“A Nagging Question” (1 Corinthians 15:12–20)

“What if . . .?” Have you struggled with the “What if” questions about your faith? Have you ever asked yourself: What if Christianity is a farce? What if my faith is a psychological trick I’ve been playing on myself? What if the Bible is merely a collection of myths? What if there’s no life after death, no God, and no judgment? For the first twenty–two years of my life, I was plagued with many “What if . . .” questions. I wondered: What if there’s a better holy book than the Bible? What if Jesus isn’t really the Son of God? What if salvation by faith alone is wrong? What if there’s no heaven or hell? “What if . . .” questions have plagued every honest Christian.

But maybe you don’t consider yourself a Christian. Yet, you’ve also had some “What if . . .” questions. Perhaps you’ve wondered: What if Christianity is true? What if the Bible is God’s Word? What if Jesus is God’s Son and that He actually did rise from the dead? What if salvation really comes through faith in Jesus? “What if . . .” questions have also plagued every honest, thoughtful person.

“What if . . .” questions have been asked since the beginning of humanity. Almost 2,000 years ago, the apostle Paul himself even posed several “What if . . .” questions in 1 Cor 15:12–20. Seven times in these nine verses Paul uses the word “if.” Therefore, on this Easter Sunday, I’d like to speak to the white elephant in the room: “What if Jesus Christ didn’t rise from the dead? What if Easter isn’t really true?

In 15:12 Paul introduces the “What if . . .” question: “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?”

1. If there’s no resurrection, Christ hasn’t been raised. In 15:13 and 16 Paul writes: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised . . . For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.” Paul is saying: Let’s grant that there’s no resurrection of the dead. Then logically, no one has or ever will rise from the dead, which means that not even Christ has been raised. As Paul will point out, you can’t have it both ways. You can’t believe in the resurrection of Christ and deny the eventual resurrection of believers, for resurrection is a single package.

2. If there’s no resurrection, our preaching is useless. In 15:14 Paul argues: “. . . and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain.” The word “vain/useless/empty” (kenos) means “without content.” Paul’s insistence is that our preaching is without truth and power. Now that hurts! I’ve listened to at least one sermon a week for the past forty–one years! I’ve spent fourteen years in college and graduate school preparing to preach. I’ve preached hundreds of sermons. But if the tomb isn’t empty, I’ve wasted my time. Likewise, if Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then all the preaching you’ve listened to over the years is a lie! All your praying, serving, witnessing, and church attendance have been a waste of your time.

3. If there’s no resurrection, our faith is worthless. In 15:14c and 17 Paul states: “. . . and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain . . . worthless.” The gospel isn’t good news but a hoax that has no real power to change lives or to do anything else except to deceive. The word “worthless/empty/futile/useless” (mataios, 15:17) is different from the word for “vain” (kenos, 15:14c). The word “worthless” means that which produces no results. It’s used of the worship of carved idols that have no existence. Paul’s point is: Faith in a dead man is just as futile. What help can a corpse give?
4. If there’s no resurrection, we’re false witnesses of God. In 15:15 Paul ups the ante: “Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.” Those who proclaim that Christ rose from the dead speak in God’s name what they know to be untrue. Such people are bold-faced liars! If you’ve claimed that Jesus’ rose and He didn’t, you’ve led a lot of people astray, and so have I! Remember, Christianity isn’t a philosophy system or a moral code, but the declaration of what God has done in Christ. If the dead aren’t raised then the whole gospel is a sham and those who preach it are liars. Ouch!

5. If there’s no resurrection, we’re still in our sins. In 15:17 Paul insists: “and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” In Rom 4:25 Paul asserts that Jesus was raised “for our justification.” The resurrection declared us righteous! Our sins are no longer counted against us. However, if Christ’s resurrection is a sham, we’re without forgiveness! How excruciating not to know if our sins have been forgiven. Stop and think about it: How do we know that Jesus’ death actually accomplished anything? If Christ is still in the tomb, how could we ever be sure that God had accepted His sacrifice? During that long weekend in Jerusalem, no one in the entire world could be certain that Christ’s death had truly been sufficient. As long as He was in the tomb, it looked as if the devil had won and Jesus had lost the great battle. Even though Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), what was really accomplished? If Jesus doesn’t rise from the dead, then He’s finished, the story is over, and we’re still in our sins. What a precarious state!

6. If there’s no resurrection, previous Christians have perished. Paul writes in 15:18: “Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.” The verb translated “fallen asleep” (koimao) comes from a word (koiometeria) from which we get our English word “cemetery.” “Cemetery” was once a distinctively Christian word. It means the “sleeping place.” That’s where the Christians buried their dead—in the “sleeping place.” Why did they say that? Because when you go to sleep, you expect to wake up eventually. Even so, Christians have always believed that one day those who have died in Christ will wake up in the coming resurrection. However if Jesus’ resurrection is a lie, those believers who preceded us in death have perished eternally. If you have loved ones who are believers, you’ll never see them again if Christ never arose. If Christ hasn’t been raised, death wins. If He’s still in the tomb, there’s no hope for anyone, this life is all there is, and all who are dead will stay dead forever.

7. If there’s no resurrection, we’re truly pitiful. In Paul’s final argument in 15:19 he says: “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” For Paul this is the ultimate argument because he unequivocally states that if Christ isn’t raised, we’re just fooling ourselves. If Christ is still in the tomb, then Richard Dawkins is right, Christopher Hitchens is right, and all the rest of the skeptics are right. If there’s no foundation to our faith, then we’re nothing but self-deluded fools. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead then you’re the victim of the cruelest hoax ever played on humanity and the Christian faith is the greatest joke of all time.

Now some people will tell you that even if Christianity isn’t true, the Christian faith is still the best way to live. You’ve probably heard people say things like this: “Even if it turned out Jesus Christ didn’t rise from the dead and there’s no heaven, I would still have no regrets about living the Christian life.” You might have said that yourself at some point. Yet, the apostle Paul vehemently disagrees with that view. If Christ hasn’t risen, Christians are the most miserable, pitiful people in the world. If the only promise of the Christian faith applies to this life, then why believe in it? Why believe in a faith that can bring persecution, poverty, ostracism, sorrow, and death? Why lose out on all the selfish and sensual pleasures that this world has to offer? If the ultimate fate is the same for everyone, why not eat, drink, and be merry (15:32)? Why deny oneself? Why be miserable if the other worldviews bring death as well? If there’s no God, no resurrection, and no judgment, why bother?
What a tension! This is disturbing and gut-wrenching. Thank God, Paul didn’t stop writing with 15:19! Verse 20 stands like a majestic lighthouse pointing the way to hope, safety and salvation: “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.” “But now!” Consider how much hangs on those two little words—“But now.” Jesus’ resurrection, our future resurrection, and the resurrection of previous believers depend on those two little words. Paul states that “Christ has been raised from the dead.” Notice Paul doesn’t defend Jesus’ resurrection—he assumes it and states it as fact! Christ has been raised from the dead! He’s the “first fruits of those who are asleep.” The imagery of “first fruits” (aparche) links with the Feast of First Fruits in the Old Testament. The “first fruits” were ripened sheaves of the barley harvest waved before the Lord in the Temple the day after the High Holy Sabbath of Passover Week, which would be Resurrection Sunday. On this day, at the beginning of the grain harvest, the Israelites brought the first sheaf harvested and dedicated it to the Lord. This offering assured the Israelites that the rest of the harvest would follow. In this context, Christ is the “first fruits” of the resurrection—the first person to be raised from the dead permanently. His resurrection assures us that someday there will be a complete harvest. One day all of God’s children will rise from the dead.” Not one of them will be left in the grave. Every single one will be raised. Easter is God’s great “Amen!” to Good Friday. Jesus cried out, “It is finished.” God said, “Amen!” when He raised His Son from the dead. And because He is alive forevermore, we can know our faith is real and our sins are forgiven.

What good news! We’ve been promised a future bodily resurrection because Jesus arose! The resurrection changes everything! But does Jesus’ resurrection matter to me today? Yes, it does! There are three primary reasons.

- **Jesus’ resurrection matters because it provides a new beginning.** The whole point of the resurrection is that God can resurrect your life too! God can take your life, and no matter where you are or where you’ve been, He can give you a new beginning. God wants to take your past mistakes, your past failures, even your past sins, and give you a new beginning. This is why Easter has been called “The New Year’s of the Soul!” Do you want or need a new beginning? Trust in Jesus today! The resurrection changes everything!

- **Jesus’ resurrection matters because it provides power for living.** We live in a day of self-help books, seminars, and retreats. Such resources and experiences are useful for telling us what we’re supposed to do, but they can’t give us the power to do it! Yet, the Bible promises us true power that can change our lives. Like most people, I use a cell phone. However, I regularly find my phone low on battery life. So I keep my charger with me at all times. When my phone dies, I plug it into an outlet and recharge it. Do you need power in your daily life? Paul says that the very same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available for our lives (see Eph 1:19–20). Millions of Christians can testify to the fact that God’s power has altered their lives: Marriages that seemed beyond hope have been restored, long, habitual, destructive patterns of behavior have been broken, finances have been straightened out, difficulties on the job have been overcome, parenting challenges have been met. The resurrection changes everything!

- **Jesus’ resurrection matters because it provides a guarantee of our salvation.** Yesterday, Lori and I made some returns to Shopko. We took in a receipt that showed our prior purchases. Receipts are valuable, if not essential. If there’s a problem with the product or if a dispute arises about whether you actually bought the item, your receipt proves your purchase and authorizes your claim to have the problem fixed. The receipt shows that the payment for the product was made and accepted. Jesus’ resurrection serves the same purpose for us. It’s God’s “receipt.” When Jesus cried, “It is finished!” on the cross, He was announcing that the price for sin had been paid in full. Jesus’ resurrection validated Jesus’ purchase. Right now, will you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone? Jesus Christ loves you and wants you to place your faith in His promise and work. Will you do so? The resurrection changes everything!
Study Questions
1. When have I had the most doubts regarding my Christian faith? What issue(s) has plagued me with the most concern? How has the Lord helped me work through my intellectual or volitional tension? How did God reveal himself to me? Did He use a particular person or resource?

2. Why is Christ’s resurrection so fundamental to the Christian faith? When did I become persuaded that Christ rose from the dead? What was the primary argument or experience that God used to convince me of this reality? How have I explained Christ’s resurrection to others?

3. How did I struggle with purpose, meaning, and significance when I was an unbeliever? What were my priorities? How did I live without an eternal perspective? What were the nagging questions that I had? Do I now have answers to these same questions? Will I share them with others?

4. What line of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15:12–19 do I find the most compelling? Why? How can I share this argument with others? How can I brush up on explaining Christ’s resurrection and its relationship to my life with others?

Notes

1 Witherington underscores the significance of the rhetoric behind Paul’s use of “it”; “It was a regular practice for a rhetor to try to refute an argument by showing that its logical consequences were unacceptable and thus that the logic must be flawed. Paul offers a kind of syllogism to correct their view.... This is one of the most rhetorically powerful and detailed arguments in the letter.” Ben Witherington III, Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 303.

2 Though it’s impossible to know for sure, it doesn’t appear that the Corinthians had a challenge with a Gnostic idea that the resurrection had already happened. Instead, the position that Paul takes a stand against here is that the resurrection was a misguided understanding; some in Corinth said that there was no resurrection. Garland explains: “The Corinthians apparently believed in an afterlife but retained the dualistic anthropology that was the legacy of their Hellenistic environment. According to this view, humans are composed of two inharmonious parts, body and soul, that are of unequal value. At death, the mortal body is shed like a snake’s skin, and the immortal soul continues in a purely spiritual existence. In Homer, the vital breath or psyche of a person leaves the body at death and exists merely as a specter separated from the world of the living by an impassable barrier.” David E. Garland, I Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 699–702.

Furthermore, it is likely that the Corinthians wrestled with how a corporeal body, decomposed in the ground, tomb, or burial box, can be reconstituted for heaven—and for that matter, why anyone would think this was a necessary or good idea. See Gordon D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 741; Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians: Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 259–60; Raymond F. Collins, First Corinthians. Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 541; Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1216; Garland, I Corinthians, 699–700.

3 This is the first of only four uses of “resurrection” (anastasis) in 1 Corinthians (15:12, 13, 21, 42). It is worth noting that the first unambiguous statement of belief in the resurrection of the dead is found in Dan 12:2.

4 Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 1218 states: “So central are the truth claim and event of the resurrection of Christ that if the linchpin is removed a multiple of dependent derivatives collapses: (i) the content and currency of the gospel; (ii) the authenticity of the Christian faith; (ii) the truthfulness of testimony to the acts of God (v.15); (iv) liberation from the destructive and damaging power of sin (v.17); and (v) the irretrievable loss of believers who have died (v.18).”

5 Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians” in the Revised Expositors Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). Eaton also states: “The two resurrections—Christ’s and ours—are linked. It is quite impossible for a Christian to deny Christ’s resurrection. So it is impossible to deny our own resurrection also.” Michael Eaton, 1 Corinthians 10–16. Preaching Through the Bible (Tonbridge: Sovereign World, 2000), 95.

6 BDAG s.v. kenos: 2 a. “of things: without content, without any basis, without truth, without power.”

7 I like how Bailey puts it: “Imagine a scenario in which God takes Jesus to heaven seconds after the great cry, ‘It is finished.’ Had that happened, would there be any salvation for believers? If the focus is on penalty, then of course there is salvation, because ‘Jesus paid it all.’ Did he not cry out, ‘It is finished’? Does that not mean that the great work of salvation is completed? Not for Paul. For him, without the resurrection all faith is futile and believers are still in their sins. As noted, the central focus is rescue, not penalty. Without the resurrection the death of Jesus is like the death of John the Baptist. If there is no resurrection, Jesus is one more rabbi who tried to renew Israel and failed. In such a case Peter, James, Andrew and John would have returned to their boats, taken up their nets and lived out their lives in their villages.” Kenneth E. Bailey, Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in Corinthians (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 439.

8 Garland, I Corinthians, 702.

9 BDAG s.v. matia: “pert. to being of no use, idle, empty, fruitless, useless, powerless, lacking truth.”

10 Paul Barnett, 1 Corinthians (Fearnshire: Christian Focus, 2000), 284.

11 Barnett, 1 Corinthians, 284 comments: “‘Found’ (heuriskometha) is a divine passive indicating God will ‘find’ Paul guilty of such a crime on the Day of Judgement.” In n. 17 he states: “‘Found’ is often used in this sense in the New Testament (see e.g. 1 Cor 4:2; 2 Cor 5:3; 1 Pet 1:7).”

12 The word pseudomartur (“false witnesses”) is used elsewhere only in Matt 26:60 during Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, this word technically refers to lying under oath in court or knowingly providing perjured testimony, a very serious offense named in the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:20).

13 Naylor writes: “To understand the force of these words, compare with Mark 14:55: ‘The chief priests and the whole counsel sought testimony against Jesus.’ The operative word in Mark’s record is against (kata + the genitive,
as in 15:15): the leaders of Israel had set themselves deliberately in opposition to the Lord. Should, then, the Corinthian sceptics be right, Paul has committed himself to slander and libel, his intended target being none other than God. Because the ‘apostle’ knows that resurrection cannot happen, his proclamation of the risen Jesus is a conspicuous lie (cf. Acts 5:39).” Peter Naylor, I Corinthians (Darlington: Evangelical Press. 2004), 428.

14 In Deuteronomy 18 sense this makes them false prophets worthy of death.

15 Oster remarks: “Interpreters of the New Testament are more accustomed to associate forgiveness of sins with the death of Christ rather than his resurrection. The writers of the New Testament can obviously focus on distinct facets of God’s work in Christ (e.g., birth, miracles, human suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension), and the same can be said of Paul. While Paul can focus separately on the significance of Christ’s incarnation, his death, his ascension, his life of service, and his resurrection, it would be a distortion for interpreters to imagine that any one of these could stand alone in Paul’s theology. All of these were held together in the person of Christ because it was in him that God was pleased to accomplish his work on behalf of mankind. Without the culminating work of God in the resurrection of Jesus, then all of his prior acts would be without consummation and validity.” R. E. Oster, I Corinthians: College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press, 1995), Electronic ed.

16 Naylor, I Corinthians, 429–30 explains why Paul believed the Jesus’ resurrection was so essential to salvation. There are at least two closely related reasons: First, the empty tomb demonstrates that God acknowledged Jesus’ sufferings to be exactly what they were intended by the Lord to be: His unique and effective sacrifice for the sins of others. Had Jesus not been raised, it would have been as if God ratified the condemnation passed upon Him by the Jews and others; He would have been detained by His Father in a perpetual dungeon. Second, Jesus’ resurrection anticipated his ascension into heaven to present Himself before God on behalf of those for whom He died. It follows that if Jesus doesn’t appear at the throne of God as our High Priest, we remain lost. Why should God accept those foolish enough to rely upon someone else whom He rejected?”

17 Only Peter uses the phrase “in Christ” other than Paul. Paul uses it seventy–three times; clearly it is an important concept to him. Eleven of those uses are in 1 Cor (1:2, 4, 30; 3:1; 4:10, 15, 17, 18; 15:19, 31; 16:24). Paul predominantly uses it in the sense of sphere as a marker of those who belong to Christ or are allied with Christ.

18 Eaton, I Corinthians 10–16, 97 rightly states: “To think that the Christian life is mainly for this world (as some people seem to think) is to seriously pervert the gospel message. Actually life in this world is tougher for the Christian than for others. In the world we have tribulation. If the Christian gospel is mainly about this life then it is not very successful because the true Christian does not have a specially easy life. If it is only or mainly for this life that we expect to get blessings from God, then we are people to be pitied, for there is nothing specially easy of comfortable about being a true Christian. People who think that the gospel is mainly about health and wealth have not read their bibles properly. The Christian gospel is mainly about life after resurrection! Life in this world is a matter of preparing for the resurrection-glory that is yet to come. If there is no resurrection, says Paul, it means that those Christians who have died have perished without ever knowing physical and bodily glory. A gospel without the resurrection is pathetic and miserable!”

19 Paul uses the term “first fruits” (aparchē) again in 1 Cor 16:15 to describe the first believers in Achaia. He also used the term to describe Epenetus, the first individual to become a Christian in Asia (Rom 16:5). Paul uses this word to refer to Gentile Christians as precursors to a mass of Jews converting to Christianity before Christ returns (Rom 11:13–16). He also uses it in Rom 8:23 describing believers as receiving the Spirit, but anxiously waiting for the resurrection. Jesus is the first to be resurrected (cf. Col 1:18), but in due time all of His followers will experience the same. In a spiritual sense we already have resurrection life (cf. Eph 2:5–6).

20 The phrase “But now” (Nuni de) is the same one Paul used in Rom 3:21 when transitioning from the universal condemnation of people to the news of justification by faith in Christ. Here he uses it in a similar manner to transition from the pitiful state of Jews if Christ has not been raised to the wonderful truth of the results of His resurrection. See also Rom 6:22; 7:6; Gal 4:9; Eph 2:13; 5:8; Col 1:22; Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 2:10.

21 This is the last occasion in the chapter in which the resurrection of Jesus is mentioned.

22 Naylor, I Corinthians, 433 does point out: “It is true that in 15:20 there is no reference to the Old Testament ordinance of first fruits. Yet because Passover and first fruits were associated historically (Exod. 23:15–16; Lev. 23:5–10), it might be unsafe to conclude that Paul did not have both in mind. He has already expounded on Christ as ‘our Passover’ (5:7), and the resurrection of the Saviour is seen here as the commencement of the harvest. The association would not have been lost upon Jewish believers.”

23 Although Christ was not the first to rise from the dead (He raised Lazarus and others), He was the first to be raised to never die again.

24 Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians.”