FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE” (1 Corinthians 15:12-34)

Have you ever noticed how we speak so casually of heaven? We express surprise by, “Oh my heavens!” or “What in heaven’s name!” or “Heavens to Betsy!” (I still don’t get that one. Who is this Betsy, and what’s she got to do with heaven?) When we are in a jam, we might cry out, “Heaven help us!” When we can’t solve a dilemma with our own wisdom we might say, “Heaven only knows!” We “thank heaven for 7-11!” We even have a flavor of ice cream called “Heavenly Hash” and a perfume named “Heaven-Sent” (which may have given rise to the expression “Stinks to high heaven!”). Admittedly, I am guilty of misusing the term myself on occasion. When I exchange e-mails with one of my preaching friends, I will occasionally encourage him with his preaching with the words, “Give ‘em heaven!”

But what if there is no heaven? Have you ever allowed yourself to think about this? When I was growing up, I used to think about this all the time. What if everything I believed was a fairy tale, or worse yet a malicious lie? I remember listening to John Lennon’s song “Imagine”: “Imagine there’s no heaven/It’s easy if you try/No hell below us/Above us only sky.” I remember thinking to myself: what if Lennon is right? Of course, whenever I would have these thoughts, it would quickly dawn on me that if there is no heaven and the resurrection is a sham, life is an exercise in futility.

That is Paul’s whole point in 1 Cor 15:12-34. If the bodily resurrection is only an empty dream and this life is all there is, Christians are to be pitied. Fortunately, Paul will argue this life is not all there is. We all know the contemporary beer commercial that goes: “You only go around once, so you’d better grab all the gusto you can get.” Once one denies the resurrection of the dead, this slogan seems entirely logical. But since Christ was raised from the dead, and since His kingdom culminates in the defeat of death, we actually “go around twice.” Yes, we go around twice! In this passage, Paul will provide three key results of Christ’s resurrection.

1. Christ’s resurrection provides hope (15:12-19). In these eight verses, Paul claims that if we have no future we have no past or present as well. That is, we have no forgiveness of our sins in the past, and we have no advantage over unbelievers in the present. Paul begins with an important question that is essential to this entire chapter: “Now if [since] 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?” This opening question explains why Paul spilled so much ink on the topic of the resurrection. He did so because the Corinthians argued that there was no future physical resurrection. They were denying that believers will experience resurrection. Paul’s logic is clear in this verse: since Christ has been raised, resurrection obviously is possible. In the course of this chapter Paul will insist that the resurrection is not merely possible, it is absolutely certain and essential to our faith. However, before Paul can drive home this point, he will concede the possibility that Christ has not risen.

In 15:13-19, Paul discloses seven disastrous consequences if there is no resurrection from the dead. First, if there is no resurrection Christ has not been raised from the dead. 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 in essence, “For the sake of argument, let’s grant that there is 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, because He was a human being like you and me.” As noted above, the erroneous Corinthians were not denying the resurrection of Christ per se, only the future resurrection of believers. But as Paul will soon 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. We go around twice.
Second, if there is no resurrection our preaching is vain (15:14). In the late 1990s, I was a staff pastor in Corvallis, OR, home of the Oregon State University Beavers. The distinguished religion professor at OSU is a man by the name of Marcus Borg. An outstanding teacher, Borg has received all of OSU’s major awards for teaching, including one from the legislature. Fortunately, Dr. Borg does not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. In one of his books, he said this of Christ’s resurrection: “As a child, I took it for granted that Easter meant that Jesus literally rose from the dead. I now see Easter very differently. For me, it is irrelevant whether or not the tomb was empty. Whether Easter involves something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant.”

Despite his education and giftedness, Dr. Borg is in error. The gospel Paul preached at Corinth proclaimed Christ’s literal resurrection (15:3-5). Paul reminded the Corinthians that they had received this gospel, stood on this gospel, and were being saved by this gospel (15:1-2). Thus, as far as Paul is concerned, if there is no resurrection there is nothing worth preaching! This remains true today: eloquence, persuasion, humor, and passion are all wonderful, but if a sermon does not contain the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it cannot accurately be labeled preaching. Everything stands or falls on the truth of the assertion that God raised Christ from the dead.

Third, if there is no resurrection our faith is vain and worthless (15:14, 17). Regardless of how vibrant the outworking of faith, the core of Christian belief and life is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christ did not rise from the dead faith is without foundation; it is empty and useless. The gospel is not good news but a hoax that has no real power to change lives or to do anything else except to deceive. If Christ has not risen, Christians are like people who say they feel better after taking a dummy tablet. They are confessing some change that has no substantial basis. Like the dummy drug, such faith would not do anything except within the individual minds of these people.

Fourth, if there is no resurrection we are false witnesses of God (15:15). Those who proclaim that Christ rose from the dead speak in God’s name what they know to be untrue. Christianity is not a system of philosophy or a moral code, but the declaration of what God has done in Christ. If the dead are not raised then the whole gospel is a sham and those who preach it are liars.

Fifth, if there is no resurrection we are still in our sins (15:17). In Rom 4:25, Paul asserts that Jesus was raised “for our justification.” In other words, if Jesus failed to rise from the dead we are still dead in our sins.

Sixth, if there is no resurrection those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished (15:18). If Christ has not been raised, then those who “fall asleep in Christ” are no different from unbelievers, who are consigned to ruin (1:18). And who wants to think of their relatives and loved ones who have trusted in Christ rotting?

Seventh, if there is no resurrection we are to be pitied more than all human beings (15:19). Some people will tell you that even if Christianity is not true, the Christian faith is still the best way to live. You have probably heard people say things like this: “Even if it turned out Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead and there was no such place as 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 absolutely disagrees with that position. He says in 15:19, “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” If Christ has not risen, you folks are the most miserable people in the world.
[Paul has completed his speculating and is ready to move on to the next step: the glorious consequences of the fact that Christ has been raised from the dead. Paul now turns from negative (15:12-19) to positive consequences of the resurrection (15:20-28). In the next nine verses, Paul will argue that…]

2. Christ’s resurrection guarantees victory (15:20-28). Paul next will show that the resurrection of Christ makes the resurrection of believers both necessary and inevitable. Those “in Christ” must arise since Christ arose. Christ’s resurrection set in motion the defeat of all God’s enemies, including death. His resurrection demands our resurrection since otherwise death would remain undefeated. Verses 20-22 affirm the inclusive nature of Christ’s resurrection. We have been folded into that resurrection reality. Verses 23-28 affirm the forceful purpose of Christ’s resurrection. There is a point to it that we can anticipate as ultimate reality.

In 15:20, Paul writes, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.” “But now” are two of the sweetest words in the Bible, for they are often followed by words of comfort and hope. Such is the case here where Paul informs us that Christ has been raised from the dead. Furthermore, He is the “first fruits” of those believers who have died. The imagery of “first fruits” links with the Feast of First Fruits in the Old Testament. 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. 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. We go around twice.

In 15:21-22, Paul explains himself further: “For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” The point that Paul is making in these verses is: Adam’s sin brought death (cf. Rom 5:12-21) and Jesus Christ’s resurrection offers life to those who believe. The word “all” is used twelve times in 15:22-28. Consequently, some argue that all people will eventually be saved. This is typically called “universalism.” However, the “all” that will be made alive with Christ refers only to those who have fallen asleep in Christ. Moreover, in this section Paul is only speaking about the Christian dead, not about a general resurrection.

The imagery of “first fruits” implies that Christ’s resurrection sets in motion a series of events that will culminate at His coming. In 15:23-24, Paul writes, “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.” Every Christian is going to receive a brand-new body, but every one must wait his or her turn! The key word here is “order.” The word translated “order” (tagma) is a military term that refers to rank or order. Paul was describing a military parade passing by, with each corps falling into position at the proper time. (For those who can’t identify with the military, think of the carpool.) Throughout history, different Christians fall into their place in the parade at their appointed times.

Paul concludes this section in 15:25-28 with these powerful words: “For He [Christ] must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE [God] HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, ‘All things are put in subjection [God],’ it is evident that He [God] is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him [Christ], When all things are subjected to Him [Christ], then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One [God] who subjected all things to Him [Christ], so that God may be all in all.” In these verses, Paul quotes Ps 110:1 and Ps 8:6 to support his arguments about the Messiah’s reign. The point that Paul is making is that God empowers Christ to accomplish His purposes. Christ is equal to the Father but chooses of His own accord to submit to His Father so that He might receive glory.
[Paul has touched upon the victory that God and the believer will enjoy on account of the resurrection. Now he moves on to affirm the motivating power of Christ’s resurrection.]

3. Christ’s resurrection gives purpose (15:29-34). In these final verses, Paul will insist that the resurrection motivates appropriate responses. In 15:29, Paul pens what could be the most confusing verse in the entire New Testament: “Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?” Paul’s words in 15:29 are fraught with difficulty. Some scholars have suggested that there are over 200 proposed interpretations of 15:29; however, this figure is exaggerated. The actual number is closer to forty, which is still a lot. You will be happy to know that I will not bog down in the various interpretations; yet, I will not be able to ignore this difficult verse because it has been the subject of much controversy. Mormons, for example, have baptized millions upon millions of dead people by proxy in Mormon temples so that they might be saved, including Christians, pagans, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and even avowed atheists.

As a result of this belief, the Mormon Church has amassed the greatest collection of genealogical data anywhere in the world, with billions of names in millions of family trees traced back to long before the time of Christ. Hundreds of full-time employees do the research, which is recorded on over a billion pages of documents, the originals of which are all stored in a multi-million dollar underground vault system in a canyon near Salt Lake City. Now the information is available on the internet. After researchers come up with new names, hundreds of volunteers go through baptismal rites, hour after hour, day after day, in some fifty Mormon temples. They don’t hold services in those temples, you know; they are only for secret temple rites, including proxy baptisms. Many of your ancestors have been baptized in absentia in a Mormon temple, without either their consent or yours.

All of this activity is based upon this one verse of Scripture, 1 Cor 15:29. But when one examines the verse, it becomes apparent that it serves as a very shaky foundation for such a practice. And furthermore, it flies directly in the face of Scriptures that teach clearly that after death comes judgment (Heb 9:27), not a second chance if someone happens to be baptized for you. Therefore, I believe this verse deserves careful re-examination.

I take the view that when new believers in Corinth were baptized, they credited their salvation to the gospel message they had heard or received from some of the apostles, many of whom were now dead. They did this because they wanted these deceased apostles to receive greater reward in eternity for the work they had done. This seems to be the best view for four primary reasons. First, this interpretation is based upon a literal understanding of the terms “baptism,” “for,” and “the dead.” Baptism refers to a literal act for new believers; the word “for” means “for the benefit of;” and the phrase “the dead” is identified with physically dead people (cf. 15:6). Second, the Corinthians like to associate themselves with the ministry of certain apostles (1:12-13; 3:4). This would explain why some of them were baptized “on behalf of” some deceased apostles. Third, some of the Corinthians did not believe in a resurrection (15:15-16). In refuting this, Paul refers to their practice of baptizing for the dead. Their practice is contradicting their beliefs. Lastly, Paul had previously mentioned eternal rewards (3:13-15), the Corinthian desire to bring honor to the apostles (1:13-17), and how the Corinthians themselves would be part of Paul’s apostolic reward when he stood before Christ (3:10; 4:14-15). This reward can only be received in the resurrection, and if the Corinthians wanted the dead apostles to receive the reward they were ascribing to them by baptizing new believers for these apostles, resurrection was necessary.

It is important to understand that Paul nowhere denunciates the practice of baptizing for the dead. He would not cite a practice he did not agree with to support his argument for the resurrection. Though Paul does not explicitly state approval for the practice, the fact that he cites it as support for his argument proves that all views which hold some sort of saving grace in baptism are to be rejected.
Paul now gives two incentives for the resurrection: service (15:30-32) and sanctification (15:33-34). In 15:30-32, Paul explains that the reason he served God was because of his personal assurance of the resurrection of his body. He puts it like this: “Why are we also in danger every hour? I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.” Paul went through incredible suffering and pain in the course of his ministry. If there were no resurrection of the dead, he would be foolish risking his life for nothing. Paul’s boast in the Corinthians (15:31) refers to the fruit of his apostolic labor and suffering (9:1-2). Paul is deeply attached to this church. It is interesting to see the expression of Paul’s basic satisfaction with his Corinthian converts despite the many things for which he had to rebuke them.

One case of Paul’s dying daily was fighting with beasts at Ephesus (15:32). It is nearly certain that the “beasts” are not wild animals. As a Roman citizen, Paul would not have fought with wild animals. Furthermore, he would have likely mentioned these beasts in all of his lists about his own personal suffering. Therefore, it seems best to link the phrase “wild beasts” with 1 Cor 16:8, where Paul writes about many who oppose him in Ephesus. They are, metaphorically speaking, “wild beasts.” It would make no sense for Paul to face his opponents head-on and endanger his life if there were no resurrection. Paul says there is no profit in this.

In fact, Paul says if there is no resurrection, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” This is a quote from God’s people who are suffering in the midst of an Assyrian siege (Isa 22:13). They figured they had nothing to lose since they were going to be destroyed. If there is no resurrection then we might as well live for the present. This is unadulterated hedonism—the Hugh Heffner philosophy.

Our passage closes in 15:33-34 with a series of commands: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’ Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.” Paul commands the Corinthians to stop being deceived. He then quotes a well-known cliché. “Bad company corrupts good morals.” God’s people are susceptible to deception, especially from friends and fellow church members. It is dangerous to keep company with fellow Christians who are not characterized by consistent Christian living. Hanging around with people who claim to know Christ, but who are themselves far from the Lord can be more dangerous than spending time with non-Christians. We are inclined to be vulnerable to inconsistency of thought and action, to let down our guard, if the Christians around us are materialistic, sensual, loose talking, freethinking, irreverent persons. Remember, water flows downhill. Birds of a feather flock together. If we lay down with dogs, then we will get up with fleas. It is inevitable that evil companions warp good morals.

This is why we should care about who our children “hang out” with. Similarly, you need to be careful about who influences you.

Paul commands the church to be sober-minded and to stop sinning. Some of the Corinthians had been duped into believing that this life is all there is—you only go around once. Paul says such people have no knowledge of God. They are agnosia (“ignorant”) of God. We get our English word “agnostic” from this Greek word. Paul is saying, “Some Christians can live like functional agnostics.” Beware of such people! The crying shame of the church today is the glaring difference between what we believe and how we behave. There is little correlation between doctrine and deeds or creed and conduct with some Christians. High talk and no walk is a problem. We quote the Bible by the mile and live it by the inch.

What you believe about the resurrection, Paul says, controls how you live your life, how you spend your money and use your time—how you invest yourself. People who think wrongly invariably behave wrongly. Yet, you and I must remember, we go around twice, and we must live accordingly.
Scripture Reference
1 Corinthians 15:12-34
   Daniel 12:1-13
   Matthew 12:38-40; 27:62-64
   Mark 12:24-27
   John 5:28-29
   Acts 24:15
   1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Study Questions
1. What are my earliest memories of heaven? Who was the first person to tell me about heaven? How have my perspectives about heaven, eternal life, and the resurrection changed over the years? What is the most significant insight into heaven that I have received?

2. Why is Christ’s resurrection so fundamental to the Christian faith (15:12-19)? 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?

3. How does Christ’s future kingdom reign give me confidence in the present (15:20-28)? What can I do to consistently meditate on God’s future kingdom program? How will this change the way I spend my time, money, and spiritual resources?

4. Do I agree with Keith’s interpretation of 15:29? If so, how does this understanding motivate me to share Christ with others and leave a godly legacy? Have I marked the lives of other believers and unbelievers? What practical examples can I cite?

Notes


3 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; (iii) the truthfulness of testimony of 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).” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).


6 See [http://oregonstate.edu/cla/philosophy/faculty/borg](http://oregonstate.edu/cla/philosophy/faculty/borg).


12 E.g., Rom 3:21; 6:22; 7:6; Gal 4:9; Eph 2:13; 5:8; Col 1:22; Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 2:10.


14 Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians.”

15 Kistemaker demonstrates that the verb *zoopoieo* (“will be made alive”) implies a new creation. Furthermore, Paul only applies the verb to believers not unbelievers (cf. Rom 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:45). Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistles to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 550.


19 The word “excepted” is a very awkward and wooden rendering. I prefer the translation of the NIV: “Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ.”

20 Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 711-14, is helpful in working through these verses.

21 Psalm 110:1 is the most quoted OT verse in the NT.


23 Ibid., 71-72.


25 This idea is not foreign to Scripture. Generally, the privilege of baptizing converts belonged to the one who shared Christ, but sometimes the baptism could be performed by his followers on his behalf if he were absent (cf. John 4:1-2; Acts 19:1-3). Patrick, “Living Rewards for Dead Apostles,” 76.

26 See 1 Cor 4:8-13; 2 Cor 1:3-7; 4:8-10; 6:1-10; 11:23-29; Gal 6:17.


28 Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*.

29 Verbrugge writes, “We do know that Paul had experiences in Ephesus in which he almost lost his life (cf. 2 Cor 1:8-10), but these events happened just shortly before his writing of 2 Corinthians and thus cannot be reflected here. Moreover, one wonders why something so dangerous and recent as fighting wild animals would not be specifically listed in his catalog of sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.”
Possible candidates for these human wild beasts were Demetrius and Alexander (Acts 19:24-41; 2 Tim 4:14). “Wild beasts” may also be the wild crowds at Ephesus incited against him by Demetrius (Acts 19:23-34) or the “Gentiles” Paul mentions in 2 Cor 11:26.

Paul uses the phrase, “Do not be deceived” in 1 Cor 6:9 and Gal 6:7; cf. Jas 1:16.


See also 1 Cor 5:11 and 2 Thess 3:6.

The word *agnosia* is only used one other place in the NT: 1 Pet 2:15 “For God wants you to silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good” (NET).