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Why the Resurrection Matters **1 Corinthians 15:16-17**

There are far too many professing Christians who are happy to celebrate what we know as Easter but care little if at all whether or not Jesus really, physically, and literally rose from the dead. Deep down inside, many who call themselves “Christians” don’t believe that God the Father, through the power of God the Holy Spirit, literally raised the body of God the Son back to life. I say they “call” themselves Christians because if you don’t believe that Jesus of Nazareth was literally raised back to life, you can’t be a Christian. You can be religious. You can attend church. You can read your Bible. But at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian is that you believe in and have entrusted your eternal future to the historical fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Let me explain why the resurrection of Jesus is altogether unique and utterly necessary for Christianity and why it separates the Christian faith from all other religious systems.

Those of you who attended *Convergence* in September of 2019 or who have watched the videos of the many sessions will remember the name of Dr. Michael Brown. Michael is a Jewish believer in Jesus and a good friend of mine. He recently told the story of a man named Shabbetai Zevi.

Zevi was born in 1626 to an upper-middle-class family in Smyrna or modern-day Izmir, Turkey. Zevi was trained in rabbinic principles and soon was recognized as a scholar who specialized in Jewish mysticism. He lived an extremely ascetic lifestyle, abstaining from many of the physical comforts that most people take for granted. As a mystic, he claimed to experience trances and a variety of ecstatic states of mind in which he would receive new insights that often contradicted Jewish law and other sacred traditions.

Many said that this was proof that he was in fact the long-awaited Jewish Messiah who, when he was to come, would break the old laws in order to introduce the new Messianic order. Others experienced visions and confirmed that yes, Zevi was indeed the Jewish messiah. The result was that religious fervor spread throughout the Jewish world.

Zevi traveled to Istanbul to reveal himself to the Muslim sultan. The sultan, however, was not impressed and arrested Zevi. He gave him two choices: convert to Islam or die! So, Zevi, this alleged Jewish Messiah, converted to Islam! He died in 1676 at the age of 50, having lived outwardly as a Muslim while secretly participating in Jewish rituals.

Michael Brown talks about the religious fervor that swirled around Zevi and how he provoked massive deception in the Jewish community. Still, though, many believed him to be the true Messiah.

But there was one problem. No one ever claimed that Zevi rose from the dead. Not one single follower, much less the hundreds of followers of Jesus we read about in the NT, claimed to have seen him alive. They believed a lot of things about Zevi, this Jewish mystic who claimed to be the Messiah. But no one claimed that his tomb was empty.

Michael Brown then says: “There is a massive difference between our Jesus Christ and Zevi, and it boils down to one word: Resurrection. Only one of these potential messiahs rose again” (“Resurrected,” *Charisma*, April 2020).

It’s important to remember that had Jesus not risen from the dead, no one would have still insisted that he was the Messiah. The movement he started 2,000 years ago would have died with his death. It doesn’t matter how many miracles Jesus performed or how impressive a personality he might have been or how revolutionary his teachings proved to be. If he had not risen to life from the grave, it would all have been for naught. We would be talking about Jesus in the same way we talk about Shabbetai Zevi.

If the body of Jesus is rotting in his grave, in the same way that the body of Shabbetai Zevi rots in his, we are not merely in serious trouble; we are in *eternal* trouble.

Let me tell you what the Christian claim that Jesus literally rose from the dead means. It means that either I am a blubbering fool or I am telling you the single most important truth that you will ever hear. It means that either I am an absolute buffoon, most to be pitied, or I am a blessed man whose destiny is one filled with glory and honor and unending joy. And the same is true of you.

Those are the options. There are no third alternatives.

The reason I say this is because I've staked my life on the reality of an empty tomb. Everything I am, everything I own, everything I've done or hope to do hang suspended on whether or not Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.

The decision I made decades ago to put my trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is only as good as the tomb is empty. The decision I made to pursue ministry rather than some other career path was wise only so far as the tomb is empty. My decision to attend theological seminary, pursue doctoral studies, and to become a pastor, was vain and futile and downright stupid if the tomb wasn't empty.

The decision I made 48 years ago to marry Ann was dictated in large part by whether or not the tomb was empty, for I would only have married someone who herself had staked everything on an empty tomb. How we have chosen to raise our children was shaped and formed by values that make sense only if the tomb was empty.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, my life is a disgraceful sham. That's not humility. That's the truth! I've invested everything in, staked everything on, entrusted everything to the historical fact of the empty tomb of Jesus. If his body and bones are still buried somewhere in Israel, or have long since disintegrated under the force of time and the laws of physics, nothing has meaning for me, nor do I have meaning for anything or anyone else.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead and the tomb is not empty, I am worse than a fool, I am a liar and a deceiver and I am to be justifiably blamed for misleading countless thousands of people by persuading them to put their hope in a fantasy, a fairy tale.

So, what if Jesus Christ is not risen from the dead? Have I overstated my case? Am I guilty of being melodramatic and hyperbolic in my declaration of faith in the empty tomb of Jesus?

Consider the impact of this on the life of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, whose courage to preach the gospel to the religious leaders of Israel was grounded in his belief in an empty tomb (see Acts 7:55-60). If Christ is not risen, we would be forced to conclude that Stephen suffered from a martyr's complex, that he was seeking death for self-glorification, and that coupled with the intensity of the moment he hallucinated a vision of what he thought was the resurrected and exalted Christ.

Or consider the case of the apostle Paul, who stood by while Stephen was stoned and only days later himself set eyes upon, at least what he thought was, the risen Jesus, and from that moment on dedicated every ounce of energy and every minute of every day to proclaiming the gospel of a risen Savior.

If Christ is not risen, we would have to agree with the liberal critics who explain Paul's experience in terms of physical and psychological stress. Paul, so they tell us, had been touched by the steadfast faith of the Christians whom he persecuted; he was deeply moved by the grandeur of Stephen's death; he had begun to have doubts within himself. Sick in body, distracted in mind, smitten by the sun or the lightning of some sudden thunderstorm, he too, in his delirium, *hallucinated* a vision of one he thought to be Jesus Christ.

One more example is John the apostle. His vision of the risen and glorified Christ is found in Revelation 1:12-18. But what if Christ is not risen? We would again be forced to conclude that John, now an old and perhaps senile man, was distraught by the deaths of his fellow apostles. He alone, of the original twelve, was left, exiled and abandoned on a lonely and deserted island. He too, like Stephen and Paul before him, fantasized a vision of the resurrected savior. Such, in the case of these three men, is what we must conclude if Christ is not risen.

My purpose isn't to provide evidence for the empty tomb, but to explore the theological and personal consequences of a tomb that still contains the physical remains of Jesus. I trust you will agree with me that ***if the tomb was not empty, if the body and bones of Jesus are embedded somewhere in the earth, we are of all men most to be pitied.***

The Consequences of a Tomb that still Contains the Dead, Decaying Body of Jesus

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, he can in no way serve as our Savior. We know this to be true from several things.

First, Jesus himself prophesied that he would rise from the dead. We saw this earlier in our study of John's gospel, chapter two. Jesus answered his Jewish critics and said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). The Jews thought he was talking about the physical structure in Jerusalem, but Jesus "was speaking about the temple of his body" (2:20). We then read in John 2:22, "when therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had spoken this, and they believe the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."

In other words, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead it means **he was a liar and deceiver**. I'm amazed by how often the unbelieving world is prepared to reject Christianity but retain its admiration for Jesus. "He was a great moral leader," they say, "a model for us all; kind, gentle, faithful, and above all, wise."

But how can anyone believe this of Jesus if the basis on which he gathered people around himself, indeed the basis on which he built his fame and appeal, was one that he knowingly and willingly fabricated? Either bow in belief of the resurrection or face up to the sad but undeniable fact that Jesus was a religious and moral wretch, deserving little more than our contempt. But don't try to live in that elusive *religious middle ground* that says he was good and caring but is still dead in the grave.

If Jesus is not risen, he is a *sadistic deceiver* of the worst imaginable sort. On the night of his betrayal, in an attempt to encourage, uplift, and console his disciples, Jesus promised them that he would rise from the dead and go ahead of them into Galilee (see Matthew 26:31-32). Consider their spiritual and psychological state of mind: they were confused, discouraged, and perhaps a bit depressed. Yet, if the tomb isn't empty, Jesus gives them hope based on a lie. He deliberately deceives them, building their expectations, knowing that nothing will come of it. Is that the mark of a good, moral, kind-hearted example?

The only other option is that he didn't know any better. **His words of an impending resurrection were less the malicious deception of a moral reprobate than the deluded fantasies of a certifiable madman**. In any case, if Christ is not risen, he is hardly worthy of anyone's praise. Pity, perhaps, but certainly not praise.

If Christ is not risen, he is clearly **not divine** and therefore hardly qualified to make atonement for those he intends to save. The logic is inescapable. God is absolutely free from sin. Whether by lying or intentional deceit, on the one hand, or self-delusion and lunacy, on the other, if Jesus is not risen he is exposed as merely human, and not even a very good one at that.

So, the first disastrous consequence for us if the tomb is not empty is that we no longer have a Savior. And if we no longer have a Savior, we obviously no longer have salvation. Let me explain this by focusing on the three primary categories of our experience of salvation.

We often describe our salvation with three terms: justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification refers to God's declaration that we stand righteous in his sight. He has imputed the righteousness of Jesus himself to us, which we receive by faith. No charge or accusation can be brought against us because we are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus. Listen to how Paul said it in Romans 4:24-25,

"[this righteous standing is] counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

If he was not raised, we are not justified. If he was not raised, the basis of our justification, namely, the sufficiency of Christ's suffering the wrath of God in our stead, is destroyed. As my former mentor, S. Lewis Johnson, once said, "The resurrection was the Father's 'Amen!' to the Son's 'It is finished!'" The resurrection was the **exclamation point** of the Father's joy and celebration for all that Jesus did for us in his dying. Without the resurrection, the Son's death was in vain.

In 1 Corinthians 15:16-17, Paul declared that “if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” Why are we still “in” our sins and under the condemnation that sin deserves? The answer is simple: If Jesus was not raised it means his death did nothing to satisfy or propitiate the wrath of the Father. If Jesus was not raised, there is nothing standing between us and the judgment of an infinitely holy God.

The second word that we use to describe what it means to be saved is *sanctification*. This refers to the on-going, progressive, moment-by-moment transformation of our hearts and minds into the image of Jesus. But if Christ is not risen we have no hope of ever experiencing victory over sin in our daily lives. Why? ***Because if Christ did not rise, the Spirit did not descend.*** Jesus said, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). This can't be simply a matter of Jesus saying that for the Spirit to come he must die. Jesus' point is that if he goes he “will send” us the Spirit. But if he didn't rise from the dead, he can't send anything! ***No resurrection, no Spirit. No Spirit, no sanctification.***

Furthermore, if Christ did not rise we have ***no High Priest*** to intercede on our behalf (Hebrews 7:25). And if we have no High Priest, we have no one to provide us with help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16), no one to sympathize with us in our sin or to supply strength to resist its temptations (Hebrews 2:18).

The third word that describes the final stage of our salvation is *glorification*. If Christ is not risen, we have no hope for deliverance from this mortal and corrupt body. If Christ did not rise from the dead, lay your hand on your body and say: “This is as good as it gets. I will never be any better than I am right now.” Glorification is always predicated on the truth of Christ's return at the end of this age (cf. John 14:1-6; 1 Cor. 15:50-58; Col. 3:4; 1 John 3:2). But if he is not risen, he cannot return. And if he does not return, our hope for the eradication of evil and the transformation “of our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21) is empty and vain.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is absolutely foundational to Christianity and to the hope of every repentant sinner.

There is yet one final consequence to consider, if Christ be not risen.

So far we've noted two major consequences if Christ is not risen. First, he would be utterly unqualified to be a savior. Second, there would be no salvation: no justification, no sanctification, no glorification. We now turn to the third and final conclusion that a dead Christ would demand.

If Christ is not risen, we who believe in him are fools. Perhaps the word “stupid” would be more appropriate, but I recently learned from a precious five-year-old girl that Christians shouldn't use that word.

Why use such harsh language? Because Paul does in 1 Corinthians 15:14-15. There he declared that “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 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.”

We, in effect, are ***guilty of blasphemy*** if Christ is not risen. How so? By lying to people about God, declaring that he raised Christ from the dead when in fact he did no such thing.

Consider the countless missionaries who have devoted their lives to a lie, if Christ is not risen. Consider the countless throngs whom they've led to faith in a dead Christ rather than a living one. Consider those who've lost their lives in the service of a myth, a fable, an utter fabrication. If Christ is not risen, all is for nothing. Your hope is baseless, your faith is futile, your beliefs are worth less than those who still leave cookies and milk for Santa Clause on Christmas Eve.

Paul went on in 1 Corinthians 15:19 to make his point as pointed as possible: “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” There are many who deserve our pity. We feel sorry for those who are victims of the Coronavirus, or any number of devastating natural disasters, whether tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, or mudslides. We pity those who are born with HIV because of the reckless sexual antics of their mother or father. We pity the homeless, those convicted of crimes they haven't committed, and a host of others.

But we Christians are *most* to be pitied, for *we have staked our eternal destiny on a fairy tale*. We have built our lives and made our decisions and chosen our mates and spent our money and raised our kids and denied ourselves for a pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by dream that lacks any historical or empirical or substantive reality.

So, too, the early disciples. Some have argued that the disciples knew Jesus didn't rise from the dead but fabricated the story to justify their commitment and sustain the struggling Christian movement. If so, I suppose their conversation on the matter would have gone something like this:

“Hey, Peter. Matthew, Philip, John, and the rest of us have been thinking. It's not much fun hiding in fear of the Romans and the Jewish leaders. So, why don't we make up the story that Jesus actually came back to life! The way we figure it, by doing so we will be guaranteed incredible persecution and pain and opposition. I mean, some of us will even get tortured and beat up and whipped. We will probably lose our families and friends, our homes, money, and pretty much everything else. And a few of us might even be lucky enough to get stoned to death or beheaded!”

Peter, stroking his beard, then scratching his head, looks up and says: “Yeah! Sounds like a really good idea. Let's go for it!”

I'm sorry, but even moderately sane people don't deliberately concoct what they know to be a lie for the purpose of bringing destruction and devastation on themselves and all they hold dear.

But Christ is risen! Therefore,

(1) We are NOT in our sins, for he has not only died but has been raised as proof that his sufferings on our behalf were fully sufficient to satisfy the wrath we deserved.

(2) We are NOT powerless in our struggle with the flesh, for the Spirit of Christ has come and dwells within to empower and convict and enable and lead.

(3) We DO have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who intercedes on our behalf at the throne of grace.

(4) We CAN exult in tribulations and distress, trial and adversity, knowing that the sufferings of this present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is yet to be revealed.

(5) We DO have a basis for our faith and a valid message to proclaim to a lost and dying world.

(6) A day IS coming when Christ shall return and receive his own to himself.

(7) We DO have hope for the final resurrection and glorification of the body, when our lowly frame will be conformed to the image of Christ himself.

How does this affect you? Is it a cold, dead doctrine? Or is it the joy of your life, the bulwark of your faith, the basis and foundation of your daily experience?

So, in conclusion, let's call roll among the dead:

“Aristotle”? “Present!” “By the way, Socrates and Plato are here too.” Thanks, Aristotle for reminding us.

“Pontius Pilate”? “Yo!”

“Mary, mother of Jesus?” “Ugh huh. Yeah.”

“Muhammad”? “Here!”

“Buddha”? “Present!”

“Joan of Arc?” “Yo!”

“Shabbetai Zevi”? “Yeah, ok, I’m here with all the rest.”

“John Calvin”? “Present!”

“Mahatma Gandhi”? “Yo!”

“Joseph Smith”? “Here!”

“Jonathan Edwards”? “Yes sir. Here!”

“Martin Luther King, Jr.”? “Yo!”

“Charles Darwin”? “Right here!”

“Abraham Lincoln”? “Yeah, I’m here.”

“Joseph Stalin”? “Present.”

“Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis”? “Yes.”

“Elvis Presley”? “Thank you, thank you very much. I’m right here!”

“Former Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush”? “Yes. Uh huh.”

“Mother Teresa”? “Sure. I’m right here.”

“Billy Graham”? “Yo!”

“Jesus”? “Jesus of Nazareth”? “Where is Jesus of Nazareth?”

The only reply is that of the angel, who said to the women at the tomb on that glorious Easter morning:

"He is **NOT** here! For he has risen, just as he said!"