

The Wonders of the Resurrection

Text: 1 Corinthians 15

Introduction

Let's begin with a few rather grand statements: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most momentous and pivotal point in history. It is the earth-shattering moment which changed the world forever and – together with the death of Christ – is the event which every man, every woman and every child is summoned by God believe. It is a three-fold declaration of God to humanity:

1. It is God's declaration that he has overturned sin and death and brought *true life* to a dying world.
2. It is God's declaration of *hope* in the midst of hopelessness.
3. It is God's declaration that he has planted a *new creation* upon the ashes of the old.

The Resurrection is a *Declaration of God* not a point of dispute

Before looking at these three things in turn, let's just set the scene by establishing what the Bible says about the resurrection itself. It is not uncommon for people to ask for proof of the Resurrection. However, this is upside down from how the resurrection is presented in the Bible. Rather than it being something that needs to be proved, the resurrection – says the Bible – *is* the proof. It *is* the proof of God's power; it *is* the proof of God's goodness; it *is* the proof that he is a God who should be worshipped.

And so in the Gospels and the Epistles, there is never any attempt to prove the resurrection. There is no sense of getting into endless debates over whether it was a real bodily resurrection or no. This is not to say that there is no time and place to have that discussion, but the basic biblical position, which you can see clearly in [verses 3 and 4 of 1 Corinthians 15](#), is this: Jesus *did* die for our sins, Jesus *was* buried, and Jesus *was* raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures. Paul speaks of it as a fact, and he does so on the basis of two things:

1. He says he has been given special revelation from God ([Verse 3](#)).
2. He says that there are a multitude of credible witnesses who testified to it. Jesus *did* appear to Peter, he *did* appear to the 12, he *did* appear to more than 500, he *did* appear to James, and he *did* appear to me, says Paul ([Verses 5-8](#)).

In passing, it's interesting to note who is saying this. It's not someone who was hanging out with Jesus for three years. It's someone who hated and despised the church so much, that he was the most zealous and chief persecutor of it. He of all people had no reason to vouch for the authenticity of the resurrection, and yet that's precisely what he does.

The resurrection is therefore not presented to us as something that can be proved with more evidence to come in to confirm it. Rather, the resurrection, says Paul and the New Testament, *has* happened, and it *is* the declaration of God to all humanity. But what is it declaring?

It is God's declaration that he has overturned sin and death and brought *true life* to the world

Let's start with the obvious: the world is chock-full of death. We all know people who have died, and we each of us know that we ourselves will one day die. Let's make another observation from the University of the Blindingly Obvious: The Old Testament scriptures are full of death. It's there in the 3rd chapter of Genesis, and it stalks every page thereafter.

In chapter 1 of Genesis, God created a world, and he filled it with life. He filled it with plants and trees on the 3rd day; birds and fish on the 5th day; and with land animals on the 6th day, culminating with the creation of man, into whom he breathed the breath of life, and the woman, who he took from the man's side. Yet into this world teeming with life, into the midst of God's amazing grace to man, we get the first hint of what is to come:

“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”
([Genesis 2:16-17](#)).

In the very next chapter, we see not just the threat of death but death itself. And from then on the dust of death is upon everyone and everything – every man, every woman, every child, along with every other creature that God had made. In Genesis 4 we get the world's first murder. In Genesis 5 a genealogy where the phrase “and then he died” is repeated over and over. In chapters 6-9, there is a global flood which sweeps away the population of the world, bar eight who are saved.

And then on through Genesis, Abraham, the father of the faith dies; Isaac, the promised seed, dies too; So too do Jacob and Joseph. On through the rest of the Bible, Moses and his generation. Joshua and his generation. David and Solomon with their generations. All sin. All die. Death grips the world, and it won't let go.

But although death is ever present, there are glimmers of new life & new beginnings. The flood, for instance, wasn't just the sweeping away of the old creation. It was God announcing the start of a new creation. Noah is a new Adam – a new King and priest of God – tasked with taking dominion and subduing the world under God, and of leading men to worship God.

Then we have another new world emerging with the call of Abram. He is also a new Adam and represents a new start for a world of sin and death. Unlike Adam, he is not so much told to take dominion as God telling him he will give it to him and his descendants.

Then there is Isaac, the promised child. When God tells Abraham to go and sacrifice him, at the point of death there is a glimmer of life, as God intervenes to provide a substitute.

There is the glimmer of new life seen in the Exodus; the Egyptians die, but the Israelites live and eventually come into the promised land. There is the glimmer of new life seen in the ascension of David to the kingship. It is again seen with Solomon. And then again in the return from Exile in Babylon. Death is ever present, but there are constant flickers of hope of new life.

And yet every time when life and hope seem to flicker up, sin and death come in to quickly snuff it out before it has hardly had a chance to get started. The message of the Old Testament, then, is very much that sin and death are infectious and they have spread to all humanity. This is what Paul says in [verses 21 and 22](#) of 1 Corinthians 15:

“For as by a man came death ... For as in Adam all die”.

But he also alludes to the theme of life in the midst of the contagion of death, but this time it is the real thing and is tied into the death and resurrection of Jesus. So in [verses 3 and 4](#), he says:

“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

The third day reference is interesting. What does he mean by that? There are a few candidate Scriptures. For instance, in [Psalm 16](#), David says:

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”

Since a body starts to corrupt after three days, it is said that this was a prophecy of Jesus rising on the third day, and there is much truth in this view.

Then there is the sign of Jonah, who was in the fish’s belly for three days and three nights. We know that this is definitely part of what Paul is referring to because Jesus explicitly ties his death and resurrection to it in [Matthew 12](#):

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

But there is something else. If we go back to what at first might seem like a rather obscure passage from Numbers 19, we see something very interesting regarding the contagiousness of death, and the need for cleansing:

“Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean” ([Numbers 19:11-12](#))

“And the clean person shall sprinkle it on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day. Thus on the seventh day he shall cleanse him, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean” ([Numbers 19:19](#)).

What was this meant to teach the Israelites? Chiefly two things:

1. By teaching them that coming into contact with death made them unclean, it was meant to teach them that death is contagious. It spreads to all.
2. But secondly, it was also meant to teach that they needed cleansing from this spread of death, and that it would take place in two parts – one on the third day, and the other on the seventh.

This is essentially what Paul is teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. He says that we all die because we are all in Adam. In other words, through Adam’s sin and through death entering the world then, sin and death have spread to all humanity. It is contagious and we are all effected by it. But just as in Numbers 19 there was a cleansing from the contagion of death, so we see in verses 21 and 22 that this is what the resurrection provides:

“For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the *resurrection of the dead*. For as in Adam all die, so also *in Christ shall all be made alive*” ([Verses 21-22](#)).

The resurrection of Jesus in the midst of history is therefore parallel to the cleansing on the third day from the contagion of death in Numbers 19. Just as the unclean person must be cleansed on the third day in order to be cleansed on the seventh day, so too does Jesus – the clean person – cleanse us through his resurrection in the middle of history, so that at his coming at the end of time, those who are in Christ and have been made clean by his resurrection shall be raised and declared clean by God the Father.

Put all this together, and what do we see? That death, which has stalked the earth almost from the beginning of time, has been defeated, by the resurrection of Jesus. That death, which is contagious and has spread to all, no longer has the grip on this world that it once had. Yes people still die. Yes death still stalks. Yes death is still a fearful thing. But those who are united to Christ in his death are also united to him in his resurrection, and because of this – [as the Book of Revelation teaches us in chapter 20](#) – over such the second death – Hell – has no power.

And so the raising of Jesus from the dead was the moment in the midst of history when God declared that death reigns no more – that the king of terrors has been defeated by the king of kings, that true life has been planted in the middle of a dead world, and so we can say with Paul, as he does at the end of the chapter in [verses 54-55](#):

“Death is swallowed up in victory. “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

It is God’s declaration of *hope* in the midst of a hopeless world.

There are many ways we could come at this, but I want to do so from a slightly unusual angle by asking a question that you may not have considered before. Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to have been a disciple between the Friday morning of Jesus’s death and the morning of his resurrection? Imagine the scene for a few moments. You’ve been with Jesus for the past few years. You’ve heard him teach, and you wondered at his authority and gracious words. You’ve witnessed his miracles first hand, and you marvelled. You’ve seen his great love and compassion, and you were astonished. You heard him proclaim himself to be the bread of life, and you trusted him. You heard him say that he is the water of life, and you believed him. You heard him say that he is the light of the world, and you knew it to be true.

Like Simeon, who held the infant Jesus in the Temple, you believed him to be the consolation of Israel. Like Peter, you believed that this was the Christ of God who would deliver Israel. Like the blind man whom Jesus healed, you believed him to be the Son of God. Just days before, when he rode into Jerusalem on the ass’s colt to great acclaim, you anticipated that this was the moment you – and Israel – had been waiting for. This was the moment when God would finally establish his Messiah and his Kingdom.

And yet on that miserable Friday morning, you looked on from afar as he was nailed to a Roman cross, crucified between two thieves, the life draining from him. You heard the mockers: “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” And you wondered the same thing: “Why doesn’t he save himself? Is he not the Christ of God, the chosen one, after all”?

Later that day, his lifeless body is taken down from the cross, wrapped in linen cloths and spices, and laid in a tomb with the entrance sealed. It is beyond doubt: He really is dead.

And so in the place of joy and expectation, there is emptiness and despair. Jesus, the water of life, the light of the world, the bread of life is dead. Jesus the Messiah, the consolation of Israel, the Son of God – your friend, is dead. And with him all your hopes, all Israel’s hopes, and all mankind’s hopes are gone – snuffed out completely.

This is the kind of hopeless scenario that Paul wants the Christians to imagine in [verses 12-19](#) of 1 Corinthians 15. There are obviously some in the Corinthian church who are doubting that the dead can be raised at all. Paul responds by effectively saying, “Really? Well if that’s the case, what are you doing in church?” If there’s no resurrection, how can Christ himself have been raised (verse 13)? If it’s the case that the dead are not raised, then Christ himself can’t have been raised, can he (verse 16)? And if Christ hasn’t been raised, then what? Your faith is vain and futile (Verses 14 & 17). How so? Because it means you are still in your sins (Verse 17). But didn’t Christ pay for our sins in his death? Indeed, but the resurrection is the declaration that the asking price was met. If there was no resurrection, there is no proof that the asking price was met.

This is a bad analogy – most analogies are when talking about these sorts of high and lofty things – but think of purchasing something in a shop. You go to the counter and hand over exactly the right money. In a sense, you have paid for the goods. But it’s not until the cashier takes the payment, opens the till, puts the money in and gives you a receipt that you can actually leave. In other words, the payment is made but it still needs to be verified as legitimate, and the receipt is the token that it has been accepted.

As I say, all such analogies fall down, but the basic concept is there. Christ paid for our sins, but the acceptance of this payment by God the Father – the receipt – is not Jesus’s death, but the raising of him from the dead. And so Paul says that if Christ is not risen – if he really is still dead – then his death is meaningless: your faith is futile, your sins still cling to you, and you will die and perish same as everyone else (Verse 18). Your situation is as hopeless as that the disciples experienced from the Friday of his death to the Sunday of his resurrection.

To put it bluntly: no resurrection; no hope.

But...and it’s a very big but...But he says, this is not the case. “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” ([Verse 20](#)). In other words, hopelessness has been vanquished. A Christless world, such as the one the disciples had to contend with during those agonising hours between his death and resurrection, doesn’t exist. A world where the Messiah is no longer alive, doesn’t exist. A hopeless world, such as the one that existed for thousands of years before Christ, doesn’t exist.

We simply don’t live in that world anymore. Instead, we live in a world where the banner of hope has been planted in a world that had no hope, by the raising of God’s son, Jesus Christ, from the dead.

But if that hope is grounded in the resurrection, where is it actually pointing to? Paul tells us at the end of the chapter:

“Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” ([Verses 51-53](#)).

And so the resurrection is God's declaration of hope in a hopeless world, and the hope it leads to is eternal life. The world will look in vain to any other person for true hope, because all other people are either dead or destined to die. But Jesus is risen, and with him true hope both for you and for the whole world has come.

It is God's declaration that he has planted a *new creation* upon the ashes of the old.

We've looked at the resurrection as God's declaration of the overturning of sin and death, and the planting of true life in a dying world. And we've looked at the resurrection as God's declaration of hope, in a world which without Christ is hopeless. But it is more than that. It is also the declaration that God has begun the world again and is creating a new heavens and new earth.

We are perhaps accustomed to thinking of the new heavens and new earth as the final and eternal creation of God. Well it is that, but it started at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. If we look at [Isaiah 65 verse 17](#), we read the following:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”

As we read through that passage, it sounds to us in many places that Isaiah is describing the eternal kingdom. Sounds great, until we get to [verse 20](#) and we hit a snag:

“No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.”

People are living longer, but the snag is that death still exists in this new heavens and new earth. The dust of death still remains. How do we account for this?

The answer is that the new heavens and the new earth being described by Isaiah, began with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It began when God accepted his payment for sin and raised him from the dead to new life. It began when God overturned hopelessness by raising Christ, the hope of the world, from the dead. And because he has risen, a new creation is being built on the debris of the old.

Here's how Paul describes it in [2 Corinthians 5: 17-21](#):

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

If you are united to Christ, it is not simply that you have been forgiven your sins through his death. You are a new creation, and you are so because God the Father, in raising Jesus by his Spirit, has inaugurated a new creation. And this new creation isn't just for one or two here and there. It is, says Paul, for the reconciling of the whole world.

It's useful to think of the new heavens and new earth in a similar way as the Bible presents personal justification, sanctification and glorification. When someone is justified, they are *declared* to be

righteous in God's sight. But they still sin and so need the *ongoing sanctifying work* of the Spirit to make them live righteously. Then at their death, they are glorified – not only *declared* finally righteous, but *actually* morally righteous, with no more sin and no more death clinging to them forever and ever.

Now apply this three-fold pattern to the new heavens and new earth. At Jesus's resurrection – just like justification – a new creation was *declared*. For the remainder of history – just like sanctification – the Spirit of Christ is cleansing the world from the old creation and establishing the new – his kingdom. And at the end of time – like glorification – the new creation will be given its final form, with all sin, all unrighteousness, and death itself banished forever.

This is what we find if we turn back to 1 Corinthians 15. In [verse 23](#), Paul says:

“But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ”

This use of the word firstfruits is a reference to the Feast of Firstfruits, set out in [Leviticus 23:9-11](#):

“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it’”.

The point of this was that the firstfruits were consecrated to God, and this was then his guarantee to them of the coming harvest. And this was to be done on the Sabbath just after the Passover. Which means that the day of the Resurrection was on the feast of firstfruits. What Paul is saying in verse 23 of 1 Corinthians 15, therefore, is that just as the seed has been planted – Jesus's death – and the firstfruits have come – Jesus's resurrection – so this is God's guarantee of the coming harvest.

But in the following verses, he talks both about what happens *after* the firstfruits– the resurrection of Jesus – has come, but before the end. So in [verse 24](#), he says that the end – that's the end of time – comes, *after* Jesus has destroyed every rule and authority and power. In [verse 25](#) he says “he must reign *until* he has put all enemies under his feet.” In [verse 28](#) he says “When all things are subjected to him”.

In other words, he's describing an ongoing work, after the resurrection, of ongoing cleansing and the forming of a new creation. Since his resurrection and his ascension, Christ has been destroying opposing rule and power, putting enemies under his feet, and slowly but inexorably subduing the world to himself. That is, he has been building a new creation on the ruins of the old. This might feel odd to a Western Christian, with the faith evidently declining rapidly across Europe and North America. But across the globe, there are almost certainly more Christians on earth than there ever have been – and Jesus hasn't finished yet.

Finally, after he has put all things upon earth under his subjection – [verse 24](#) – then will the Kingdom of God be complete and God glorified. Jesus the resurrected Messiah will hand that completed kingdom, the new creation, up to his father, and those who are in Christ will be part of that new creation forever and ever.

And so the resurrection, like justification, is God's declaration that he is making a new creation. The ongoing, subduing work of Christ, like sanctification, is God building that new creation on the debris

of the old. And the end, the glorification, is when the new creation is finished and consummated at the end of time, culminating with a new heavens and new earth of glorious wonder.

The good news is that if we are in Christ, we are part of that new creation. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we will be victorious ([verse 57](#)), the new creation will come, and – [verse 28](#) – God will be all in all.

Application

These are some of the wonders of the resurrection, and if we even partially get our heads around them, they will astonish us and bring great joy. In closing, here are three brief applications to take away:

1. The fact that the resurrection is not presented in the Bible as a subject of debate, but rather as the declaration of God to mankind, should shape the way we think about it, and also the way we speak to those who have not yet come to terms with God and his Messiah. Through the resurrection, God has *declared* the overthrow of sin and death and the planting of *true life* in the middle of history. Through the resurrection, God has *proclaimed* that there is *hope* and not hopelessness. Through the resurrection, God has *announced* the beginnings of a *new creation*. The only question unbelievers need to answer is this: Will you believe it and come and join this true life, this hope, this new creation?
2. If you have not yet accepted God's declaration in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, what is it you're waiting for? More proof? God says the resurrection *is* the proof. Or perhaps you ask what God – if indeed he exists – is doing when there's so much evil and death and hopelessness in this fallen world. The news is he agrees with you. There *is* evil, there *is* death, there *is* hopelessness in this world, and he hates it. And that's precisely why he raised his Son from the dead – to banish sin, death, hopelessness and the old world, and in their place bring true life, true hope and a new creation full of goodness and righteousness. So if goodness and life are what you're hoping for, then look no further than the resurrection of Jesus – because it is here and here alone that you will find these things.
3. And finally, if you are a believer, know this: The Sun of Righteousness has arisen with healing in his wings ([Malachi 4:2](#)). Whoever you are, whatever your situation, however you feel, Jesus is risen. The advice usually given by preachers to people facing their sins or their trials and difficulties is "Look to the Cross". Very true, but when you've looked to the Cross, be sure you look to the Empty Tomb as well. For Christ is not dead, but is risen: risen to give you life, risen to give you hope, and risen to make you part of the new creation that he is building and will complete at the resurrection at the end of time.