

Last week, we began our stepped journey through chapter 15 by observing that Paul roots his teaching of the general resurrection in the reality of Christ’s resurrection. In those opening verses, he establishes the historicity and centrality of Christ’s resurrection, and he will now promote the argument that to deny a general, bodily resurrection of the dead is to deny the resurrection of Christ.

If the resurrection is true, then everything would change for those who do not embrace the faith. If the resurrection is true, then unbelief is implausible. If Jesus has been raised from the dead, that validates Paul’s preaching of the gospel. And if the resurrection is not true, then everything would change for those who do embrace the faith. If the resurrection is false, belief is implausible. If Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then the gospel is invalidated.

(Stephen T. Um)

The Realities of Resurrection

Sceptics often suggest that resurrection theology is just the product of ancient superstition, but that modern science shows that resurrection is impossible. The truth, however, is that resurrection was as implausible to ancients as it was to moderns, as this text clearly shows. Ancient Greek culture, in particular, had no category for resurrection, because it generally viewed the soul as immaterial and beautiful and the body as physical and evil.

Even among first century Jews, there was no monolithic understanding of resurrection. For example, Pharisees affirmed resurrection; Sadducees did not. Jewish religion became more monolithic *after* the destruction of Jerusalem, because of the varying sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, etc.), the Pharisees were the only group that survived, so Pharisee doctrine became Orthodox Judaism.

TO THINK ABOUT

There may have been no monolithic understanding of resurrection in the first century, but what about the Old Testament? Does the Old Testament teach resurrection? If so, where?

Paul argues that resurrection is central to the Christian faith. Without the doctrine of resurrection, Paul’s work is vain (v. 14a), the Corinthians’ faith is vain (v. 14b), Paul is a liar, misrepresenting God (v. 15), Christianity is futile (v. 17), the promises of future hope are empty (v. 18), and the present experience of Christianity is pointless (v. 19). This is so because if resurrection, generally speaking, is not true, then Christ’s resurrection is not true.

The resurrection is the truth on which everything else hinges. Without it Christian ministry is pointless, personal faith is ineffective, God’s character is called into question, Christians are still in need of salvation, any sense of future hope is removed, and our present experience is meaningless.

(Stephen T. Um)

We must keep before us in this discussion that the doctrine of resurrection is bigger than Christ’s resurrection. The Christian understanding of resurrection encompasses both Christ’s bodily resurrection from the dead, and the future bodily resurrection of believers from the dead. That is our ultimate hope.

The Implications of Resurrection

Biblically speaking, Christ overcame Satan and the fear of death by his own death (Hebrews 2:14–15). His resurrection was the proof of this victory. And the general resurrection at the end of the age will be the final means by which death will be fully defeated. Without a robust doctrine of resurrection, we have no way to account for the biblical promise of the final defeat of death.

TO THINK ABOUT

If it is true that the only two certainties in life are death and taxes, we must all deal with death in some way. What are some of the ways by which different people try to face the problem of death?

Since death is a certainty for everyone, we must all face the question of what comes after death. Basically, there are three major explanations of post-mortem experience.

1. **Naturalism.** Naturalists believe that death is the end of existence. There is no hope of continued existence—embodied or disembodied—after death. Ultimately, this leads to hedonism (see v. 32).
2. **Dualism.** Dualists believe that the soul/spirit and the body are two distinct elements of the human person—one (soul/spirit) immaterial; the other (body) material. In this view, the soul exists consciously after the death of the body and will be reunited with the body at the resurrection. In first-century Greek thought, the soul was considered inherently good, while the body was considered inherently evil.
3. **Physicalism.** Physicalists believe that humans are a complex whole—that humans don’t *have* a living soul but *are* a living soul. Humans exist as body and soul, and when a person dies, they remain dead until the resurrection. There is no conscious experience between death and resurrection but, unlike naturalism, there is the hope of ultimate resurrection.

Paul is not concerned in this chapter with the intermediate state (i.e. the period between death and resurrection), but with the ultimate hope of resurrection. Dualists and physicalists share this hope.

The resurrection of Christ guarantees the resurrection of Christians, and the resurrection of Christians is the means by which death is defeated, for the resurrection promises an end to death. As Adam acted as a federal head, plunging the human race into sin, Christ acts as a federal head, bestowing eternal life, through his own life, to all who believe in him.

If there is no resurrection, death wins. If there is resurrection, death loses. “Resurrection means endless hope, but no resurrection means hopeless end” (David Garland).

The Application of Resurrection

For Paul, the doctrine of resurrection was not academic, or a mere theological distinctive. It was profoundly practical. In fact, Christianity is profoundly geared around the reality of resurrection. Much of what the Christian life calls for—and what the Corinthians were willing to stand for—necessitates the truth of resurrection. Paul shows this in at least three ways.

First, if there is no resurrection, why submit to baptism (v. 29)? It is clear that the Corinthians practised baptism (1:13–17), and by that very practice they affirmed belief in resurrection. Why would someone be baptised in the name of someone who died and remained dead? If Christ did not rise from the dead, to be baptised in his name makes no sense.

Second, the call for Christians to face persecution displays faith in resurrection (vv. 30–32a). It makes no sense to gladly accept persecution if there is no hope after this life. We face persecution because we believe that rewards are given in the life to come.

Third, the affirmation of the need to live according to “good morals” displays belief in resurrection (vv. 32b–34). If there is no resurrection, there is no incentive to live ethically. If death is the end of human existence, we should pursue hedonism to the fullest extent, because this life is all we have to enjoy.

The resurrection narrative tells a story with a beautiful, happy ending. The end of redemptive history is: God wins, and those who are in union with Christ will win along with him.... Death will not ultimately have the victory because of what Jesus Christ has done. It’s not possible that we could ever fail or consider ourselves as losers. Because Jesus Christ lost everything for us, we can’t ultimately lose anything.

(Stephen T. Um)
