

Christ Our Hope in Life and Death (1 Cor. 15:12–19)

By Jacob Gerber

In v. 12–19, Paul finally reveals what has prompted this discussion about the fundamental message of the gospel: some have been saying that there is no resurrection from the dead. Although many have offered suggestions for why some in Corinth may have denied the resurrection of the dead, ultimately we do not know.¹ We do know that the resurrection of the dead was a highly controversial subject, rejected by Jewish Sadducees and Greek philosophers alike (Matt. 22:23; Acts 17:32). Elsewhere, Paul warned Timothy of those who taught that the resurrection had already happened (2 Tim. 2:16–18). It is impossible, however, to say what exactly was behind the thinking of the Corinthians. The reasons behind this false teaching in Corinth, then, are less important than the damaging teaching itself. The benefit of withholding the original reasons for this denial is that we may apply Paul's words all the more directly to those who would deny the resurrection in our day, regardless of their reasons.

Rhetorically, Paul's structure of this whole chapter is powerful. Rather than immediately addressing his concern, Paul first reminded the Corinthians of their shared belief in the gospel. Only now does he demonstrate that the implications of their shared belief in the gospel must undercut this idea that there is no resurrection from the dead.² Or, to put this the other way, Paul now demonstrates that a rejection of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead will ultimately undercut their shared belief in the gospel. Paul's argument is simple: if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then he and the other apostles have preached a false gospel. If they have preached a false gospel, then the Corinthians have believed in a lie that leaves them without a shred of hope for this life or the next. If, however, Christ has indeed been raised, then, *the resurrection of Christ assures us of truthful preaching and powerful faith.*

Christ is Raised from the Dead (1 Cor. 15:12–14)

To make this case, Paul first carefully connects his preaching about the specific resurrection of Christ with the necessity of the general resurrection of the dead. As before, Paul speaks of Christ's

¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 202.

² “The structure of Paul's argument in this chapter is one of the most striking examples of Paul's use of forms and conventions familiar to Greco-Roman rhetoric. The first section (vv. 1–11) stated a major premise or basic case (Latin *narratio*). Normally this set out common, shared, beliefs or assumptions on which the rest of the argument could be based. This next middle section (vv. 12–34) embodies what rhetoricians called a *refutatio* (the reasons why a denial of the argument leads to unacceptable consequences, vv. 12–19) and a *confirmatio* (a reaffirmation of the logical alternative and its implications, vv. 20–34). Paul begins with the *refutatio*.” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 264.)

being “raised” with a passive verb, reflecting that Christ was raised up by the power of God.³ Also, while the ESV uses a different word for “preach” in v. 11 and “proclaimed” in v. 12, Paul connects the previous section with this new section by using the same Greek word in both verses.⁴ In these elements, Paul is restating exactly the point he made earlier.

Subtly, however, Paul expands on what he said earlier about the nature of Christ’s resurrection by stating that Christ is proclaimed as raised “from the dead” (v. 12). Earlier in v. 4, Paul only stated that Christ “was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” without specifying *what* Christ was raised *from*. Now, by adding the phrase “from the dead,” Paul is clarifying not merely that Christ was raised from *death* in the abstract, but that he was raised from among the number of all other human beings who had died.⁵ In death, Christ became one of “the dead,” until he was raised “from the dead” on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures. Therefore, a statement that the *dead* are not raised ultimately proves too much by effectively denying that even *Christ* was raised from the dead (v. 13).⁶

In v. 14, Paul points to two consequences for denying that Christ was raised from the dead: (1) “our preaching is in vain” and (2) “your faith is in vain.” Twice in a row, Paul uses the same word for “vain,” meaning “empty” or “hollow,” “like a nut without a kernel.”⁷ These two warnings—the emptiness of a resurrection-less preaching, and the emptiness of a resurrection-less faith—explains the specific focus of each of Paul’s next two parts of this section, in vv. 15–16 and vv. 17–19, respectively. If Christ is not raised from the dead, then Christianity is not merely corrupted. Much worse, if Christ is not raised from the dead, then Christianity is completely false and altogether worthless.⁸

Before studying Paul’s warnings about false preaching and false belief, we should make one additional observation. We may perhaps remember that Paul also earlier contrasted the Corinthians of the worthlessness of eloquent speech against the power of the preaching of the cross in 1

³ “The passive voice implies that God is the agent who raised Christ. The Scriptures make both statements: that God raised Christ, Rom. 6:4; 8:11; Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 26:32; and that Christ himself arose, Mark 9:21 [*sic*; 9:31?]; Luke 18:33. In both expressions the act is due to the divine power which is Christ’s [page 648] equally with the Father. Jesus has power to lay down his life and to take it back again, John 10:18. The apostle properly uses the passive here and makes God the agent because of the parallel which he has in mind regarding our resurrection, which is the work of God.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 647–48.)

⁴ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 258–59.

⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 821.

⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 319.

⁷ “If Christ were not raised, if Christ were dead forever, both the proclamation and the faith would be ‘empty,’ hollow, like a nut without a kernel. All gospel preaching, every assertion and every promise which are a part of the gospel, would be a mere sound of words without reality back of them. The same would be true regarding faith or confidence that is made to rest upon such preaching. In plain language, the preaching would be a lie, and the believing would be trusting in a lie. The preachers would be like those who sell fake stocks, and the believers like those who buy fake stocks.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 651.)

⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 18–19. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.ii.html>>

Corinthians 2:1–4.⁹ Is it possible that the Corinthians had begun to think that Paul’s preaching about Christ’s death and resurrection was less about the substantial truth of that proclamation, and more about the style with which the speaker presented it? Certainly, professing Christians have often attempted to evacuate Christianity of its core message and power, while holding on to its outward form. Especially during the last 150 years or so, a number of so-called Christian churches have jettisoned the doctrine of Christ’s bodily resurrection, while trying to maintain Christian practices, worship, and teaching otherwise. Tragically, until Christ returns, the church will face perennial temptations to put faith in a cross-less and resurrection-less Christianity. We must not be deceived by such a false gospel, however. Such a Christianity will never be anything more than vain emptiness. Paul’s message is as relevant today as it has ever been.

True Preaching (1 Cor. 15:15–16)

In v. 15, Paul draws another devastating inference from what he has just spoken.¹⁰ If the dead are not raised (which would also mean that Christ has not been raised from the dead), then the apostles are “found” (i.e., “found *guilty*”)¹¹ of bearing false witness about God. What a terrible crime to commit perjury against almighty God! The English translation we have, “we testified *about* God,” is probably not as strong as what Paul is saying. The phrase Paul uses means “[down] against God,” and may refer to the idea of placing the hand *down* on something to swear an oath.¹² As apostles, God sent them to bear witness about Christ in God’s name.¹³ If the dead are not raised, then they have violated their commission and abused their authority, and they would need to face God’s wrath against their lies: “For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised” (v. 16).

Powerful Faith (1 Cor. 15:17–19)

In v. 17, Paul addresses the second major problem: if Christ has not been raised, then their faith is “futile.” Earlier, Paul said that their faith would be “empty/vain” (v. 14) if Christ were not raised. Now, Paul uses a different word that means “useless,” “idle,” or “worthless.”¹⁴ It is not merely that the

⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 701.

¹⁰ Grammatically, Paul uses the word ἄρα (“then”, drawing a logical conclusion) to illuminate the consequences of denying the resurrection that the Corinthians have not yet seen. The word ἄρα appears three times in this section: v. 14, 15, 18. In v. 14, the standard Greek Lexicon *BDAG* classifies the usage as “to express result (*BDAG*, 2a; p. 127). Here in v. 15, *BDAG* classifies the usage as a “marker of an inference made on the basis of what precedes” (*BDAG*, 1, p. 127). Later, in v. 18, *BDAG* classifies the usage as “to emphasize a further result” (*BDAG*, 2a, p. 127).

¹¹ Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 282.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 653.

¹³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 823.

¹⁴ “In v. 14 Paul says: your faith is κενή, ‘empty,’ hollow, without a reality on which to rest. Here he says: your faith is ματαιά, ‘useless,’ idle, it gets you nothing. Our versions use “vain to translate both synonyms which obscures the important difference....Only because faith is regarded as ‘useless’ can Paul add the next clause: ‘You are yet in your sins.’ For faith is to benefit us, bring us something, namely the greatest of all

preaching would be false, as bad as that would be. Much more, their faith in that false belief would accomplish nothing good for them. It is not only Christ's death, but also Christ's *resurrection*, that is necessary for our justification and forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom. 4:25).¹⁵ So, if Christ is not raised, "you are still in your sins" (v. 17).

Paul sharpens the point he is making by appealing to those who had already died after believing in Christ (v. 18).¹⁶ If the dead are not raised, then those who died have *perished* forever. They died believing in Christ for their salvation, but their faith was worthless. If the dead are not raised, then they have been condemned in their death forever, without hope that they will be raised up with Christ. This means more than mere annihilation, but everlasting torment.¹⁷

It is with this threat of hopelessness in death that Paul writes v. 19: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."¹⁸ Without any hope of the resurrection of the dead, the world would be right in saying that the cross is folly (1 Cor. 1:23).¹⁹ Beyond this, John Calvin lists three other reasons why Christians would be the most to be pitied: (1) Christians receive more of God's loving chastisement than the rest of the world; (2) Christians do not have the pleasure of giving themselves to the benefits offered in the world (cf. 1 Cor. 15:32); and (3) Christians face the persecution of the world.²⁰

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the possible reasons that some in Corinth may have denied the resurrection of the dead (cf. Matt. 22:23; Acts 17:32)? What are some of the reasons that people deny the resurrection of the dead today? What are some of the ways that even professing Christians downplay or explain away the bodily resurrection of Christ? Why does Paul insist that the resurrection is of first importance for the gospel proclamation and for the faith of Christians?

2. What would it mean for the preaching of the gospel to be "in vain" (v. 14)? Why does Paul worry about the possibility of being "found to be misrepresenting God" (v. 15)? What do these concerns

treasures, the forgiveness of sins. If it brings us nothing it is 'useless.' On the other hand, faith is "empty" when the Word to which it clings is untrue, unreal. Though it cling ever so firmly it grasps only an empty shadow, a delusive lie. The two ideas are clearly distinct, yet they are also closely related, for a faith that is empty and rests on empty air is for that very reason also of no use whatever." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 655.)

¹⁵ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 321.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 20–21. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.ii.html>>

¹⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 322.

¹⁸ There is some debate about whether the word "only" should be associated with "in this life only," or perhaps as "in Christ only" or "only hoped in Christ." On the whole, the first option ("in this life only") makes the most sense of the passage, especially in context. See Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 322–23.

¹⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 703.

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 22–23. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.i.ii.html>>

tell us about Paul’s view of the truthfulness of the gospel, as an eyewitness to the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ? What might we learn from this for the ways that we talk about the gospel with others? Does this line up with the way that we personally think about the gospel?

3. What would it mean for our faith to be “in vain” (v. 14)? What would it mean for our faith to be “futile” (v. 17)? Why does Paul say that we would still be in our sins, apart from the resurrection of Christ (v. 17)? How does the power of the resurrection of Christ shape the way we live our lives in a world cursed to futility (cf. Gen. 3:17–19)? How does the power of the resurrection of Christ shape the way that we prepare to die?