us in His image. And though we are sinners by nature and birth, we are given solid assurance—Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. So when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we don’t have to speculate over the counterfactual history, the issue of ‘what if’ it hadn’t happened. The fact of the matter is stated by Paul in verse 20:

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Not theory, but fact! That means there is hope for every man, woman, and child. The enduring life of Jesus Christ reminds you and me that this world is not all there is. If all of our hope is bound up in the temporal and fleeting things of this world, then ultimately we have no hope in the face of tragedy, no expectation for the future, and no guarantee of eternal life. Without the resurrection, nothing makes sense in life. It is interesting to me that some of the most vocal advocates for justice in our time also deny the exclusive truth of the gospel. You hear them talk about justice for the poor and marginalized of society, solving hunger and disease, or caring for the environment. Yet at the same time, many of them believe the material world was caused by an accident and that the world and everything in it will eventually simply burn up. They find it discouraging that people care so little about justice without realizing that their own worldview undermines any motivation to make the world a better place. Why sacrifice for others if in the end nothing we do will make any difference? However, if the

resurrection of Jesus is true, that means there's infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the lostness of the world.

Has the truth of Christ and resurrection gripped your heart and changed your life? Friend, I'm not talking about head knowledge. I am referring to personal application of this truth. I'm not talking about mentally assenting to a set of facts —I'm talking about you personally surrendering your life to Christ. There is a huge difference.

Romans 10:9—“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

After looking at the evidence for yourself, have you come to personally believe that Jesus Christ is risen? And are you surrendered to Him? Scores of professing Christians have only believed half of Romans 10:9, and they think that they have been saved from their sins, when in reality they are not. The crucial question to be answered is this one—“Will you repent of your sin and surrender your life to Christ as your crucified and risen Lord?”