

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 29

The resurrection— our hope for the future

The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:13-14 that “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” In other words, if there isn’t any resurrection, our faith is pointless.

If Christianity is simply about this physical life and then we die to never exist again, then it really doesn’t matter what we do or how we live or what we believe. As Paul said in verse 19, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

If there is no future for us, then our lives would more sensibly focus on having a good time while we can (verse 32). If there is no resurrection, then we would not be helpful for us to believe in Christ, because that might mean sacrifice and persecution. And if there is no resurrection, then the crucifixion of Christ didn’t really achieve anything for us, and we are still in our sins (verse 17).

But there is a resurrection, not only for Christ but also for us, and this is an essential part of the Christian faith. Let’s look at the significance of this doctrine—not just for the future, but for day-to-day living, as well. It is relevant every day of our lives.

Biblical evidence

The Old Testament doesn’t say much about the resurrection. Ezekiel says a little bit, and Daniel says a little bit, but our belief is based mostly on the

New Testament. Jesus talked about the resurrection in several parables. He even called himself the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). The resurrection is mentioned several times in the book of Acts, and in the book of Hebrews, but in most passages we don’t learn much except that there *will be* a resurrection.

There are two passages that describe the resurrection in a little more detail—Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonika, and his first letter to the Corinthians.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul writes,

“We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be

with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

Here, Paul isn't saying much about the resurrection except its timing. There will be a resurrection, and the reason we know that is because Jesus, the example of true humanity, was himself raised from the dead. We believe in his resurrection, so we believe that he will also resurrect all who believe in him, and this will happen when Jesus returns to earth. Christians who have died will rise, and Christians who are alive will be changed and rise into the clouds to meet the Lord as he returns, and we will be with him forever.

In 1 Corinthians Paul goes into more detail, explaining not only that there will be a resurrection, but he also comments briefly on what we will be like in the resurrected state. First, he compares the resurrection to the planting of a seed. The seed looks like a seed, but the plant that grows from it looks quite different, depending on what kind of seed it is (verses 37-38).

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (verses 42-44).

After we are resurrected, we will be different, perhaps as different as a leaf is from a seed. The important differences are that we will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual—and we will look like Christ:

“Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an

eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (verses 49-53).

Here Paul is using a different figure of speech, that of putting on new clothes. The point that he stresses the most, the point that he mentions the most, is that we will be imperishable—our bodies will not deteriorate, and we will never die. We will have new, glorious bodies, transformed by the Holy Spirit to be like Christ.

Eternal significance

What significance does this doctrine have for us? The eternal significance is that we will live forever—and not just live forever, but we will live forever *with Christ*—and not just that, but we will have glorious bodies that are like *his*, with power and glory and life that's far *better* than what we know now.

There is a great reward waiting for us, a reward that compensates for the difficulties we sometimes have in Christianity. The eternal reward is important—as Paul said, if faith is good for this life only, then it isn't good enough. But there *is* an afterlife, there is a resurrection, and there are wonderful rewards waiting for us. No matter what kind of sacrifices we make in this life, they are well worth making, because we will be given 100 times and more in the world to come. The resurrection is an important part of this picture.

Day-to-day significance

Our belief in the resurrection has important consequences for our day-to-day lives, too, as noted above. For example, knowing about the resurrection helps us deal with the difficulties and persecutions of believing in Christ when most people around us do not. When our life and ministry runs into problems, we do not just quit. We do not say, Let's eat and drink and be merry, because nothing really matters much. No, we see that there is a future, and

life *does* matter, and we want to live with our future in mind.

The doctrine of the resurrection goes hand in hand with the doctrine of the judgment. As Jesus said, some will rise to a resurrection of life, and others to a resurrection of judgment. This says that God cares about the way we live. He has something to say about the way we live, and he will call us into *account* for the way we live.

The good news tells us how we can be acquitted on the day of judgment—it tells us we can be found righteous through faith in Christ. The gospel is built on the reality of the resurrection and the judgment. The existence of the resurrection explains why the gospel is necessary, and why it is good news.

The gospel is good news not only for the people who believe, but also for the people who do not *yet* believe. There is an *infinite* significance to the gospel we preach. We are not talking about a few years of better feelings, or even 70 years of good things—we are talking about eternal life, an eternity that is infinitely better than anything this life has to offer. So we know that what we do in serving Christ, what we do in supporting the gospel, is *worth doing*. It is important for all who need to hear the gospel.

The fact of the resurrection emphasizes the importance of sharing the good news with other people. This is the way Paul ends the resurrection chapter: “Therefore [because there is a resurrection], my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that *your labor in the Lord is not in vain*” (verse 58).

The resurrection is not just an interesting bit of trivia about the future—it has practical consequences for our lives today. It gives us reason to work, reason to persevere through whatever difficulties we might face.

The resurrection is also relevant for day-to-day Christian conduct. We see this in Romans 6: “We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead

through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (verse 4). Paul explains in verse 6 that “our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.”

Paul is talking about a change in behavior. When we identify ourselves with Christ, we put to death the deeds of sin. We put them out of our lives, and we walk and live in a new way, just as Christ was raised from the dead into a new life. So our behavior reflects the death and resurrection of Christ. Out with the old, and in with the new.

In verses 11-13, Paul tells us,

“Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.”

Because there is a resurrection, we are to live in a new and different way. Instead of serving the desires of the flesh, we seek to serve the Lord, because we will be with him forever. We can escape condemnation through faith in Christ—but God’s forgiveness doesn’t mean that he does not care about the way we live. He still cares, he still makes commands, and understanding the resurrection helps us walk in newness of life.

As 1 John 3:2-3 says,

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him *purifies* himself, just as he is pure.”

John goes on to say in verses 4-6 that when we live in Christ, we do not go on sinning. We quit. But if we do sin, as we all do, then we have a defense attorney standing by, Jesus Christ, and the

atonement sacrifice has already been given for us. So there is no condemnation for us, but there is still the fact that people who believe in the resurrection also change the way they live. Knowing that we will live with Christ forever changes the way we live with him right now.

Last, knowing about the resurrection gives a new perspective to death. We know that death does not end it all; we know that we will see our loved ones again; we know that life will go on forever. Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that Jesus “shared in our humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

By knowing about the resurrection, we are freed from the fear of death. That enemy has been conquered, and we are the recipients of the victory that Christ has won! He has triumphed over death,

and we share in his life, freed from the fear of death. As we read in 1 Thessalonians, we do not grieve like other people do. We still have grief (and that’s OK, because death is still an enemy, even though a defeated enemy), but we have a hope that others do not have.

Knowledge of the resurrection helps us die faithfully, in hope and confidence for the future. We know that the best is yet to come. As 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says, “Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

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