

The End of Death (Genesis 1-3 1 Corinthians 15)

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I want to ask a question about one of the things that is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15.13-14.

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.” NRSV

What is so important about the resurrection that without it the message is useless or vain? Why is it, that if the resurrection did not happen, the gospel is of no use whatsoever? Why is the resurrection the central thing?

Is the resurrection mentioned in the message just because it is some kind of vindication of Jesus, some vindication that God approved of what he said and did? (It could be that, of course).

Or is the resurrection crucial to the gospel because it is some kind of ratification of his death, that is, his death for sins really worked and you know that because God raised him from the dead. Is that what Paul means? Is that why it is vital to the gospel?

Or might we want to say that you can't have a gospel without the resurrection because the resurrection is just part of the package? Lots of modern gospels go like that, in fact lots of modern evangelical gospels go like that. We major on 'Christ died for our sins' and we talk about the resurrection (with a little debate as to whether Good Friday or Easter Sunday is the more important day), but the resurrection often gets mentioned just because its part of the package and because you've got to say it, and if you leave it out you've left out an important bit.

Is that really what is behind what Paul says here? Or is there something about the resurrection itself which, if it didn't happen, there is no message, the message is a useless, empty, vain message? Is it something about the resurrection itself? That's my question.

Back to the Beginning

To understand this, we need to go back to the beginning of the story of the resurrection. When is the beginning of the story of the resurrection? Where will we go in the Bible to find that? We will have to go to Genesis chapter 1.26. Here we are told that God made man, humankind, in his image or as his image. He made them male and female. Male and female was what humankind was, or is, and this human was made as the image of God or in the image of God.

But when you come to Genesis 2.7, we are told that God took some dust from the ground and breathed breath into it, and it became a human being. So we have two quite contrasting pictures of what humans are. On the one hand, made in the image of God, or as the image of God, and on the other hand a lump of dust into which God has breathed the breath of life.

Now notice in Gen 2.7 that when he takes this dust and gathers it together he doesn't put a soul into it that already existed, he doesn't even put a spirit into it that was already there. He just breathes breath into it and it becomes a living thing. So in Gen 2.7 the human being is made of dust and is made alive.

The story goes on, as you know, and in this beautiful garden there are lots of trees, but there are two trees that are singled out. A tree of life and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen2.9). Now

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is obviously a very dangerous tree. It is interesting to know why God has planted it there. It is so dangerous that God has built into it a fail-safe device. So that he says to the man, Don't eat the fruit of that tree, but if you do, or when you do, you will die.

Now we read that as a kind of a judgment. But there is more to it than that. It is a way of God protecting humankind from the results of knowing good and evil. If they know good and evil, by eating the fruit of this tree, they will die. That's the reality.

You know the story, by the end of chapter 3 they have not only eaten it but they are being excluded from the garden (Gen 3.22,23). The reason given there, why they're being excluded from the garden, is in case they eat of the tree of life. Because you see, that's where the antidote is. There are these two trees, and one tree - if you eat it you will die. But the other tree is the tree of life . It's like those magic stories - if you eat this one you could live forever. They are there together and it looks like the tree of life is the antidote to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But God is not using it like that. He pushes them out of the garden and keeps the garden closed to them so that they won't eat of the tree of life and live forever. Because, you see, the tree of life in this case is not actually the antidote for the knowledge of good and evil. It might be the antidote to death, but there is more to it than that. This couple now know good and evil. And the corruption of knowing good and evil will not be eradicated by the tree of life. Death might be overcome in the sense that they will live forever, but they will live forever with the corruption.

The new reality

And so they are excluded and death is now the reality for human beings. They all die. Immortality is not possible. But human beings do not like it. We do not like to die. We don't like death. And so human beings ever since then have been faced with this really big problem of death.

Mistaken solutions

What do you do about it? Now some modern people say, Well death is the end, enjoy yourself till you die, then get over it, just die, that's the end, don't take any notice of anything else - that's just the end of life. But most other people from the beginning through all of the cultures and all of history have got some other opinion. Human beings cannot accept this idea that death is the end.

Lots of stories are made up about what happens after death. They mostly have to do with spirits and ghosts, souls, things that continue. There's all these different stories, they all have this thing in common that there is some continuation of life in some form. And you notice that all of them, except one, don't have anything to do with bodies. Well, its obvious, bodies decay. Everybody knows that. Whatever stories you are going to make up, it's no use having bodies attached. They are all spirits and ghosts and things like that.

Reincarnation, I guess, is the one that brings you back to bodies, and in a way it's on the right track. It's got the wrong reasons, the wrong motivation and the wrong result, but at least it is dealing with bodies. Which is the problem of death - bodies die.

Other people these days, say, Well, when someone dies they turn into an angel, or they turn into a star. If you've been to any modern funerals you will have heard it and seen it. So and so, whoever has died, is now a star in the sky, or an angel, or some other fantasy that has been made up, because people want something to continue on.

The other option that most people in the western world have opted for, without perhaps articulating it, is what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15, as eating and drinking. Eat and drink for tomorrow you will die. So make your life comfortable, do the best you can, have fun, get what you need to make your life easy, and just keep on going and hope you'll live a really long time. If you can't exercise, then take pills and your cholesterol will be controlled a bit longer, and so on. That's the modern western affluent way of ... they are all the same aren't they.

They are all forms of denial and avoidance. It's a problem that human beings have not actually solved. They do not know what to do with the problem of death, and even Christians who ought to know, don't always seem to know.

God's problem

Now that's our problem. That's a human problem. But God's got a problem with this as well. Because God has created this world, he's put human beings on it, and for reasons that are not entirely clear to us he's given this tree of the knowledge of good and evil, with the fail-safe device built in, and they have eaten from it. Will his purposes for these humans now be ruined completely?

If you jump ahead a bit in Genesis you see that one of his options was just to destroy the whole lot and start again. He did that with the flood, except he kept a little bunch of them, and the little bunch turned out to be just as bad as the first group. So he's still got the problem.

Is it possible for God to solve this? What is the solution that God has to the problem that human beings now know good and evil and die. Destroying the whole lot is one solution.

God's solution

The other solution is that God in his mercy kills them off but raises them from the dead again, in the future, but frees them from the knowledge of good and evil. That's what we come to in 1 Corinthians 15.21-22

“For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” NRSV

Death has come into the human race through the action of a human, and now God has sent another human. Part of the race of Adam, made of the dust. But a righteous one, who is his Son, whom death is not able to hold, as Peter says in Acts 2.

And through the resurrection of Jesus, the only one who has ever been raised from the dead like this, not like Lazarus, but to a life that will never die. Through the resurrection of Jesus we see what God has done with the problem of death. He has taken a human to death and then raised him from death.

Paul makes clear in these verses that all those who belong to Christ now, even though they die like Adam, they will be brought back to life, raised to life in Christ. He's the first fruits (v23). Lots of others will follow what he has done. They will go through the same experience of resurrection. They haven't yet - he is the only one who has done it, but for those who belong to him, that is the future.

Resurrection from the dead

Now let me say something about this resurrection from the dead, because lots of Christians get confused here and we get our minds a bit muddled because of all of the strange ideas around us. The

resurrection of the dead doesn't have anything to do with whether spirits, souls etc continue on after death. Resurrection of the dead has to do with resurrection of bodies. We say it in the creed. It is the resurrection of the body. When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection he says, I am not a ghost- ghosts don't have flesh and bones as you see I have. He can see that they are still amazed and he says, Have you got any fish to eat, give me something to eat. I'll eat, you watch. Ghosts don't eat things like that.

The resurrection of the dead is the resurrection of bodies, not the continuation of life. And what is being promised in the gospel is not just that life will continue on after death, but that at some point in the future Christ will raise from the dead, in bodily form, in transformed raised bodies, those who belong to him.

Some implications

Now there are some implications of this for us I think. For example, we ought not to get sucked in to those kinds of thoughts that say if we could communicate with the spirits of those who've died, or communicate with people who think they are in touch with the afterlife, we might find out something about what's ahead.

Or those who read the books or waste their money on the "near-death" experiences - there is a little batch of these books that have come out recently, but they have been coming out for years and years - it is the same thing all the time. But how is it possible that that will tell you anything true about the resurrection from the dead. They don't claim to tell you that, they just tell you some experience somebody had. They may have had the experience in their head, but they are not telling you anything about what the Christian gospel is saying because the Christian gospel is describing the resurrection of bodies. And so far only one body has been raised from the dead never to die again, and that is the body of Jesus.

So if you actually want to know what the Christian hope is about it would be much better to go to the one who has actually been raised from the dead and see what he has got to say about it. And not worry about these other interesting, irrelevant and money wasting ideas.

Did it really happen?

Is there really a resurrection? Did it really happen? I don't suppose I have to spend very much time encouraging you to believe that the Bible is telling you something true. That the records we have in the New Testament are reliable, that they are telling you stuff that was really seen, that the disciples actually saw Jesus, it really happened, and so on.

The question is though, if there is a resurrection in this Christian sense, how do we know what it's like? The only evidence we've got is the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. In fact he is the only proof of it, he's the only one who has been raised from the dead in this way. He is the proof.

What if it didn't happen?

Now if there is no resurrection, that's where I began, if there's no resurrection, what is the implication of this? Paul says if there's no resurrection, then our message is useless (v14), it is nonsense. There is no message if there is no resurrection. We misrepresent God (v15), we say God did something that he never did do. So they are quite serious things that Paul says are hanging on whether there really was a resurrection of Jesus. Our faith is vain and futile.

Faith

Let me strengthen you on this, let me encourage you on this, because again, in the environments that some of us live in, when people say they have faith, they mean something really vague and kind of like wishful thinking, and they really hope that something will happen, or they've got faith in something they know is not true, or they've got faith in something they can't prove.

This has nothing to do with Christian faith. Christian faith is almost the opposite of that. When you think about having faith you've got to think about something or someone who is reliable, trustworthy, dependable. And if you know someone who is trustworthy, reliable, dependable, that is the person you trust, you depend on them, you have faith in them. That is what it means.

And in this case, is God reliable, dependable and trustworthy when he tells you, through the scriptures, that Christ was actually raised from the dead never to die again? Can you depend on that as a true thing? If so, that is what Paul is talking about when he refers to our faith. That's what we put our trust in, that's what we rely on, that's what we depend on. That's what our whole life is based on. That God has actually done this by raising Christ from the dead.

But of course if he didn't raise him from the dead, that is an entirely useless, futile, deceptive thing to believe. And it means you are still in your sins (v17).

What if it is true?

But what if Christ has been raised from the dead? What if that really is true? Christians say it is true. Paul says it is true. And not only true but the heart of the message. If it's not true there is no message. No Christianity. If it is not true, you should have stayed home and watched the movie. It is a useless message if there is no resurrection.

But if it is true, then it is telling you something about what happened in Genesis 1, 2 and 3. It is telling you that God has done something about human death. And it is telling you also that he has done something about the creation that is outside of Eden, because he pushed these two outside of Eden into a world that wasn't perfect like it was in Eden. Where they had pain in childbirth, where they had to struggle to produce food, where there was tension between the man and the woman. And that creation, that natural world which we can now clearly see is still under huge stress, and is not perfect, - that creation God is going to recreate again just as those who belong to Christ will be raised from the dead and recreated again with new bodies that will last forever, for eternity.

The creation

And so when you think about all of the things that are being said at the moment about the environment, should we try to save the environment by stopping the illegal logging in Indonesia, or reducing the amount of carbon that we use? Will that save the planet? It won't save the planet. It is a useless thing to do in terms of rescuing the creation. The creation is decaying.

But God is going to recreate the creation. That's why we ought to care for the world we live in. That's why we ought to stop the logging, that's why we ought to decrease the pollution. That's why we ought not to waste the electricity. Because God cares for this creation.

One of the things that some Christians do is to spiritualise everything, they think everything is kind of non-material, it is all in heaven, it's all kind of spirit like. But the resurrection of the dead is saying that the creation, the bodily creation, the dust, is going to be raised from the dead and made over again. God values it and therefore we can value it too.

Resurrection and sin

Paul says that part of the gospel is that Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15.3,4). But if we stop there, we've only got as far as Adam got. Adam died for his sins too. Christ died for our sins but was raised again on the third day. Paul says that's a crucial part of the gospel and if it's not true there is no gospel.

Raised means, raised with bodies that will not die. Raised means that the problem of knowing good and evil has been left behind. That the bodies that will be raised with Christ will no longer be subject to the fail-safe device of the people who know the knowledge of good and evil. They will live forever, imperishable, immortal. Immortality, for Christians, is for the raised-with-Christ people.

To say it another way, at the end of chapter 15 verse 53, 57, death is swallowed up in victory. Death has served its purpose. Yes, the death in Genesis 2 and 3 is a kind of a judgment, but it is also a mercy I think. That's why he didn't let them eat the tree of life. Because what is the cure for human beings that know good and evil? For sinners? The cure is death. That is the cure as well as the penalty. But the real solution is not to stay dead but to be raised to a new life, a new bodily life, because we belong to Christ.

You can see a similar thing in Revelation 20.14, where it says, Death and Hades are no more. Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. They have served their purpose. They don't need Hades any more, they don't need the big cemetery, the place where all the dead people go. Death is not needed any more. Death is ended. Because the resurrection has taken place. Well, some people will go into the lake of fire as well of course. Those who continue to disobey Jesus.

Is it all useless?

One of the implications for us you see right at the end of 1 Corinthians 15. What it means is, you see, is that everything you do in the Lord, is not useless. Nothing that you do for the Lord is useless because God accomplishes all his purposes. When you look back at Genesis 1 and 2, when you see what happened in chapter 3, you see that there's this huge potential for the whole purpose of God to come to nothing.

But God has done something so that all his purposes will come true. The purpose he has for humanity, to be in his image and as his image, not just dust, will come true, because the dust will be remade into the image of the Son of God. Destined to become like Jesus himself. Glorified with the glory of God himself.

God carries out and will complete everything that he began to do in the first place. And it means that everything that you do in the Lord's service, whatever it is that you are doing to serve the Lord, none of it will be useless, none of it will be wasted. And when you get to heaven you will look back and think, those years that I spent doing whatever it was, and I thought there was no use to it, you will see that God was using you to accomplish a purpose that will come to its completion and perfection in that great day when you see God face to face. Nothing will be useless.

Let me finish by reading a little bit from Ecclesiastes 12.1-8.

"So remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, "I don't enjoy life." 2 That is when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away. 3 Then your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly. 4 Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be

able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. 5 You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will have gone.

We are going to our final resting place, and then there will be mourning in the streets. 6 The silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered. 7 Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth, and the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us. 8 Useless, useless, said the Philosopher. It is all useless." GNB

Except that this is not true now is it? It's not useless. The dust and the breath is raised from the dead now. Made in the image of Jesus. And the life you that you live now is not useless.

And I want to say to you now, make sure that you do not live a useless life. Don't do what Paul refers to in chapter 15 as, Eat and drink for tomorrow you die. Don't live with the avoidance of death as though there is nothing you can do about it. Because God has already dealt with the problem of death in raising Jesus. And there is nothing that those who serve God do that is useless. Your life is not useless, and you ought not to allow it to be useless.

You ought not to be living one of those modern affluent western lives that say, Let's make sure we are comfortable. Let's spend our time with better television programs (well, that's unlikely). Let's not spend out time getting more and more CDs on our iPods so that we obliterate and block out the reality around us. Let's not say I've got a mortgage and I can't move away to anywhere else. Let's not say that our life is just eating and drinking. Let's see that our labour, our work in the Lord will always be useful and productive because the Lord is always carrying our his purposes. He is always accomplishing what he set out to do through you and me. Don't live a useless life.

You know that that's relevant, not only to me and to you, but you probably know lots of other people who don't know what to do about death. Who are living in denial and avoidance of it. And they are hoping they will live longer by exercising, or taking cholesterol pills or whatever your age group is doing. They fantasise about what happens after death. Completely untrue, unreal rubbish.

Do you think their lives would be different if you could say to them, The problem of death has been overcome by one man who has been raised from the dead? That death is not the end. It is no longer the reality and it doesn't make life useless.

It would change their life, wouldn't it? If our gospel said that to them.

This is the text of a sermon preached at St Mark's Bassendean, Western Australia, for Easter Day 2020.

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