

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

We might wonder: Why does Paul devote so much attention to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians?

Well, Greek believers struggled with the idea of the resurrection. And this is because of ideas buried deeply in their culture. In the first century, the dominant strain of thought in Greek culture was Neoplatonism, which of course had its roots in Plato, who had lived much earlier. In Neoplatonic thought, they understood God to be pure spirit. Human beings are brought to life because we each have a “spark,” a piece, of the divine in us. But our bodies are no good. All flesh and material things are corrupted and evil. So when we die, our soul, our spirit, this spark of the divine is set free and returns to God.

But there is no individuality in the afterlife in this school of thought. And the body is irredeemable and corrupt, so there was no thought of any kind of resurrection.

There were other, older thoughts about the afterlife in Greek culture. But they weren't very cheery ones. Some believed that the dead existed in a gray, dark, and cheerless existence as “shades beneath the earth.”

By contrast, the Jewish people did believe in a resurrection, or at least most of them did. When we read the Old Testament, most of the references we find to life after death are about Sheol, the place of the dead. And Sheol also has this sense of a gray and shadowy existence. It doesn't seem like the place you'd want to go.

But there are also places in the Old Testament that offer a more promising vision of a resurrection. One of the best is Daniel 12:2, “Many of those whose bodies lie dead and buried will rise up, some to everlasting life and some to shame.” Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God.” And there are some others.

By the time of the New Testament, most Jews believed in a bodily resurrection at the end of days. For example, Martha affirms this belief in a future resurrection when Jesus tells her in John 11 that her brother, Lazarus, will rise from the grave. The exception to this belief were the Sadducees, who denied any kind of resurrection or afterlife at all. And that's because they were very influenced by Greek thought.

In Jewish thought, the body was good, not evil. It could certainly be used for evil, but it was not itself evil. After all, God created it. And Jesus took on human flesh. If the body was bad, then that would make no sense for the sinless one to take on flesh!

A resurrection was necessary, in Jewish thought, to redress the wrongs suffered by God's people in this world. If this world is all there is, then injustice triumphs.

As Christians, we believe in the resurrection of the dead. We believe in the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of Christ's people. We believe in individuality in the afterlife. We still have our own soul. We don't just "merge back into the cosmic oneness," like in Neoplatonic thought. We also believe in a temporary, spiritual afterlife, until the day of the resurrection. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." There is spiritual state of waiting, where our souls reside until the day of the resurrection and the New Creation.

These beliefs took root more easily in Jewish Christians than in Greek Christians, because of the different beliefs about the body and individuality and the afterlife. The Greek believers had a harder time accepting these things. So Paul is out to demonstrate the truthfulness of the resurrection to them.

He begins in verses 1-11 with the resurrection of Christ. There was at least one resurrection they could not deny. They couldn't deny Jesus rose bodily from the dead.

He died for our sins, as the Scriptures said. We call this "substitutionary atonement." Sacrifice, in other words. The wages of sin is death, and God told Adam and Eve that death would be the result of rebellion. Christ died as a substitute for us, a sacrifice on our behalf.

Then he rose. And after he rose, he was seen by witnesses, hundreds of them. Paul doesn't suggest the resurrection probably happened. He is absolutely, 100% convinced of it. And if Christ rose from the dead, then it proves that the dead can rise bodily. The particular proves the general. If one can rise, then so can others.

"So why do some say there will be no resurrection of the dead?" Paul asks. Without the resurrection, the gospel just falls apart. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is useless, dead, and worthless.

Faith is both what we believe and the action of believing it. In English, we use two different words. Faith is the content, and believing is the act. But in Greek, it's one word for both. PISTIS is the noun for faith, and PISTEUO is the verb for believe. If Christ did not rise, then it's not just that the content of our faith is wrong, our believing is wrong. Faith is how we relate to God. If our believing is wrong, then our way of relating to God is dead and worthless. If Christ didn't rise, our faith is useless. We are still dead in our sins. And there is no hope for those who died believing in Christ.

And we should be pitied. In the first century, having Christian faith was very likely to lead to persecution, poverty, and ostracism. To believe it when it is wrong is to suffer for nothing. But worse than that, anyone who sincerely believes a lie should be pitied.

The death and resurrection of Christ are essential to the gospel message. Now, I do think there are some in the Church who don't believe that. "God loves you and wants you to be nice to your neighbor" is not gospel. That's not good news because we are still going to die and then death is the end if there is no resurrection of Christ. He had to die for our sins. He had to rise again to demonstrate that he was victorious over the power of death. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we will all grow old, die, and that's the end of it. There is no salvation from evil. There is no triumph over death and injustice.

"But the fact of the matter is, Christ rose from the dead. He is the firstfruits of the resurrection." The idea of firstfruits goes back to Leviticus 23. At the beginning of the barley harvest in March or early April, and again at the beginning of the wheat harvest in May or early June, they would offer a sacrifice from the first of the grain to be harvested. These would coincide with Passover, which we celebrate as Easter, and Pentecost. Only after the first portion of grain was offered as a sacrifice could the rest of it be used for ordinary purposes. And it was understood that the firstfruits of the harvest guaranteed God's promise that the rest of the harvest would come later.

Paul applies that idea to Christ. His resurrection is proof that the rest of the resurrection will happen in God's timing. Christ rose, so we will rise, too.

Why is this important to us? Well, no matter what our background, what the ideas in our culture are, there are always going to be things in the gospel that are difficult for us to receive. Should we throw the whole thing out then? No, as Paul says many times, we should hold fast to the message. And we should be honest with God about our struggles with certain things and wrestle with them until we are satisfied with the answers God gives us in his Word and in our studying of it.