*Celebrating the Resurrection*

1 Corinthians 15:1-24

Easter Sunday 2023

4/9/23

Resurrection Sunday celebrates the most important event in the history of the world. The passage we just read makes it clear that Christ’s resurrection sits at the center of our faith. If that is true, we would be wise to consider it carefully. My intention today is not to exhaust the 24 verses I just read, but to highlight the four main themes that run through it. You can use this framework to reflect on these things further on your own.

The first thing to see is how the resurrection completes God’s salvation purposes. In vs. 3-4, Paul describes the message he preached. He proclaimed that Jesus died for our sins *according to the Scriptures,* and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures.* This is the good news of salvation in its simplest form. It identifies humanity’s basic problem. We have sinned against God, ending our relationship with Him, and bringing the sentence of death upon ourselves. Yet Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin as our substitute. But after three days in the grave, death could not hold Him, and the grave could not keep Him. God raised Him from the dead according to the Scriptures. By rising from the dead, Jesus conquered our three mortal enemies: sin, Satan, and death.

The phrase *according to the Scriptures* reminds us that this is the central message of the Bible. Following the very first sin, God promised to send someone to save people from their sin. The primary purpose for the OT is to build the case for the coming Christ. It describes the promised Savior as a better prophet than Moses, a better priest than Aaron, and a better King than David. It predicts His suffering for sinners, and ultimately points to His victory. The NT tells us how Jesus fulfilled the OT predictions. The Gospels tell how Jesus accomplished salvation, while the epistles explain what Jesus did and how we should live as His people. Finally, Revelation tells of how Jesus will complete the salvation work He has started and bring judgment on His enemies.

The resurrection is the climax of the unfolding drama of God’s salvation plans. Sin has been rendered powerless by Jesus’ sinless life and sacrificial death. He has broken the enslaving power of sin in His people’s lives. Jesus is also the snake-crusher. The cross bruised His heal, but the resurrection crushed Satan’s head. Finally, Jesus overcame death by rising from the dead. The cross paid the penalty, but it was the resurrection that sealed the victory. Jesus has secured salvation for all who call upon His name.

Next, we see that the resurrection is a historical reality. In vs. 5-8 Paul acts as a lawyer calling eyewitness after eyewitness to testify to the fact of Jesus’ resurrection. There was no argument over if the tomb was empty; but since that day there has been an unbroken argument over why it was empty. It was empty because He came back to life. Paul proves it by recording many of His appearances. First, Jesus appeared to Cephas, or Peter. The NT does not tell us anything of this private appearance beyond the fact that it happened. Then He appeared to the His inner circle of disciples. The four gospels record various appearances of Christ to them, beginning on resurrection Sunday and continuing in various ways over a period of forty days. Then we are told of an event recorded nowhere else, as Jesus appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time. After this, He appeared to James, His half-brother who would become the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Then Jesus appeared to all the apostles, which probably refers to those who watched Him ascend into heaven. Finally, Paul says, as one untimely born, Jesus appeared to him. Acts 9 tells how, as Paul traveled the road to Damascus planning to arrest the Christians there, Christ arrested him with His grace, commissioning him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

More appearances could be added to this list. Paul lists these to establish the historical reliability of the resurrection. In the Jewish court system, two or three collaborating witnesses established a fact. Paul has not two or three witnesses, but hundreds of them, most of whom were still alive when he wrote this. He is inviting people to fact check him to see if this really happened.

Questioning the truthfulness of the resurrection is nothing new. In Mt. 28:11ff we read how the soldiers who guarded Jesus’ tomb reported that the events at the tomb that morning to the chief priests, who paid the soldiers a large sum of money to spread a roomer that the disciples stole the body while they slept. Because the resurrection is the lynchpin of Christianity, Satan must attack this core truth. But Paul says it is a historical reality. Here is a list of eyewitnesses who are prepared to seal their witness with their own blood. Fact check me. They will tell you the same thing. The resurrection really happened.

This leads to our third observation. The resurrection is a theological necessity. In vs. 12ff, we discover that there were some who denied resurrection. Yet Paul says that if you remove the resurrection from the tapestry of Christian belief, the entire system unravels. To deny the resurrection is to deny the gospel. The message preached to the Corinthians by Paul, which they had believed, included His resurrection from the dead. Resurrection was clearly taught in the OT. Daniel 12:2 states that all people will be raised from the dead. Some will be granted everlasting life, while others will be condemned to shame and everlasting contempt. When people deny the resurrection, they are rejecting God’s word they and denying the message of salvation. This is usually done to remove the reality of judgment by God.

It seems that the Corinthians had not thought through the theological implications of denying the resurrection. Yet Paul says if we deny that people rise from the dead, then we also deny that God raised Christ from the dead. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is also vain. Furthermore, we are even 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. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. Paul’s message needs no commentary. His point is clear: no resurrection, no salvation. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, He is not who He claimed to be. He clearly stated before the crucifixion that He would rise from the dead. If he did not, He is a lying fraud who is not able to save anyone. Our faith would be worthless for our hope would be in a myth.

Many people view Christianity as a coping mechanism, while thinking Jesus is a moral teacher and example of good deeds. Jesus was a good teacher whose message encapsulated God’s perfect character. He provides the perfect example to follow. And I do not know how people can bear up under the weight of life in this broken world without faith in Him. Yet these things are not why Jesus came. The Christian message is the solution to the universal problem of humanity. We are broken beyond our ability to repair. Sin severed our relationship with God, placing us under His wrath and destining us for eternal punishment. There is nothing we can do about this. Yet God, because of His great love for us, sent His Son into the world, to live the life we were supposed to live, die the death we deserve, and absorb the wrath we earned because of our sin. After paying the penalty of sin, He rose from the grave, triumphing over sin, Satan, and death, while securing eternal life for all who believe. Take the resurrection out of the equation, and it is no longer salvation. We need more than a substitute who can deal with our guilt; we need a conqueror who brings victory. Jesus is both the Lamb of God who bore our sins away, and the Lion of Judah who overcame death so we could have life in His name. The resurrection is a theological necessity.

Finally, Jesus’ resurrection gives hope for eternity. I love how vs. 20 responds to the doubts raised by some regarding the resurrection. People can deny it all they want, but that does not change the fact that it happened. *Christ has been raised from the dead.* He is the first fruits of those who are asleep. Death is a problem we all must face, but because Jesus overcame death, it gives us hope that we can too in Him.

In vs. 21-22, Paul draws on a fundamental truth. In Adam, our first parent, we all died. When Adam rejected God in the garden of Eden by disobeying Him, He brought the curse of sin on humanity. In Adam, humanity passed from innocence into condemnation. All Adam’s seed are born slaves of sin, opposed to God, seeking to replace God with themselves. This is the death of sin. In Adam all die this death.

Yet a second Adam has come. Jesus was born of a woman, but not of a man. He was conceived in the womb of a virgin by a miracle of the Holy Spirit. As the second Adam, He had the innocence that Adam originally possessed. Jesus lived the life of innocence Adam failed to live. Then He died the death Adam should have died, so that any of the first Adam’s descendants who believe in Him may live.

In the first Adam, all die. In the second Adam, all live. That does not mean everyone will be saved. In the same way we are in the first Adam by physical birth, we must be placed in the second Adam by another birth. This birth is a spiritual birth wrought in us by God’s grace when we turn from our sin to trust in Christ. Only those who experience this second birth are saved.

This is glorious news for God’s people, for Jesus said *I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies.* Vs. 23 tells us that Jesus is the first fruits of this resurrection. Although there are other resurrections recorded in the Bible, all those individuals died again. Jesus is the first to rise from the grave, never to die again. Since He has risen never to die again, we know that those who are Christ’s at His coming will also rise again. Like Christ, His people will be resurrected to eternal life. After this, His enemies will also be resurrected to eternal punishment. This is why Daniel 12 says some will be raised to everlasting life, while others will be raised to shame and everlasting contempt. That means eternal condemnation in hell as the just consequence of sin. These truths stir the believer’s heart to faith, hope, and love to God; yet these truths should unnerve the unbeliever, for all of us must stand before God to give an account of our lives. We either have Christ’s righteousness as our own, or we must stand on the merit of our own righteousness. That account is hopelessly overdrawn by sin.

This is why we must think carefully about the resurrection. It is the capstone to God’s salvation plan. It is a historical reality. It is a theological necessity. And it is the reason for our hope. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.* See the risen Savior. His hands and feet bare the marks of His crucifixion. His arms were stretched wide on the cross to pay for your sin. Those same arms remain stretch wide today to receive anyone who will turn from their sin to trust in Him for the salvation of their souls. May each of us run into the arms of the Savior, finding life, and hope, and peace, and joy in a reconciled relationship with the God who loves us so much that He was not willing to spare His own Son, but crushed Him to death so that we might live. *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*