

What is Resurrection?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

Joel R. Beeke

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P U B L I S H I N G

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HOW DOES CHRIST'S RESURRECTION SHAPE OUR HOPE?

We all live by hope. If you are an unbeliever, you put all your hope in this life. You get some satisfaction out of life, due to God's common grace, but ultimately your hope is vain, for it will perish. If you are a believer, you build your hope on a different foundation: you build your hope on the sure, unchanging foundation that Christ has been raised from the dead. For you, life is like a long trip or a spiritual pilgrimage to reach Christ and to be with him in glory. Everything about your hope depends on Christ being alive and almighty.

Let us look more closely at how our hope is affected by Christ's resurrection. In the process, we will examine our hope, our life, and our attitude to the resurrection. We will pursue this theme via various portions of 1 Corinthians 15, which is Scripture's most profound, doctrinal defense of the church's confession, "I believe in the resurrection of the dead." Let us specifically focus on verses 19–20: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept."

A MOMENTARY YET MISERABLE HOPE

The Corinthian Christians did not deny the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, for as Paul says in the opening part of 1 Corinthians 15, hundreds of living witnesses testified (v. 6) of the resurrection. Indeed the resurrection was already part of the apostolic tradition.

Some Christians at Corinth, however, had difficulty believing in a general, physical resurrection of the dead. They could not believe that all believers would be raised like Christ and that their bodies would be reunited with their souls and become like the glorious body of the Lord Jesus.

These Christians were influenced largely by Greek philosophers who believed that, when we die, our souls enter another world but our bodies perish forever. Unlike many philosophers today, they believed that though the body perished, the soul was immortal. Plato, for one, taught that the soul is imprisoned by the body. When someone dies, Plato said, his soul escapes the body like a bird escapes from its cage. For Greek philosophers, the soul was everything; the body, nothing. It was even less than nothing; it was the soul's prison.

Influenced by this Greek philosophy, some Christians at Corinth did not view the bodily resurrection as a privilege. For them, resurrection was purely spiritual.

Today, modern theologians embrace a parallel error. They say Christ's resurrection refers only to the resurrection of the spirit or the teaching of Christ. They claim that the body of Jesus still sleeps in the tomb, but his soul goes marching on. Only Christ's teaching, doctrine, and spirit are still alive, they say. They believe only the doctrine of Christ is immortal. That doctrine, not the person of the resurrected Christ, will one day overcome evil and Satan.

This theology is altogether mistaken in denying the bodily resurrection. It defies the express teaching of the Bible. When Paul instructs the Christians at Corinth about the resurrection, he first strongly asserts that Christ died, was buried, and rose again, all according to the Scriptures (vv. 3–4).

Under the Spirit's enlightening wisdom, Paul then tells the Corinthians the consequences of disbelieving in the bodily resurrection of Christ. In verse 13 he says, "But if there be no resurrec-

tion of the dead, then is Christ not risen.” The apostle basically says, “If you do not believe in a physical resurrection and deny that the saints will once receive a body like Christ’s, then Christ has not been raised, for he is the head of the body, and believers are members of his body. You cannot separate him from his church. If the church will not be raised, then Christ is not raised either. If we believe only in a spiritual resurrection after we die, then we can only believe in a spiritual resurrection of Christ.”

The consequence of this denial, Paul says, is the absence of hope and salvation: “And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ” (vv. 14–15). If Christ was not raised from the dead, there is no gospel to preach to the lost. There is no gospel of salvation, of deliverance from death, and of eternal life. If Christ was not raised, we have no message of forgiveness, no message of victory over death and hell, no message of eternal life. If Christ was not raised, we have only a momentary hope, which will not carry into eternity.

Christ’s resurrection from the dead proves that his sacrifice has been accepted. It proves that his sacrifice has met every requirement of the justice and holiness of God, that God was satisfied by the work of Jesus. If Christ was not raised, the sin question is not settled, the devil is not defeated, atonement is not made, and there is no salvation for lost sinners. If the Lord Jesus had remained in the grave, there would be no Christian faith at all, and His disciples would never have written the New Testament.

If Christ was not raised, our preaching is nothing but a lie, and your faith is in vain. All your trust and reliance upon Christ is an empty hoax. You trust nothing more than a bruised reed. You will be deceived in the end.

We recently witnessed the space shuttle docking with the space station. After they docked, everything in the space station

could come into the shuttle, and all the supplies from the shuttle could come into the space station. A remarkable union brought the two together in the darkness. This was Paul's idea of faith: it docked the sinner with Christ. In the midst of the darkness and hopelessness of sin, we look to Christ and dock with him by faith. As a result, all that is in us is transferred to him, and all his righteousness and good works come through the channel of faith and are credited to us.

The space shuttle brought new batteries and sources of energy to the space station, which had lost much of its power. Likewise, when Christ and the sinner come together, the power of Christ gives the sinner power over sin. It enables us to fight against sin and brings power into the heart. What a blessed docking this is between a hell-worthy sinner and the living Christ! As soon as that connection is made, life purges the sinner's bad record and gives power to the sin-fatigued heart.

Paul says here, in effect, that if Christ was not raised, we have no one to dock into. We have no hope of union. We become like any pagan in the street, trying our best to get to heaven by our own efforts. But we are still sinners in the darkness, wandering further and further into outer darkness, with no hope of union with someone who can save us. What a terrible consequence!

Your only hope, Christian, of having your abhorrent records blotted out and all that Christ did written in its place and credited to you is burned into ashes if Christ was not raised! Your hope of gaining power over your habits that are so self-destructive or of getting power from above is gone! It is dashed into pieces! You are still mired in your sins.

Paul goes on to say in verse 18 that those who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished, if Christ was not raised. In other words, those who died hoping in Christ were deceived in their hope. They have not entered into the place of eternal bliss.

Paul concludes in our text: “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (v. 19). If Christ was not raised from the dead, he can only help us believers while we are alive. He cannot be our Savior in death and our Redeemer after death. We can expect nothing from him after this life if he cannot lead us through the dark valley of the shadow of death into the kingdom of his Father. If that is so, we are of all people most miserable. We believers are the most pitiable and unhappy people in the world, for we have placed all our hope upon the Savior’s redemptive work—in vain. We have given up the world with all its pleasures and follies and friendships—in vain. We have exposed ourselves to the hatred, the reproach, and the persecution of the world—all in vain. We have been chastised by God—in vain. We have been harassed and tempted by the devil—in vain; we have fought against the world, sin, and Satan—in vain. We have prayed—in vain.

If Christ was not raised from the dead, all our hope, our religion, and our Christianity is a colossal mistake. It is nothing but a dream. Of all people, we are to be most pitied, for we are going to lose both this world and the world to come. If Christ was not raised from the dead, we have no hope or expectation for a better world. We have no future. Abraham and all other believers have sought in vain for a city that has foundations. Moses and the children of Israel have chosen in vain to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. In vain we have counted all things loss except for the excellence of Christ. In vain we have denied ourselves and crucified our flesh. In vain we have been oppressed; in vain we have hoped and believed.

But did you notice Paul’s emphasis on the little word *if*? Paul says, “*If* Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain. . . . And *if* Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. . . . we are of all men most miserable!” (vv. 14, 17–19). The apostle

is saying in effect, "But God be thanked and blessed; it is not so!" Verse 20 says, "*But now* is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept."

A MAGNIFICENT YET MODERATE HOPE

The truth of Christ's resurrection changes everything. Instead of having only a miserable, mistaken hope, we may now say that we are the most blessed people on earth, for we have a magnificent hope. *Now* we of all people are most happy and hopeful, for God has accepted the sacrifice of his Son, and there is no condemnation to those who are in him. Our faith is not in vain but is the power of God unto salvation. *Now* preaching is full of power and comfort. *Now* those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, expecting salvation from him, have entered into eternal bliss! *Now* all their sins are forgiven and buried in Jesus' empty grave.

This resurrection hope is like a beautiful, glistening diamond in our hands, which we can view from several different angles to appreciate some of its breathtaking beauty. Let's look at some angles of resurrection hope.

The Resurrection's Magnificent Christ-Centered Hope

Our resurrection hope is built on Christ's resurrection in three important ways.

First, the resurrection of Christ is God's validation of Christianity itself. Without Christ's resurrection, Christianity would have been just another sect, quick to die out. But because Christ's tomb was empty on Resurrection Sunday, believers can triumphantly declare: "Death has lost its sting, sin is subdued, the world is overcome, and Satan is trodden underfoot. Christ, who was delivered for our offenses, was raised again for our justification" (see Rom. 4:25)!

“A terrific resource for the church. Biblically clear, theologically penetrating, and apologetically sharp, this booklet will benefit pastors and laypeople alike. Armed with Beeke’s trademark pastoral insight, *What Is Resurrection?* is sure to bring spiritual blessing to those who enjoy this engaging read.”

■ **Richard D. Phillips**, Senior Minister, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

Do you long for heaven? Biblical Christianity is not fueled by a vague belief in the afterlife. Just as Christ rose from the dead, all who are united to him in faith will be raised bodily to enjoy eternal reward. But what does this mean? How will the dead be raised? When will this take place?

Joel Beeke unpacks these questions to reveal the multi-faceted hope of our final resurrection, a hope that transforms the way we live and allows us to face death with confidence. See afresh the significance of Christ’s rising from the dead, and renew your joy in his coming.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

Joel R. Beeke is president and professor of systematic theology and homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

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