

The Gospel of Resurrection

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 12, 2020.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:3–4, 20-28).¹

If ever there were a dysfunctional church, it was the church at Corinth. There was disunity among the members, disorder in their practice of worship (including a significant abuse of the Lord’s Supper), sexual immorality, an infusion of legalism, and doctrinal confusion. What a mess!

Practically speaking, the church struggled in the Apostle Paul’s absence, revealing an apparent leadership vacuum. And in his absence, some had begun to even criticize the apostle for all his inadequacies. (Criticizing and undermining the pastor is not a modern phenomenon.) And yet, it is this dysfunctional church that Paul addresses as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus” and those “called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). The church at Corinth was no less a church, but it was a church that needed correction, guidance, and most importantly to be reminded of the gospel.

While every local church is unique, every church, dysfunctional or not, needs to be reminded of the gospel frequently. Therefore, Paul reminds the church, “Now, brothers and sisters, I want to *remind you* of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand” (1 Cor. 15:1 NIV, italics added). And, what are the essentials of this gospel on which the church stands? According to the Scriptures: Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day. The death and resurrection are at the heart of the gospel; they are of “first importance.”

In considering the gospel, it is imperative then that we remember that there is no gospel if any one of the essential points is not true. If Christ did not die, but merely fainted or was close but not completely dead, then there is no significance to his vicarious death and our death to sin.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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An almost-dead sacrificial lamb upon the altar was no sacrifice at all. And, if the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and Christ did not die for our sins, then there is no atonement for sin. If Christ was not buried, then the testimony of the historical witnesses is false. The empty tomb is necessary evidence of Christ's resurrection. And, if there is no resurrection, then our faith is futile and we are still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17). We are not a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) but still the old, if he is not risen indeed. If there is no resurrection, then, as Paul puts it, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19). Christianity is one, big sham if Christ is not risen.

Perhaps some believe that Christ died. Perhaps some believe that Christ died for our sins, whether efficacious or not. It is not difficult to believe that the corpse was placed in a tomb. But to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was tortured, executed, buried, and then arose from the dead takes faith! Indeed, it does, which is why the resurrection makes the gospel the greatest news in the world.

The Certainty of Resurrection

Faith is not an unsubstantiated belief but a trust in truth. By faith, we believe that Christ has been raised from the dead. According to the historical account, our resurrected Lord was witnessed by Peter and the other disciples (1 Cor. 15:5). He was witnessed alive and well, yet glorified, by "more than five hundred brothers at one time," many of whom were still living when Paul wrote his letter (1 Cor. 15:6). He met with his half-brother James, commissioning him and the other apostles. And, he even confronted Paul, sending him as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Therefore, we trust in the validity of the Scriptures which reveal to us the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. So certain is this truth that Paul states, as if obvious to all, "in fact Christ has been raised from the dead." And in this fact, we rejoice because Christ's victory over death is also our victory.

The Victory of Resurrection

Paul refers to Christ's resurrection from the dead as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep," meaning those who have died. The expression "first fruits" is rich with Old Testament imagery, as Israel was commanded to bring "the sheaf of the first fruits" (Lev. 23:10) of the harvest to the priest to be offered in worship. Borrowing this imagery, Paul is describing Jesus' resurrection as this first fruit of God's harvest to be followed by our resurrection from the dead, the remaining fruit, so to speak.

One might argue that Jesus was not the first person to be raised from the dead. For example, Jesus did raise Lazarus and others from the dead prior to his own resurrection, but they all died as have all the saints before us. But Jesus's resurrection is an eternal resurrection; he will never die. And, just as Jesus' resurrection is eternal, so ours will be, a final victory over sin and death.

In fact, the present reality of sin and death is what makes the gospel of resurrection so essential. In the Fall, Adam our earthly father sinned, the consequence of his sin is death. We as his progeny inherit his sin nature. Therefore, "in Adam all die." This is the reality of the fallen

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human condition *and* what makes the gospel good news. Just as sure as Christ's resurrection so also is ours, for "in Christ shall all be made alive."

Consider the victory of these words: "made alive"! We who were dead in our trespasses and sins, have been made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:1-5). By virtue of Adam's sin, coupled with our sins of thought, word, and deed, apart from Christ we were spiritually dead. But because Christ is alive, we are made alive by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

Christian, are you living like you are dead? Do you carry the guilt of your past sins everywhere you go? Do you wallow in your shame, trying to forget it but never repenting? Have you fallen into sin because of the temptations of the passions of your flesh, "carrying out the desires of the body and mind" like the walking dead? Wake up! Repent of your sin, confess your sin, and rejoice in the cleansing and life-giving power of the gospel. You are alive together with Christ and will live with him forever.

For, he who ascended into heaven bodily shall return bodily, and upon his return we too will be resurrected bodily. Our spiritual resurrection will unite with our physical resurrection. United spiritually and physically, we will enjoy the final consummation of Christ's victory over sin and death: Living physically without sin in a new earth under new heavens, alive together with Christ for eternity.

But if our resurrection is sure, when will this be?

The Timing of Resurrection

Paul returns to the imagery of "first fruits," describing the harvest that began at Christ's resurrection is consummated at his second coming. He who ascended and reigns will descend, not for a secret gathering up but "with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). And then, just as Jesus' parable of the weeds foretells, "the weeds...the sons of the evil one" will be gathered up for judgment and the "fiery furnace," while the children of God, in our resurrected bodies, "will shine like the sun" in the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:36-43).

In that moment, the end of human history, there will be no atheist, no agnostic, no defiant rebel against God. Christ will finally and comprehensively exercise his complete authority over every creature and all of creation. It will be sheer terror for those apart from Christ and true joy for those made alive together with Christ.

He who is risen is none other than Christ the King, who has been given authority to destroy "every rule and every authority and power." Upon Christ's second coming, there will be no dominion, authority, or power that is not subservient to Christ. And in final consummation the last of the great enemies will be destroyed: the death of death. That which we have known as one of the realities of life will no longer exist. And, we will rejoice.

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However, there is no need to wait until the end of the age to celebrate this truth. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes well, “At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity” (WSC 38). We who were made to glorify and enjoy God forever, have been made alive together with Christ. Alive and ready, let us glorify and enjoy God today *and* forever! And this we do in confidence, because we who have been made alive with Christ will be resurrected as Christ is.

Amidst the trials and tribulations of this life, we can say confidently with Job: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:25–27). For, God has revealed to us in his Word, giving us the guarantee of his Spirit, the already and not yet of the glory of eternity.

The Glory of Resurrection

Referencing Psalm 8, Paul describes the dominion, once given to Adam in the first creation is given to Christ, the second Adam. In Christ, paradise lost becomes paradise regained. And in Christ’s final act of subordination, he will submit the kingdom to God, that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be “all in all.” As Calvin summarizes, “all things will be brought back to God, as their beginning and end.”

A glorious eternity awaits those who by virtue of Christ’s resurrection have been made alive through faith and will be resurrected unto everlasting life. And, on this Easter Sunday, and every Sunday, we assemble in worship, rejoicing in *this* truth: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” He is risen. He is risen, indeed!