



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 15:12-34

Topic

The apostle Paul explores the consequences of the false belief that there is no future, physical resurrection from the dead

Title

"It's a Matter of Death and Life"

Introduction

Life after People is a creepy program currently airing on the History Channel. The tag-line is, "Discover what would happen if the human race suddenly disappeared off the face of the planet."

The producers go on to say,

In every episode, viewers will witness the epic destruction of iconic structures and buildings, from the Sears Tower, Astrodome, and Chrysler Building to the Sistine Chapel... Big Ben will stop ticking within days; the International Space Station will plummet to earth within a few short years...

As I said, it's a little creepy with morbid thrown in.

The apostle Paul took a similar approach with the Corinthians, showing them what life would be like if there was no future, physical resurrection from the dead. Paul first pointed out the consequences of denying a

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resurrection then the blessings of knowing they would be raised from the dead.

Looking forward to your future resurrection makes a huge difference in how you approach living. I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 What Would Your Living Be Like If There Were No Resurrection From The Dead?, and #2 What Should Your Living Be Like Since There Is A Resurrection From The Dead?

#1 What Would Your Living Be Like
If There Were No Resurrection From The Dead?
(v12-19)

There was a false teaching in Corinth about resurrection. Look at verse twelve.

1 Corinthians 15:12 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?

They believed Jesus Christ “has been raised from the dead.” They no longer believed that there would be a future, physical resurrection of believers from the dead.

There are always crazy false teachings going around. They make no sense, and they lead to bad habits at best, backsliding at worst.

What we believe affects how we behave. You may not be constantly reflecting upon your future, physical resurrection from the dead. But if you were to abandon the notion it would have dire consequences on your daily living for the Lord.

Paul mentioned several negative consequences of abandoning the truth about your resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15:13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.

Jesus was fully God and fully human. He died a real death as a man. He rose in a real, physical human body. He will have that body throughout eternity. He cannot be separated from His connection to the rest of the human race. To say there was no future resurrection of humans was equivalent to saying that Jesus did not then rise from the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:14 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.

Paul had been sent to Corinth by God to proclaim the Gospel. He preached that “Christ” was “risen,” with the result that many were saved. If it was true that there is no future, physical resurrection of humans, and thus Jesus had not risen, then the “preaching” that saved them and their belief in it were both “empty.”

1 Corinthians 15:15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up - if in fact the dead do not rise.

Follow the logic. If the “dead do not rise,” then Jesus did not rise. In that case, all those who preach the Gospel are “false witnesses.” They are liars!

1 Corinthians 15:16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen.

1 Corinthians 15:17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!

There can be no salvation, no forgiveness of sins, without a real, bodily resurrection of Jesus. If you won't rise, then He didn't rise, and there is no forgiveness of sins.

Their belief about the future, physical resurrection of human beings from the dead wasn't some “let's agree to disagree agreeably” nuance of doctrine. It was and is fundamental. There's no wiggle room.

Paul wasn't done listing the dire consequences of their belief.

1 Corinthians 15:18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

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Paul referred to physical death as falling “asleep” because your body waits to be raised while your spirit is immediately alive in the presence of Jesus. Either you will rise again in a real, physical body, or there is nothing after this life. You can’t simply make-up your own version of the afterlife.

1 Corinthians 15:19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

If there is to be no resurrection then this life is all we have. It renders living for Christ now, on the earth, “most pitiable.” Think of the sacrifices that the apostle Paul made to serve Jesus. Why endure the sufferings and persecutions if there is no hope for the future?

The main application of this is, obviously, to maintain the doctrine of the resurrection as it was delivered by the apostles and presented in the Bible.

There’s also application for Christians who do maintain the proper doctrinal understanding. If I look at my life and see, for example, that most of my efforts and energies are dedicated to secular pursuits, am I not living as if I had no future “hope in Christ?”

In other words, the doctrine I believe - that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead - ought to invade every thought and every decision and every desire of my daily living until I am face-to-face with my Lord in Heaven.

And that segue’s nicely into Paul’s next point.

#2 What Should Your Living Be Like
Since There Is A Resurrection From The Dead?
(v20-34)

You get the impression Paul could have gone on listing the awful logical consequences of their false belief. He turned to showing the consequences of the truth about resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15:20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

“Firstfruits” were the initial harvest. They represented and promised a greater harvest to come.

The resurrection of Jesus is like that in that He represented and promised the future, physical resurrection of “those who have fallen asleep.” He died and rose. All they who die in Christ will rise.

1 Corinthians 15:21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

“Adam” represented every future human being when he and Eve decided to decide against God in the Garden of Eden. God told them the consequences of their bad choosing would be “death,” and death is what followed. “In Adam all die” are four words that summarize the human condition. Why is there disease, disaster, death? “In Adam all die.” It’s because of what Adam did and he represented the race of people who would descend from him.

Not fair, you say? *Wait and listen to this!* Jesus also represented the entire human race in His decision to obey God. When you identify with Him, you go from death to life.

What a minute! Jesus died and rose on the third day. Believers have been dying since the first century. Why are they still in their graves?

1 Corinthians 15:23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming.

1 Corinthians 15:24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.

The word “order” is important, letting you know that the resurrection of the human race will occur in stages - **not** all at once! It’s actually a military word used to describe the separation of soldiers into various detachments.

Jesus was “the firstfruits.” He rose and His resurrection guaranteed that believers in Him would also rise.

The next stage are “those who are Christ’s at His coming.” What coming? We’ll see at the end of this chapter that Paul meant the coming of Jesus to rapture the church - to remove living believers off the planet prior to the Great Tribulation.

In that stage of the resurrection is that the Lord will,

...descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (First Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The rapture is always presented as imminent. When it happens, the spirits of believers who have died between the resurrection of Jesus and the rapture will be reunited with their bodies - only, as we will also see at the end of chapter fifteen, their bodies will be raised incorruptible and glorious. The living believers will be raptured - changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

In First Corinthians 15:24, the “end” Paul was talking about leaps forward past the seven-year Great Tribulation and to the end of the one thousand year reign of Jesus on earth that follows the Tribulation. After all that history, every believer from every age will have been raised and be in their glorified bodies fit for eternity.

1 Corinthians 15:25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.

1 Corinthians 15:26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15:27 For "HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS UNDER HIS FEET." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted.

You can read about this moment in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, in chapter twenty. There you find that another resurrection will take place. All nonbelievers from throughout time will be raised and be judged. Rejectors of God’s grace, they will be cast alive into the Lake of Fire for eternity.

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1 Corinthians 15:28 Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

The “Son” is Jesus. In what way will He, being fully God, still “be subject to” His Father?

Jesus will remain in His glorified physical human body as the resurrected God-man for all eternity!

It brings Paul’s argument full-circle. Jesus rose in a real, physical body that He will have forever. *So will you!*

Verses twenty-nine through thirty-four are a series of quick exhortations to let the resurrection of Jesus, and your future resurrection, make a difference in your daily life. Sadly, we get immediately distracted by verse twenty-nine:

1 Corinthians 15:29 Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?

There are between thirty and forty valid interpretations of this verse! We are not likely, therefore, to be the ones who put it to rest.

The most important word to notice is the word “they.” When Paul was talking about believers in this chapter, he referred to them in the first person, using the words “us” and “we” and “your.” By referring to “they” *he was speaking of nonbelievers.*

Adherents of certain cultic religions were being “baptized for the dead.” Their families and friends who did not follow their religious beliefs died and they thought that by performing a religious ritual for them after their death it would insure their place in the afterlife. (Mormons still do this today).

The Bible teaches that it is appointed unto men once to die and after death comes judgment. There is no second chance in the afterlife - thus no ritual can be performed after a person dies that can affect their eternal destination.

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So why is this verse even here? Paul was pointing out to them that even nonbelievers had come to embrace a physical afterlife in which people lived on. Otherwise it would be illogical for them to be “baptized for the dead.”

Mostly the Greek culture, its philosophers and wise men, rejected a physical afterlife. Just when the secular world was beginning to embrace life after death, the Christians were embracing a false teaching about it! They ought to be giving the nonbelievers the real truth about death and resurrection.

This kind of thing still happens today. For example, just as nonbelievers are totally fascinated with thoughts about the end of the world, many Christians are embracing the idea that we ought to ignore prophecy and try to join with nonbelievers to improve the world.

Quick example. Pastor Rick Warren has been promoting a global Peace Plan that will solve the world’s biggest problems. Regarding prophecy he has been quoted as saying,

People ask me why I don't preach more on prophecy. I say, “Why? Nobody knows.” I could get up here and make some good guesses but they'd all be speculation. Jesus said, “Nobody knows when it's going to happen.”

I think we should do all we can to improve the human condition. But why abandon Bible prophecy as a spiritual tool just when nonbelievers are most open to it? It makes no sense evangelistically.

Our particular view on prophecy is not as crucial as changing our mind on the doctrine of the resurrection. It’s just a current example of how we as Christians can think we are leading the secular culture when, in fact, we’ve been taken in by it.

1 Corinthians 15:30 And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour?

Paul put himself and the other apostles up as examples of the normal Christian life. It was a life of being in “jeopardy every hour” for the sake of

the Gospel. It was an exhortation to be about the Lord's work every day because His coming is imminent and He brings with Him your reward.

1 Corinthians 15:31 I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.

Paul could boast in a spiritual sense because they knew of his personal sacrifices for Jesus. They were fruit of his choices to serve the Lord!

When he said, "I die daily," it was (and is) a reminder that our lives are not our own. We die to self in order to serve the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:32 If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, "LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE!"

An angry mob, compared to wild "beasts," had desired to tear Paul apart in "Ephesus." What motivated him to keep going on and face those kind of daily dangers? The fact he would "rise" and stand before his Lord.

Otherwise you might as well live as if life were all about physical pleasure now rather than spiritual reward later. In fact, that is where the false doctrine had led them.

It begs the question: What have I given up, what do I sacrifice, for the privilege of serving the risen Christ?

1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits."

We always applied this to our kids growing up. That's valid and I'd encourage you to do the same.

In the context of his discussion about the resurrection, Paul was pointing out that the doctrinal laxity in Corinth was leading them into many sinful practices. What we believe should never make us look more like the world!

He finished that thought in the opening words of verse thirty-four, saying,

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1 Corinthians 15:34 Awake to righteousness, and do not sin...

I should be growing in holiness, in separation from the world, in practical godliness - **not** appearing more worldly by adopting its bad habits.

1 Corinthians 15:34 ...for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

The Corinthians had lost their compassion for the lost. They were more concerned with themselves than with those who “do not have the knowledge of God.” Paul said they ought to be ashamed of themselves.

We must maintain a healthy focus on evangelism - both individually and as a church.

Jesus has risen and is alive forevermore. So will you rise and live forever. Meanwhile you are to live in anticipation of your future meeting with the Lord.

What you believe really does make a difference in how you live. How you are living exposes what you believe.

Meditate on these things. Have a personal revival. Be ready for the return of your Lord to resurrect or rapture you.