

The Last Enemy to be Destroyed is Death
1 Corinthians 15:12-28
April 9, 2023, Easter Sunday
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-28

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

I've gotten into podcasts in the last couple years. I was very late to the game, I'm definitely not an "early adapter" of technology, and for some reason, podcasts didn't appeal that much to me. But at some point, I found some travel, theology, sports, finance, culture, and other interesting podcasts that I bookmarked and check on from time to time. A friend of mine mentioned some podcasts that deal with history and try to imagine alternate versions of what actually happened, thinking through the "what if" scenarios of historical events. Some examples of episodes (*caution language*):

"What if America and Germany were Allies During World War II?"

"What if America Prevented 9/11 From Happening?"

"What if America Never Removed Prohibition Laws?" and

"What if George Washington Named Himself King of America?"

So, for instance, one episode asks what would have happened if Aaron Burr had just shot into the air and not killed Alexander Hamilton? With a new lease on life, Hamilton might have managed to take down Thomas Jefferson politically, become the fourth President of the US, and advanced his own agenda. Or what would have happened if Attila the Hun had not died of internal bleeding at 47 years old? Would he have continued conquering the great cities of the Roman Empire, putting millions more to death under his sword? How would he have altered the development of European countries?¹ Of course, we can never know the full implications of any "What if?" historical scenario, but sometimes it's fascinating to think through some of the consequences.

Pastor D. James Kennedy wrote a book thirty years ago called *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?* that explored the implications of what the world would look like without the Incarnation. He emphasized that one fact is undeniable: nearly every facet of human life would be worse without the life of Christ and the impact on His followers. Enormous benefits to humanity—in economics, art, government, science, civil liberties, morality, health, and beyond—would never have occurred had Jesus Christ not lived. He quoted James Russell Lowell: "I challenge any skeptic to find a ten square mile spot on this planet where they can live their lives in peace and safety and decency, where womanhood is honored, where infancy and old age are revered, where they can educate their children, where the Gospel of Jesus Christ has not gone first to prepare the way."²

Today's Scripture passage also asks, "What if?" But not "what if Jesus had never been born?", rather "what if Jesus had never been raised from the dead?" What if resurrection is not even possible? Where does that leave Christian believers? Are we still on solid ground because we have Jesus' teachings and His moral example of courage, servanthood, and love to inspire us? Well, how many of you have played the game Jenga, where you have a big stack of blocks and you try to pull a block out without knocking the whole tower down. The answer to "what happens to our faith if Jesus never rose from the dead?" is the same as the end of a game of Jenga: it all comes crashing down.

¹ "What If... World History?" podcast episode from May 31, 2021, Season 1, Episode 6.

² <https://www.djameskennedy.org/devotional-detail/20191224-what-if-jesus-had-never-been-born>

Now, keep in mind that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection don't describe the actual details of Jesus rising. The narratives all report what happened from the point of view of those who found the tomb empty, not an eyewitness account of when it actually happened. So Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe how two women named Mary went to bring spices to the tomb, but found it empty with the stone rolled away. They encountered an angel (or two, depending on the account) who explained that Jesus had risen and that they would see Him in Galilee. Matthew adds that on their way back to the disciples, they encountered Jesus. Luke adds that Peter went to see for Himself. John's account only mentions Mary Magdalene going to the tomb, and seeing both angels and Jesus, but mistaking Him for a gardener. He also wrote that he outran Peter to the tomb as they went to see for themselves. Each account is a little different in detail, though they are easily harmonized, which adds to the authenticity; if they were all exactly the same, you would assume that they had corroborated their stories and tried to tell it exactly the same, as if they had something to hide. But they had nothing to hide, they were recording history with the eyewitness testimonies of those who experienced it.

Paul, of course, was not one of Jesus' original apostles. As a young man, he did not believe the resurrection story, and persecuted the early Christians who were spreading it. Until he met Jesus Himself and learned the truth of how Jesus was the God-Man who had come to earth to save His people from their sins. In the first 8 verses of our text, Paul pursues a "what if" scenario:

I. If There Is No Resurrection (vv. 12-19)

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

There are three ways to view what happens to us when we die:

1 – Both our bodies and souls cease to exist. There is nothing beyond this life, so live for this world and get what you can while you can.

2 – Our bodies cease to exist, but our souls live on. We will float among the clouds in a disembodied existence after death.

3 – Both our bodies and souls live on. We will receive new bodies after we die and our immortal souls will enjoy eternity.³ Christianity emphatically teaches the last one.

Verses 12-13 indicate that there were people in Corinth who were doubting whether people could be raised from the dead at all. If you remember, one group of Jewish leaders, the Sadducees, did not believe in the resurrection, so perhaps their teaching had made it this far; or perhaps it was the popular philosophy of the day asserting that this life is all there is. If you were a Christian, by definition you would have had to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but maybe you had trouble believing that the rest of us would rise as well. But Paul says, no, if all humanity is kept from rising from the dead, that would have to include Jesus as well. He was fully human as well as fully divine. And then the rest of these verses are the logical implications if Jesus did not rise:

-all Christian preaching would be empty and pointless

-Christians still had their sins counted against them because they were not forgiven

³ Stephen T. Um, *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 268.

- when someone you love dies, they just perish and disappear forever, never to be seen again
- we Christians are the most pathetic people, believing in a fairy tale

The ninth commandment says that *“you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”* (Exodus 20:16). Verse 15 in our Corinthians text says that if Christ has not been raised, then we have been misrepresenting God, we have witnessed falsely about Him. If God did not raise Jesus from the dead, then it is terrible theology, even blasphemy/heresy to say that He did. This is not a little thing, this is lying about the Creator God of the universe, a serious sin that will mislead a lot of people and do untold damage. David Strain, a PCA pastor, broadens Paul’s thoughts if we are wrong about Jesus being raised:

“Not only am I wasting my time preaching an empty message; far worse, I am blaspheming God, saying things about Him that are simply not true. Christ is dead. The message is utterly empty... let’s stop preaching... worshiping. Let’s stop sending missionaries. Let’s stop planting churches. Let’s stop sharing our faith. Let’s just quit because it’s all a colossal waste of time.”⁴

Now, some people would say that it doesn’t really matter if it’s all true or not, we should all want to live good, positive Christian lives that are rewarding. A lot of critical scholars and theological liberals want to keep the forms of Christianity but gut it of its miracles and supernatural accounts. Well, those people have probably never suffered for their faith. The Christians in the early centuries were not just living like nice Christians because it seemed like a good lifestyle; if they were going to lose their livelihoods or their lives for the gospel, they needed to know that it was true and real! And so do we. The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together; one cannot be true without the other. If you ever go to a church where they say something like, “It’s not as important whether Jesus was raised physically or not, but that He rose in the hearts of His followers and inspires them to live better lives” – run, don’t walk, out of there. It absolutely matters whether Jesus’ resurrection is a historical fact or not. If it’s not, I need to resign, I can be playing golf on Sunday mornings and getting inspiration from a lot better sources than a Bible that lies to me. Beloved, you have to settle whether Jesus truly rose or not. If He didn’t, then none of the rest of the Bible matters except as interesting moral stories on the level of Aesop’s fables. But if the Bible is lying about the most important event that it records, how can we trust anything else that it says?

If Jesus did rise, however, then He’s defeated death and it’s all true, and He’s your only hope in life and death. The next four verses pivot from the hypothetical to the actual:

II. Since There Is a Resurrection (vv. 20-23)

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Paul does not go into a big explanation of how he knows that the resurrection is true here, though as you back up to the earlier verses in the chapter, he mentioned that Jesus appeared in person to over 500 people. Essentially, anyone can challenge the resurrection by saying that they don’t believe that miracles like that can happen, but the weight of evidence is on those who say those hundreds of people were lying. All they had to do was produce a body or have those witnesses recant their testimony. And, as Paul said to the governor Festus in Acts 26:26: *“For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.”* In other words, Jesus’ death and

⁴ David Strain’s sermon “Christ Has Been Raised,” preached on 3/18/18, found at fpcjackson.org.

resurrection was widely known, and the Roman government and the Jewish authorities would have had great motivation to prove that Jesus never rose. But they never proved it, and if anyone was going to admit that they had lied and conspired to deceive people about Jesus rising, it was the apostles who were being put to death because they believed it. But they never recanted because they had seen Jesus' resurrection body with their own eyes.

So Paul says, "*Jesus has been raised*" because it is a historical fact. And the reason that Jesus rose from the dead is that, yes, God the Father raised Him, but also because death had no hold on Him. The wages of sin is death, Romans 3:23 tells us, and so every one of us deserves to die because of our sins, but not the sinless Jesus. He was put to death for our sins, but He Himself had no sins to be punished for, so the grave could not contain Him.

Paul uses the word firstfruits to describe Jesus. This is a compound word that my Microsoft Word program says is misspelled, but the translators of the NT say is a word. It's the language of Leviticus 23 of the first part of the grain harvest that was dedicated to God in the temple. So, what Paul is saying with that word is that none of the believers in God who had died and were awaiting resurrection would be resurrected from the dead until Christ was; He was the first part of the harvest to come in, the rest of the harvest follows Him. Because Jesus rose from the dead, He allows and actually enables everyone who belongs to Him, to rise from the dead in the afterlife. This is the greatest comfort for every Christian. Chad Scruggs, the pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church whose 9-year-old daughter, Hallie, was one of the victims of the shooting in Nashville, released a statement the day that it happened: "Through tears we trust that she is in the arms of Jesus who will raise her to life once again."⁵

Verse 22 – all died in Adam, all are made alive in Christ. The whole world, every human being who has ever lived was represented by the first man, Adam, at the beginning of human history. He was the "representative head." When he sinned, he sinned in our place and all of humanity fell into sin with him. In the same way, Jesus represents those who place their faith in Him, He is their "representative head," saving them by dying in their place. Jesus will raise everyone who is "in Him," represented by Him. That's not everyone, it's only God's chosen people who have put their faith in Him. So, if you really grasp your standing before God, you know that you were condemned in Adam as well as guilty of your own sin, but then in Christ, you are made righteousness and enabled to be raised to eternal life. Paul treated this subject more thoroughly in Romans 5, summed up in verse 17 – "*For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.*"

The last five verses look to the end when

III. Death Will be Destroyed Because of the Resurrection (vv. 24-28)

²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

⁵ <https://www.newsweek.com/pastor-shares-1-sentence-response-daughters-death-nashville-shooting-1790900>

One day, everything that opposes God will be defeated, subjected under God's feet. Revelation 20:11-15 gives us a vivid picture of the final judgment:

"11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

In the final judgment, the King has put up with His enemies long enough, and at just the right time, He will destroy them. Paul describes Jesus accomplishing these things for His Father, destroying every rule and every authority and power, the dark forces of evil. The last enemy to be destroyed is death itself. The Greek word translated "destroyed" in the ESV can also be understood as "abolished" or "nullified." The point is that death will no longer exist, it will never threaten us. And as everything is subjected to Jesus, He is voluntarily subjected to God the Father in the obedience and love of the Trinity.

Friends, this is not an obscure theological tenant that might be nice to know, but doesn't have a lot of bearing on your life. This is absolutely critical because your life here on earth will be less than a hundred years, while your life in eternity will stretch on for billions of years. Do you want to be part of God's eternal family and His heavenly kingdom, or do you want to be an enemy that He uses as a footstool? God's enemies will be dealt with severely, I beg you to find peace with God through the blood of His Son, Jesus. 2 Timothy 1:9-10 – *"(God) saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."*

Conclusion

Tim Keller says that he has heard people say many times something to the effect of: "I could never be a Christian because there are parts of the Bible I find offensive." To that he replies, "Are you saying that because there are parts of the Bible that you don't like, Jesus Christ couldn't have been raised from the dead?" "Well, no, I guess I'm not saying that." And he replies: "Every part of the Bible's important, of course, but would you please put the ethical teaching aside for a minute? If Jesus was raised from the dead, you have to deal with everything in the Bible. But if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, I don't know why you're vexing yourself over any particular ethical teaching."⁶ That's underscoring what I've been saying, what Paul was saying: you first have to deal with the essential truth of the Scripture, and if it's true, then you can deal with the rest of it. If it is not true, feel free to walk away and never give it another thought.

Your average person these days would not be overly alarmed or upset to hear the end of verse 17: *"you are still in your sins."* OK, that's fine, I'm a sinner if you want to call it that. I've made as many mistakes as the next person. To err is human, and all that. So what? Learn from your mistakes and move on. That's where a Christian worldview and understanding of God's ways makes us hear that phrase *"still in your sins"* as being a matter of great urgency. When you become aware of the offense of sin to a holy God, you realize how your sin is living in rebellion to God; that we are too casual and

⁶ Tim Keller's chapter "Jesus Vindicated," from *His Mission: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke*, Carson & Nielson, ed (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 124.

flippant about offending Him. And more importantly, when you die, God will call you to account, you will stand before Him in judgment. And if your sins are still counted against you, you will be punished eternally. Your sins must be paid for with blood - either your own blood or the blood of a sinless substitute. And this is how the death of Jesus frees you from your sins, because Jesus died in your place to pay the debt that you owe so that you can be holy in God's sight and be raised to life in the end.⁷

As we just sang: "Lives again our glorious King / Where, O death, is now thy sting? / Dying once He all doth save / Where thy victory, O grave? / Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!" Friends, you must decide what you believe about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection before you die - to not decide is to have effectively made a choice of unbelief, and you will die in your sins and be judged. But Jesus holds out His nail-scarred hands to you and invites you to get your questions answered and your doubts settled. He invites you to believe that He died in your place to suffer your agony and curse, and that He rose again three days later in victory over death and Satan. Believe His word which promises victory over death and grants you eternal life, so that when He comes again to bring His people into heaven with Him, you will be among that number. Come, experience new life in Jesus and the power of His resurrection. And all who already know the hope of the resurrection said, "Amen."

Benediction

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 - *"When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

⁷ Adapted from Robert S. Rayburn's sermon "Christ' Resurrection and Ours" from 12/15/02, found at faithtacoma.org.