

“Why Resurrection Matters”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2019 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

If our bodies will not be raised, it doesn't matter that Christ was raised.

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

July 7, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

First importance

We currently have two mission teams in the field – one in Vermont and the other in London. Irving Perez, serving with the London team, posted some pictures yesterday including one of the Tower Bridge. It's an iconic site for visitors to London – a must-see, if not a must-visit.



Especially with beautiful and famous bridges, it's easy to forget that the bridge wasn't built to be admired. The bridge was built to be crossed. The point of a bridge is not the bridge; it's the destination. In the case of the Tower Bridge, it was built so that commercial traffic could cross into the City of London from the docks.

As beautiful as the Gospel of Jesus is, it's easy to forget that it's a bridge not a destination. The purpose of the Gospel is not to be admired for its exhibition of grace and sacrifice. The goal of the Gospel is to get you and me to our destination. That's what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.

Six months ago we began a Sunday morning journey through the Apostles' Creed. Today's message on "the resurrection of the body" is my final sermon on the creed. I'll leave it up to my colleagues to wrap up next week with "the life everlasting."

The Apostles' Creed is so named because the church universal has accepted it as a summary of what the first apostles of Jesus taught. If you're going to find a specific passage in the New Testament that provides the seed thoughts for a creed, look to the first few verses of 1 Corinthians 15 – our text for today. If you asked the Apostle Paul, "What do you believe," he would answer "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" and "that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." There's so much packed in there – who Jesus is (the Christ), what he did (died and rose again), and why he did it (for our sins). All of this is "according to the Scriptures."

Because Paul's creed is "of first importance," it comes at the end of his letter. I generally put the most important part of my sermon at the end, and it almost always ties to what's at the beginning. Paul begins (1:8-2:5) and ends (15:1-53) 1 Corinthians with the Gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ.

Paul may not have ever written 1 Corinthians 15:2-3 if he hadn't felt the need to address another issue.¹ 1 Corinthians 15 is about resurrection, but it's not *primarily* about Christ's resurrection; it's about *your* resurrection. Paul's Q&A (that's what 1 Corinthians is) has been addressing topics he heard either from or about the Corinthians. Some of them are saying there is no resurrection from the dead (12).

They don't seem to be saying that *Christ* did not rise from the dead. They have accepted that truth as an essential of the Gospel. They are saying that *we* will not rise from the dead – not believers, not anybody. In response to what he has heard, Paul starts with reaffirming what is "of first importance" – the Gospel.

What Paul believes

Paul's readers know the Gospel well. "I want to remind you," he says in verse 1. It's not only that this is "the Gospel I preached to you," he notes, but this is the Gospel "you received and on which you have taken your stand." The verb tenses are important. You *are being saved* (2) because you *responded* in faith to this message and *are holding fast* (2) or else your profession of faith means nothing. Paul wants his readers to have full confidence in what Christ did – but never to rest on the laurels of a past profession of faith. You'll never have assurance unless you keep holding on.

In verses 3-8, Paul names two key beliefs about Christ, each with supporting truths. Christ died and Christ rose again – "This I believe and preach," Paul says.

He died *for our sins* – what we call the substitutionary atonement. I like to ask my Confirmands, "If you disobeyed your Mom and she grounded you for a month with no TV, no Internet, and no phone privileges, would your brother or sister step in and say, 'Mom, punish me instead? I'm turning in my phone in his/her place. Unplug my

¹ The same can be said about Philippians 2:5-11 – the high point of New Testament Christology in poetic form. Rhetorically, though, it is subordinate to vv. 1-4. If Paul hadn't needed to address the Philippians about their own humility, might we never have had his tribute to the humility and exaltation of Jesus?

computer.” Not happening. We say so casually, “Jesus died for my sins.” We mean that he accepted the full consequences of our sins so we wouldn’t have to perish.

Paul adds, “and was buried” (4) – probably not so much as an additional statement of faith but because his burial proves he really died.

The second major “I believe” for Paul is that Jesus “was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (4). His proof for that is that he appeared physically on several occasions – to Peter, to the original apostles, to James, even to 500 people at once – perhaps a reference to the Great Commission story in Matthew 28.

Paul adds that Jesus appeared personally to him. The Damascus Road experience changed everything for Paul. He then adds a very personal testimony. Paul says he was “abnormally born” (8) – a word that can refer to a miscarriage or abortion. In other words, he wasn’t supposed to be alive – spiritually speaking. He was an enemy of this message, a persecutor of the church. But God’s grace (10) transformed him through the appearance of the living Christ, and he will continue to preach so that others can believe (11).

For Paul, his creed is based both on objective evidence – the testimony of eyewitnesses – and personal experience. The change in his life could only be explained by the reality and power of a Christ who had died and been raised.

The body matters

Beginning in verse 12, Paul turns to the subject that will require about 40 verses for him to expound. He uses the strongest language he can invoke. If this isn’t true, then preaching is useless (14), faith doesn’t matter (14), Paul’s a liar (15), we’re still in our sins (17), those who died are lost (19), and Christians are pitiable idiots (19).

What is it that matters that much? It’s the resurrection of the body – your body and my body. If our bodies will not be raised, then it doesn’t matter that Christ’s body was raised. I didn’t say that; Paul did. Christ was raised with a purpose – so that we will be raised. If we don’t need to be raised, he didn’t need to come or die or rise again.

This is why I began the sermon by saying that the Gospel is a bridge not a destination. Even when it’s the Gospel, the bridge is only there so you can cross it and arrive somewhere else.

The “somewhere else” in the Bible, the “other side,” is . . . well, you think I’m going to say “heaven,” but that answer can possibly misdirect as well. The word “heaven” is common and important in the Bible, but it’s only the setting for what’s really important. To use another analogy, talking about heaven is like talking about the house where you live.

I love my house and love taking care of it. As of Friday I have personally replaced the flooring on every square inch of the second floor of my house (with some help, I’ll

admit). But at the end of the day, the reason I love my house is not because of the flooring or the siding or the furniture. It's a *place* – a place of rest, of refreshment, of refuge. It's the place where Linda and I live, the place where we raised our kids, the place where they come home. Our house doesn't ultimately matter. Love matters, and it's our home that happens to be the setting where our love most often is nurtured and lived out.

That's what heaven is – a place, a setting for what really matters. Questions about what heaven is like – physically, I mean – are interesting but ultimately irrelevant. What matters is what happens in heaven. What happens there is love – real, permanent, undiluted, perfect love. Love means we know each other, we talk to each other, we relate to each other – all of which requires bodies not just souls.

There are three main possibilities for what happens after you die:

- First, nothing: you as a person cease to exist. Your body returns to dust and that's it except someone's memory of you.
- Second, you exist in a spiritual form. The possibilities are varied, but the spirits in Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol come to mind, or the Dead Men of Dunharrow in the Lord of the Rings – the ghost army. "Zombies" is an apt word for souls without a body.
- Third, the resurrection of the body. Resurrection is not the same as immortality. Resurrection means you have a physical existence, not just a spiritual one. Your body resumes its shape. It's you again – body and soul.

For Paul, it has to be Option 3. *Has* to be. Without option 3, Jesus' resurrection doesn't matter. He rose from the dead to give us resurrection from the dead. If we don't rise from the dead, Paul says, Jesus didn't either (13).

Why is our resurrection that important? Because the body matters. At this point I'm tempted to review the entire letter of 1 Corinthians. Paul has been dealing with subthemes of this topic all through the letter. He's in a battle of Christian ideas vs. Greek religion and philosophy. The people of Corinth then are in a similar situation that you are today. They gather with other believers weekly (or maybe a few times a week at best) to hear the Word of God, but the rest of the week they interact with a world that has a completely different world view. To at least some of the Greeks, the body doesn't matter – not now and not after you die. It's your mind that matters, your soul that matters. As for your body, do with it what you like; it's only housing for your soul.

Paul's readers have tried to join these non-Christian ideas with their Christian faith. They probably didn't do it on purpose, but there's a lazy, passive thought process that tries to join the best of the world and the best of Christ. It sounds like this –

- It doesn't matter what I do with my body here and now. It's just pleasure, it's just sex, it's just maximizing this life since you only go around once.
- The 'resurrection' is spiritual, a metaphor. God has raised me to a new life and even given me the gift of tongues so I can connect with the spirit world.

- My material wealth is evidence that I'm spiritually better than you are, so I can get drunk at the Lord's supper while you go hungry.

This philosophy – that the “body doesn't matter” – was at least part of the reason the Corinthians' priorities were topsy-turvy, why they were so confused on so many issues, and why there was so much conflict in the church. For Paul, the body matters now and if it matters now it matters in eternity.

Heaven will be a place where resurrected bodies can meet, can relate to each other, and can worship and respond to God. The resurrection of the body means that we finally are all we were created to be – not like the angels or spiritual beings, but whole beings of body, mind, and spirit, in perfect relationship to each other and to God. That's the goal; that's the wonderful promise of the Gospel.

Since the body matters then, the body matters now. It matters that you put your body in church to worship. It matters that you use your body to serve in the church and in the world. It matters that you use your tongue to encourage and edify believers and to spread the message of Jesus, that you use your arms and feet and hands in his service to work for justice. It matters that you see your body as the temple of the Holy Spirit and keep his temple pure and focused. It matters that you care for the body as a gift from God to you. Jesus died and rose again in a body; he became fully one of us in his humanity. His body mattered; so does yours. His body was raised in a glorious new form; so will yours.

Q&A

This topic raises questions – for Paul's readers and probably for you.

What is the resurrection body like? For Paul, that's a question we can't answer. The only bodies we know about are our bodies. The heavenly bodies will be bodies, but they will be spiritual, eternal, glorified, and incorruptible. There will be both continuity and discontinuity. You could never describe a stalk of wheat by looking at its seed or an oak tree by examining an acorn. We don't have to know – and in any case, we can't know what those bodies will be like. We can draw a few hints from the resurrection body of Jesus. He was recognized, but not at first. He could eat but didn't need to. He could be touched but could pass through walls. The resurrection of the body is essential, but not the details.

What about cremation? Don't worry about it, either way. Given enough time, all bodies are cremated – that is, they return to dust. It's not like God is saying, “I can raise an embalmed body but not a decomposed or cremated one.”

When does resurrection happen? The resurrection is not what happens as soon as you die. The resurrection is at the end of the age. The precise details and timeline can be (and are) disputed, but this is apparently a future event.

What happens before resurrection? This is another hard one. It's called "the intermediate state" in theology, and once again we have hints but not finality. What Paul says is that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. The theory I like best I can't prove from Scripture. It's that there is no intermediate state. The succession of time belongs to this world. So when I die, my body is raised and I step into eternity at the same moment as Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, my grandmother, my Dad, and all who follow me.

Why does resurrection matter? Ultimately it's all about God. It's about the power, mystery, and love of God. If I don't believe God can raise the dead, I don't believe in his power. If I believe I have to explain everything, I don't stand in awe of his mystery. And if I don't believe there needs to be a resurrection, I really don't believe in love. Love is about give-and-take, it's about connection, it's about touch, it's about being in the presence of someone, it's about knowing and being known. It's what we were created for. It's the resurrection of the body that makes it all possible.

Our resurrection to life everlasting is of *final* importance. We have so much to look forward to in relation to the Lord and to each other in our glorified bodies. Our destination is only made possible by the bridge – the Gospel that is of *first* importance. It is that Gospel we now remember and celebrate as we gather around the Lord's table. Amen.