

Proposition: In 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, we discover what is true if the resurrection of Jesus was a hoax.

- I. We see the doctrine attacked (12).
 - A. This is what we preach.
 - 1. It's a message about Christ.
 - 2. It's a message about what Christ did.
 - B. This is what others deny.
 - 1. Sometimes it's blatant.
 - 2. Sometimes it's subtle.
- II. We see the doctrine defended (13-19).
 - A. If there is no resurrection, then Christ wasn't raised (13).
 - B. If Christ wasn't raised, we're in big trouble (14-18).
 - 1. Our preaching is useless (14a).
 - 2. Our faith is useless (14b).
 - 3. We are misleading other people (15-16).
 - 4. We are still in our sins (17).
 - 5. When we die, we perish (18).
 - C. If this life is it, then pity on us (19).

Implications: Because the tomb is empty...

- 1. You must reckon with Christ today.
- 2. You will see Christ at a future day.

We know the facts. Most of us wouldn't be here today if we didn't. We know the story of Jesus, how He lived a perfect life, was crucified and buried. We know that three days later He rose again. We know the story. We know the facts.

But do we know the significance of the facts? The truth is, knowing the facts without knowing the significance of the facts is no more helpful than seeing a "Bridge Out" sign in language you cannot read.

This morning, I'm excited to introduce a four-part series entitled "Because the Tomb is Empty." Several years ago I ducked my head and entered the tomb where Jesus lay. Do you know what's really impressive about that tomb? It's empty!

But what if it wasn't? What if the resurrection didn't happen? That's what some have said throughout history. And that's the issue Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 15. In 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, we discover what is true if the resurrection of Jesus was a hoax.

I. We see the doctrine attacked (12).

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" What were some saying in Paul's day? They were undermining a fundamental doctrine of Christianity. They said, "There is *no resurrection*." Why?

The recipients of this letter lived in Corinth. Corinth was a Greek city. Realize this. The Greeks did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. To the Greeks, the body was a prison house from which escape was desirable. Why would you even want it resurrected?

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Remember Paul's experience in Athens? According to Acts 17, the Athenians listened intently to his religious presentation until what? Until he announced that God proved Jesus' authority to judge by raising Him from the dead. Acts 17:32 states, "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered..."

Apparently, it wasn't just the pagan Corinthians that attacked the doctrine of the resurrection. The assault had actually entered the church. So Paul responded to it. Eleven times in verses 12-19 you'll find a form of the word "resurrection" or "raised."

In verse 12 Paul presents the problem. In verses 13 through 34 Paul responds to the problem. As a brilliant lawyer he defends the case for the doctrine of the resurrection. He begins in verse 12 by pointing out...

A. This is what we preach. "But if it is preached [passive verb implying this is what *we preach*] that Christ has been raised from the dead." What is at the heart of the message we preach? It's a twofold message.

1. *It's a message about Christ.* "But if it is preached that Christ." Stop there. We don't preach a religious system. We preach Christ. Religion is man's attempt to reach God through human achievement. But biblical Christianity is the story of what God did to reach us through a person, Jesus Christ. So that's what we preach, a message about Christ. But what about Christ? That's the second part of our message.

2. *It's a message about what Christ did.* What did He do? Paul answered that question in verses 1-11. What Christ did is summed up in a word. It's called the *gospel*.

Notice verses 1-2, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the *gospel* I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this *gospel* you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." What did Paul preach? He preached the *gospel*, the objective, historical account of what Christ did.

What exactly did Christ do? Paul explains in verses 3-4, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve."

A critic will say, "Come on, now! Do you expect me to believe that Jesus really died for sins and then rose again? Do you have any historical evidence of that assertion?" To which Paul replies, "As a matter of fact, we do."

Verses 6-8, "After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep [have died]. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

That is the objective core of the gospel. Jesus Christ died to make a once and for all payment for sins and then He rose again. There is no other remedy for the human sin problem.

What grieves me as a pastor is this. There's a crisis today in the American church. Scores of professing Christians don't know what the gospel is. When asked, "How do you know you're going to heaven?" they reply, "Oh, I believe in Jesus and try to do my best."

That's not the gospel! What we preach is a message about Christ and what He did. It has nothing to do with our efforts.

Paul concludes in verse 11, "This is what we preach, and this is what you believed." This is also...

B. This is what others deny. Verse 12 again [KJV], "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

Beloved, here is the central doctrine of true, biblical Christianity: the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ from the dead. Other religions have morality. Other religions have heroes that died. Only Christianity has a risen Savior who did battle with death itself and won!

But in Corinth as in our world today, some were saying, "There is no resurrection of the dead." The attack denies *any* resurrection, not only Jesus' resurrection, but also the resurrection of any person. Allow me to make two comments about this attack.

1. *Sometimes it's blatant.* Sometimes it's overt and caustic. When a college professor challenges, "Grow up, young people! Heaven? Hell? Those are just fictitious places used by Sunday School teachers to impose morality. There is no such thing as resurrection!"

2. *Sometimes it's subtle.* The blatant attack comes from outside Christianity, whereas the subtle attack comes from within, from those who call themselves "Christians."

That was the problem in Corinth. "How can *some of you* say?" It's subtle.

Here is the biblical teaching, the message the church has preached for twenty centuries. One, we will live forever *somewhere* (John 3:36). Two, the death of the physical body is not the end. When a believer dies, his spirit goes to be with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). When a non-believer dies, his spirit goes to a place of torment called hell (Luke 16:23). Three, a day of resurrection is coming. Believers will receive a glorified body (1 Cor. 15:51-54). The unregenerate will be cast into the lake of fire in a body suited for eternal torment (Rev. 20:13-15).

Listen. The doctrine of the resurrection stands at center stage in the drama of biblical Christianity. That's why Satan attacks it. And sometimes his attack is ever so subtle.

One of the ways he attacks the resurrection is to get us so consumed with the present. Even in our gospel presentations. "O friend, trust Christ and He'll make things better for you now. You'll enjoy a better family life, better self-esteem, and more personal fulfillment."

Is that the gospel? Try preaching that message to the people of India where Christians are being martyred for their faith. No, the hope of the church has always been a *future* hope. That's why the message of the church must take serious the resurrection (see verse 19).

Having seen the doctrine attacked in verse 12, we move on.

II. We see the doctrine defended (13-19).

You'll notice the word "if" appears over and over in this section (at least seven times). In his defense of the resurrection, Paul's logic involves three main "if/then" arguments.

A. If there is no resurrection, then Christ wasn't raised (13). "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." The resurrection is the linchpin of Christianity. If you pull it out, the structure falls.

Realize this. The critics in Corinth weren't denying the resurrection of *Jesus* but the resurrection of the *dead* in general--for Greek thinking reasons we already mentioned. But in verse 13, Paul confronts their inconsistency. If you deny the resurrection of the body, how can you affirm the resurrection of Jesus? You can't.

By the way, is the resurrection of Jesus important? Dear friend, it's not only important, but as verse 3 states, it is of "first importance." Everything that we believe rests on this fundamental doctrine. What good is a dead guru? Should it surprise us, then, that Satan would do all he can to undermine this foundational tenet?

Sometimes people will say things like, "Oh, I don't care about doctrine. All I know is I love Jesus." That's dangerous. Why? Isn't it enough merely to love Christ? The question is, *what Christ?* Satan's strategy is to flood the world with false Christs, *antichrists*.

Listen to 1 John 2:18-23, "Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belong to us."

"But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you *know the truth*. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist--he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."

What does John say is true of a genuine Christian? He *knows the truth*. Knowing the truth is what doctrine is all about. And knowing the truth about Jesus is what true Christianity is all about. Hence, the first "if/then" argument: If there is no resurrection, then Christ wasn't raised. Here's the second...

B. If Christ wasn't raised, we're in big trouble (14-18). There are five horrendous consequences...

1. *Our preaching is useless (14a)*. "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless." It's empty, hollow, vain.

A dead religious leader may inspire people, but he can't give them hope beyond death. Not if he himself succumbed to death. If Christ is still in the grave, we have an empty message, and our preaching is useless.

2. *Our faith is useless (14b)*. Verse 14 concludes, "And so is your faith."

Is that true? What we hear all the time is, "Faith is a personal thing. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something." Is that a valid statement? Absolutely not. Faith is only as good as its object.

Suppose your child is afraid at night, and as you probe you discover his fear. He's afraid a robber is going to come in the night and snatch him away. Suppose that, to assure him of his safety, you devise this plan. You give your son a rock and tell him, "Listen carefully, son. You don't need to be afraid. This rock will protect you. It's a special rock. It's a rock that turns into an invisible shield the moment a robber enters a house. The rock never fails. You can trust it to protect you."

And so your child believes you. He has *faith* in the rock you gave him.

But answer this. If a robber comes, is your child's faith going to do him any good? Even if he *really believes* in that rock, will it make a difference? Absolutely not. Why not? Because faith is only as good as its object.

Beloved, if the Jesus in which we believe is still in the grave, then we have useless faith. It will not save us. Furthermore, if we proclaim it...

3. *We are misleading other people (15-16)*. Do you know what's worse than believing in a Jesus who did not rise from the dead? Verses 15-16 tell us. It's preaching that Jesus to other people:

"More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either (15-16)."

Follow Paul's reasoning. He says "we are then found." By whom? By those to whom we preach. We are found to be "false witnesses." That's a serious charge. False witnesses are people who don't speak the truth. About what? In this case, false witnesses "about God." There is no greater subject.

When you give your opinion about your *car*, that's one thing. When you share that you think a *Chevy* is better than a *Ford*, frankly, there are no eternal consequences if you're wrong. But, when you give someone your ideas about *God*, you'd better be accurate!

And right here Paul shares the message he preached. According to verse 15, what did he say he testified about God? "God raised Christ from the dead." God--the Creator and Sovereign King. Raised--brought back to life. Christ--the Anointed One, the One God sent on a rescue mission. From the dead--the problem that's plagued the world since Genesis 3 is death. Christ came to reverse the curse, to restore God's kingdom, to rescue a people. That's why God raised Christ from the dead.

But...if the dead aren't raised, the whole plan fails. And we're false witnesses. #4...

4. *We are still in our sins (17)*. "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."

You ask, "Is it really such a big deal to still be in our sins?" It is if you're interested in going to heaven to live in the presence of God forever. Why? Because God is holy, and as such cannot allow sin in His presence.

Realize this. One of two possibilities is true of every person in this room and on this planet. Possibility #1--you are either "in your sins." Or #2--you are *not*. I didn't say, "You are a sinner," *or* "You are not a sinner." We're all sinners. Right?

But Christ came to rescue us from our sins. Remember 15:3? "Christ died *for our sins*." You are either a sinner and still *in your sins*. Or, you are a sinner whose have been placed *on Christ*. You've experienced the amazing exchange described in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin [that's Christ] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

You are a sinner and powerless to change that fact. But at the cross God laid on Jesus every sin that would ever be committed by every person who would ever believe on Him. And then God exhausted His wrath on Jesus. Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.

But if He's still dead, the whole thing's a sham--and we're still in our sins. And #5...

5. *When we die, we perish (18)*. "Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost." Are you looking forward to seeing your loved ones who've gone to be with the Lord? Paul describes them as those who have "fallen asleep in Christ."

This is a sober thought. What's true of that loved one if the resurrection of Christ is a hoax? That loved one is *lost*. He or she has perished.

What a terrible word. It's what's true of a person who dies in his sins. He is *lost*, eternally lost. Does it grip you that every day thousands of people leave this planet through the door of death, many of whom are still in their sins? They are *lost*. And so many have never even heard about Jesus and the hope of His resurrection.

Dorman hadn't. I remember when I met him a few years ago. He was about 70 years old, living in an apartment here in Wheelersburg, a stroke victim. God allowed me to share the gospel with Dorman. Oh, he knew about God and about Jesus. But when I showed him from the Bible that what Jesus did at the cross is the only bridge by which we can come to God, Dorman responded, "I've never heard that before." He'd been a church goer before, but he'd never grasped the significance of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, and of His claim, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father but by me." And that day Dorman trusted Jesus to be his Savior. And it wasn't much later that Dorman died.

Do you realize that if Dorman had died in his sins, he would be lost today? That's the plight of any person who dies in his sins.

This is what makes the gospel so compelling. "Jesus died on a cross." That would make no difference were it not for the event that occurred three days later, would it? What good is a dead Savior? If Christ wasn't raised, we're in big trouble. Paul gives us a third "if/then" argument in verse 19...

C. If this life is it, then pity on us (19). "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." That's a staggering thought, isn't it? Here's how the KJV translators put it, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

What's Paul saying? It sounds like he's saying that if there is no resurrection, if there is no hope beyond the grave, then it would be foolish to become a Christian. He couldn't be saying that, could he? But it's true.

Maybe the reason this sounds so odd to us is that we've baptized Christianity into the American dream. Here's how some people present the gospel (I'm ashamed I've done so myself before), "Oh sinner, why don't you try Jesus? There's all kinds of fringe benefits to being a Christian. Jesus will make your family life better. He'll give you peace of mind. Even if you die and find out it's a hoax, it's still a better life."

Don't tell that to Paul! He said, "If this life is it, then pity on us!" Do we really believe that? Maybe our hesitance is due to the influence of *cultural Christianity*. You see, if we are biblical Christians, if we truly know Christ and pledge allegiance to Him, it will *cost us* in this life. Our brothers and sisters in Christ outside of America know this better than us.

In his chapter on "Suffering" from the book *Desiring God*, John Piper tells the amazing, true story of an African who suffered for Christ. His name is Dansa, and in the following letter written in late 1995, Dansa tells what happened (pp. 228-9):

"Around 1980 there was a time of severe persecution from the local officials of the communist government in my area of Wolayta. At the time, I was working in a government office, but I was also serving as the leader of the Christian youth association for all the churches in my area. The communist officials repeatedly came to me to ask for my help in teaching the doctrines of the revolution among the youth. Many other Christians were giving in because the pressure was very great, but I could only say no.

"At first, their approach was positive: they offered me promotions and pay increases. But then the imprisonments began. The first two were fairly short. The third time lasted an entire year. During this time communist cadres would regularly come to brainwash the nine of us believers (six men and three women--one of whom would later become my wife) who were being held together. But when one of the cadres converted to Christ, we were beaten and forced to haul water from long distances and carry heavy stones to clear farm land.

"The worst time came during a two-week period in which the prison official would wake us early while it was still dark when no one could see and force us to walk on our bare knees over a distance of up to 1 1/2 kilometers on the gravel road of the town. It would take us about three hours. After the first day, the blood flowed from our wounds like a fountain, but we felt nothing.

"On another occasion one particularly brutal prison official forced us to lie on our backs under the blazing sun for six straight hours. I don't know why I said it, but when we finished I told him, 'You caused the sun's rays to strike us, but God will strike you.' A short time later, the official contracted severe diabetes and died."

It's true. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." Just ask Dansa. By the way, you might be encouraged to hear the next paragraph in Dansa's letter.

"When the communist government fell several years later, the head official invited us back to preach in the jail. At that time, twelve prisoners being held for murder received Christ. We have continued to minister in the prison, and there are now 170 believers. Most of the prison officials have also believed."

How can you account for a story like that? There's only one way. It's because there's an empty tomb outside of Jerusalem. Verse 20--"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead."

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. But that wouldn't be true if the tomb wasn't empty. But it is! And because the tomb is empty, there are two radical implications for your life.

Implications: Because the tomb is empty...

1. You must reckon with Christ today. Do you see why? If Jesus died and is gone for good, then so what? But if He is alive, then you must do something with Him today. You must reckon with His claims and His call. In John 5:24 Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

And in the next verse Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."

Beloved, because the tomb is empty, you must reckon with Christ today. Do you need more incentive. Here it is--the second implication.

2. *You will see Christ at a future day.* Revelation 1:7 reveals, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him." You will see Him. Are you ready?