

March 29/30, 2008

Life After Death Series

Is There Life After Death?

1 Corinthians 15

Pastor Bryan Clark

“Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts his hour on the stage and then is heard no more. Tis a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.” The thespians among us would recognize those as the words of Lady MacBeth from Shakespeare’s famous play.

But you know research indicates most people don’t agree with her. Deep down within us there is something that longs to believe this hour on the stage cannot be all there is. There is something within us that says “please tell me there is something more than this”. But how do we know? How do we know, do we just take some of these near-death experiences and try to define life after death by that? Is it 90 minutes in heaven that gives us our confidence? What is it that causes us to believe there is more than just this life?

Over the years I have done hundreds of funerals and one thing that remains very consistent, and that is even people that by and large are very irreligious and have little time for God, suddenly become very religious when a loved one dies. And they want to talk about life after death and as they stand around the body as it is laid in the grave, they want to believe with all their heart that this is not the end and that there is another day, and someday they will see their loved one again.

But based on what? What is life after death? Is it that we become some sort of a disembodied spirit that just kind of floats around the universe? Or maybe we become part of the energy of the universe. Or maybe we are reincarnated and we come back in some other form. And is it just everybody’s guess, everybody’s opinion, is it all up for grabs?

Well, if you have a Bible this morning, turn with us to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. I have no doubt this morning we are going to raise more questions than we are going to answer, but again we have several weeks to try to answer some of those questions. We are not going to try and dump the whole load this morning, and I am going to try to stay focused on our subject of the morning and that is just this idea, is there life after death and how do we know that and do we have some sense of what that will be like.

Paul is the author of the letter to the Corinthians. It is probably written about A.D.50, so about 17 years after the resurrection of Jesus. Corinthians is organized in a topical fashion. The Corinthians sent a list of questions to Paul. Paul writes this letter back to answer the questions and typically the questions are listed somewhere in the text. In this case the question is in verse 12:

Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead. (Corinthians 15:12; *NASB)

The idea of a resurrection of the dead probably has two parts to it because there are several different groups in Corinth. One would just be the idea of life after death. Is there life after death? But the other would have to do with: is there life after death in the sense of a physical, bodily resurrection or is it just kind of a disembodied spirit that floats around the universe. That’s what’s meant by the idea of resurrection from the dead. With that in mind I want to go back the beginning of the chapter. Paul lays some groundwork before he gets into answering the question.

Now I make known to you brethren the gospel which I preach to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved if you hold fast the word which I preach to you, unless you believed in vain. (Corinthians 15:1-2)

So Paul opens up the letter with a reminder of the message upon which they stand. It's a creed that we will talk about in just a minute. But he says this is the message I preached to you, this is the message you received, which means they received in the form of this creed. This is the message upon which they stand. It is the message upon which they are saved. In other words, this is the core of their belief system. But then he adds this final phrase, unless we have believed in vain. In other words, this is everything unless it's not true. Then we got nothing. Now you'd have to imagine at the end of verse 2, he's got their attention. Verse 3:

For I delivered to you as of first importance (meaning of top priority) that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (Corinthians 15:3-7)

Paul is referring to what we believe to be the earliest creed of the New Testament Church. I made reference to it last week. The importance of the creed is in recognizing how early the Church developed a creed that identified the core doctrine of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Let me define the creed and then remind you why the dating of the creed is so important.

Basically the creed is that Christ the Messiah died for our sins according to the scriptures. Jesus didn't just die. He died for our sins and according to the scriptures, is reminding us that was the plan. Jesus' crucifixion on the cross was not a plan that had gone badly. That was the plan going all the way back to a promise made in Genesis 3, verse 15, that He was buried and that He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. It's very important to recognize that the early Church creed identified not only was Jesus crucified, but their belief that Jesus was raised from the dead and then he goes on and lists the number of witnesses including over 500 people in one sighting or one appearance. So the basic creed, the basic doctrine of the New Testament Church was that Jesus was God in the flesh as the Messiah and He died for our sins. That He was buried, that on the third day He rose again and He did appear to many witnesses before he ascended back to the Father.

Now the importance of that is to remind ourselves again that the New Testament Church did not create the resurrection. The resurrection created the Church. In dating this creed, we can date it all the way back to about two years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Paul says this is a creed that he received. Shortly after Paul trusted Jesus as Savior, saw the resurrected Christ, believed in the message, he went back to Jerusalem, he received the creed. That would be about two years after the resurrection of Jesus. I mentioned last week historians say it takes at least four, probably more like five hundred years before legend and myth start to take effect. We can date that the Church believed Jesus rose from the dead, and that there were eyewitnesses back within two years of the event itself. Therefore it is highly credible.

One logical question is how do we know this was a creed? That is a fairly simple question to answer. When Paul says, “I delivered to you and you received”, that’s what we would call in the Greek credal language. In other words it is very specific language that identifies the passing on and the receiving of a creed. We also can tell from the structure. In your English Bible it just reads like a paragraph, but in the original language it’s formed as a creed. It has a credal structure to it, a type of parallelism that I won’t bore you with all the details, but it clearly is laid out as a creed, just as it would have been consistently in the first century. One other interesting detail for dating the creed is the idea of Peter being identified as Cephas, which was his Aramaic name. We know from history that very early on, Peter was identified by his Aramaic name, Cephas. But also very early on that changed and he was identified exclusively as Peter, the name that Jesus gave him. So the idea that the creed included his name in Aramaic again would tell us that this was very early and helps us date this particular creed.

One other interesting note that relates to the grammar of what is being said here when he says “Jesus died for our sins”, the verb tense is what we call an eras tense which is a past tense point in time. Think of it like a period. So Jesus died at a point in time once for all. He was buried. The verb tense is an eras tense, He was buried one time. But when we get to the resurrection on the third day He rose from the dead, it shifts into what is called the imperfect tense, which is the idea that this is something that happened in the past but the fruit of it, the effect of it, goes on into the present. And that of course is the whole case he is going to make, is Jesus’ conquering death has relevance to us today and into the future, and the glamour of the verb tense certainly gives us that indication. I want to skip down then to verse 12 and pick up the question:

Now if Christ is preached that He has been from the dead, how did some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised, and if Christ has not been raised then our preaching is vain and your faith also is vain. (Corinthians 15:12-14)

You can hear there the argument that Paul is making, where he is tying the idea of the resurrection of Jesus with the resurrection of the dead. If it’s true that Jesus rose from the dead, then we have historical evidence to believe that there will be a literal, physical, bodily resurrection of the dead. But if Jesus is still in the grave, then we have no reason to believe there is anything after death. Those two ideas are closely tied together.

Now there are many people in our culture today that would say they believe in some sort of kind of a mystical life after death that is defined in many different ways. But they would find the idea that Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead to be silly, to the point they would even make fun of it. But when you stop and think about what a leap of faith they are taking, because while on one hand they are denying the resurrection of Jesus, on the other hand they are forming this opinion of life after death purely on the basis of their opinion. They have no basis to believe that, they have nothing other than this quantum leap of faith we just think it’s true.

Now we as Christians would not take nearly that big of leap of faith, but rather we would root our belief in life after death to the physical, literal, historical resurrection of Jesus; and because we can go back historically and with great confidence, identify this did indeed happen. It is the basis by which we form our belief that there is indeed life after death. Now the way your English translation reads is: “Christ has been raised from the dead”. But the original Greek language doesn’t have the definite article, it doesn’t have the “**the**” in there. It reads like this: “that Christ raised from death”. And the same thing with people then, that there is a resurrection from death.

Now the Greeks would have read this and understood what's being said. It isn't just that Jesus himself rose from his death. It is that Jesus conquered death itself. It goes far beyond just Jesus. He conquered the state of death. He conquered the enemy of death. He didn't just rise from the dead; He rose from death itself. And that is the basis by which we believe then that we will be given victory over the state of death on the basis of His resurrection. The theological logic goes like this: That when Jesus died on the cross, Jesus died for sin. It is sin that has brought forth death, therefore if Jesus conquered sin, then He conquered death. And because sin has been conquered, then Jesus conquered the state of death evidenced by his literal, physical, bodily resurrection from the dead. So because Jesus conquered the state of death on our behalf, then we have reason to believe that we shall experience victory from the state of death ourselves on the basis of His salvation. That's the logic of the text here. He says:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Jesus is still in the grave and if Jesus is still in the grave, then our preaching is vain. (1 Corinthians 15:13-14)

That word vain means it's empty, it's hollow, it is worthless. Now that's an interesting statement to think about in our culture today. Under the umbrella of preaching in churches, under the broadest umbrella of Christian churches, there's a lot of preaching going on. Some of it is highly political. Some of it is highly psychologized. Some of it is self-help. Some of it is just feel better, be the real you. But at the end of the day what's being said is that if preaching at it's core does not preach the life changing power of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, it is not Christian preaching and it has no power. The only power in preaching is if at the core it is based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Not self-help, not feel better about yourself, not be a better you, but the life changing power of Jesus. It goes on to say that your faith is in vain if Jesus is still in the grave. If Jesus is still in the grave, your faith is really just a pitiful attempt to feel better about life.

In our day and age, there are many people that promote the idea of faith in faith. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something. And it is very popular today to take something out of all the different religions, put it in the blender, and mix it up and call it your deal. And you have your deal and somebody else has their deal. As long as you believe something, then that's all that matters. Paul would completely disagree with that. What he is saying is if at the core of your faith is not the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, your faith is worthless. It's empty, it has no power, it's just wishful thinking. It is just merely faith in faith. He goes on:

Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God because we testified against God that he raised Christ whom he did not raise if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless, you're still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15: 15-19)

He goes on to say: if there is no resurrection of the dead then Jesus is still in grave and if Jesus is still in the grave, then we are liars. We're deceivers. We've told people stuff about God that just simply isn't true. We've said that God's a God of grace and God's a God of mercy and God has provided us salvation, but we've made it all up. We are misrepresenting God. We are deceivers, the worst kind of deceivers. He says if Jesus is still in the grave, then your faith is worthless, you're still in your sins. It was nice to believe that Jesus somehow did this for you and you could have relief from your guilt and

know that your sins are forgiven and have an opportunity to stand before God without the condemnation of your sin, but if Jesus is still in the grave, nice try.

But it's not true. You are still in your sins, therefore you are condemned and you stand condemned before God. Welcome back to your guilt. Not only that, those who have fallen asleep in Jesus have actually perished. It may have made you feel better when you stood at that graveside and believed there's got to be something more and I'll see my loved one again, but if Jesus is still in the grave, the reality of it is they have perished. Gone forever. No hope.

When the Bible talks about fallen asleep, it's always in reference to believers, always in reference to those who have trusted Christ as Savior. And what falls asleep is not the soul, what falls asleep is the body. It's the imagery that for the Christian the body goes in the grave. It's like a sleep state, but eventually will be resurrected, will be awakened with the return of Christ. So it's this imagery that asleep but one day to be awakened, versus the unbeliever who never really awakens from this state of death and doesn't experience the resurrection power of Jesus. And we will talk more about that next week.

Finally he says: If all we have is this life and if religion for us was just some way to feel better about the stuff of this of this life, we are a sad, pitiful people. Sigmund Freud and many others through the years have sought to make the case that religion is really just our attempt to find some way to deal with the stuff of life to make us feel better to get through the hard times. What Paul is saying is if Jesus is still in the grave and this life is all there is, then we are just a pitiful bunch, a weak, pitiful, sad, deceived, sinful bunch.

Isn't it interesting that Paul lays this all out, not only for the Corinthian believers but for all of his opponents to read. Basically what he is saying to his opponents, to his enemies; we know in the first century there were many, many, many who wanted nothing more than to stop the movement of Christianity, and while there in a back room trying to figure out how do we do that, Paul tells them. I'm going to tell you right now this is the jugular. It's the resurrection of Jesus, show me the bones and it all comes crashing down. This is roughly 17 years after the resurrection. Well within the lifetime of anyone who witnessed the event and Paul is putting it on the line and saying, in case you didn't know it, the Christian jugular is the resurrection. Disprove that and we've got nothing, and he's putting it in writing.

Have you ever seen that commercial on TV with the guy who is selling a product that deals with identity theft and on the side of his van he's got his social security number, and he is standing on the street corner with the bullhorn and he's calling it out. And the statement he's trying to make is his product is so safe, that he's putting his social security number on the side of the van and saying to people who steal identities, give it your best shot because you can't do it. And you have to admit that's pretty impressive. That's a guy that believes in his product. That's pretty much what Paul is doing. Paul is putting in writing, if you want to stop Christianity I'm going to tell you right now the jugular is the resurrection of Jesus. And if you can prove that Jesus is still in the grave, I'll tell you right now we got nothing. We'll close up shop and we'll go home.

Even though we know in the first century, there were many, many, many opponents to Christianity, rather than Christianity folding, it flourished. Paul had seen the resurrected Jesus and did not hesitate to say that is the basis upon which we stand. It's also interesting when you go back and read the creed that the creed identifies witnesses to the resurrection by name, identifies over 500 at one time, and then

he says some have died, but most of them are still alive, clearly implying if you don't believe me, talk to them. And again the evidence was overwhelming to these people. Well that's clearly what Paul believes and identifies that then in verse 20:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15: 20-22)

Because Jesus rose from the dead, we have every reason to believe that there is a literal, physical, bodily resurrection from the dead to those who believe. He conquered sin, therefore he conquered the state of death, therefore he offers that to those who believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. When the text says he is the firstfruit, they are taking an Old Testament or an Old Covenant concept. In this case identifying Jesus was the down payment, Jesus was the pledge, and He was the promise of more like that to come. What is being said in that is absolute evidence from scripture that we will not be a disembodied spirit that floats around the universe. We will not be reincarnated back into something else. We will not be assimilated into the energy of the universe. But rather we will one day, at the coming of Jesus, be literally, physically, bodily resurrected like Jesus.

Now if we look at Jesus as the prototype, we see that Jesus in His resurrected state was the same, but different. That clears it right up, doesn't it? But He was the same in the sense that He could talk with His disciples. He could sit down and eat with His disciples. He could walk with them. He could interact with them, and to some degree they recognized Him. He still had the scars of the nails in His hands and His side. But on the other hand, they struggled to recognize Him for some reason. On the other hand, He walked through walls, so He was the same, but different. But it is as close as we get to understanding what we will be like someday in our resurrected state and we will talk about that a little bit more next week.

But the fact is the Bible is very clear on that idea. We sing songs like "I'll Fly Away" that we will end with this morning and the video about "Soul Ride", but it's very important that we understand that we don't leave our body behind and go on to some kind of a mysterious, soulish existence for eternity. There is an intermediate time period that we are going to talk about next week that's very hard to define. If you were to die tomorrow, I've no question that you would immediately go into the presence of Jesus, but in a state that's a little bit hard to define. It's kind of an intermediate state. Theologians struggle with what to call it. Randy Alcorn, in his book on Heaven, calls it an intermediate heaven. You're fine if you want to just call it heaven. But there is this sense in which we go into that intermediate state for a period of time until the return of Jesus and the resurrection occurs and we move from that state into our eternal state, which is a resurrected body that is literal, physical, probably more similar than different than what we understand today. We will absolutely know one another, we will absolutely enjoy one another. It will be paradise on earth.

There's also this thought that when we die, we kind of disappear and leave this old earth behind. We fly away. But we need to understand yes we do, but we come back, because at the end of the day, what happens is the new heaven and the new earth come together as one. And God redeems all of creation back as he intended. He restores paradise and life is lived out on this earth in a resurrected body in a perfected state. And in terms of creation I would suggest far more similar than different than what we see today. Only perfected. Clearly not floating around in some mystical heaven somewhere.

The reality is also because that is true, the moment Jesus rose from the dead, He began building His eternal kingdom. And His kingdom is being built here on earth. On earth He is building a heavenly kingdom. And He is building this heavenly kingdom on earth with citizens of heaven, which is every person who has trusted Jesus as Savior. Therefore you are now a citizen of heaven, living on earth, bringing a new heavenly value system and a new heavenly way of life to earth and we are beginning to build the kingdom today, that ultimately will be perfected in the new heaven and the new earth when we get to the end and the return of Christ. That's why Paul says at the end of this letter in verse 58:

Therefore my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15: 58)

What he is saying is because of what we believe to be true, that there is a resurrection of the dead, there is a better day coming, there is everything that we are going to talk about over the next several weeks that reminds us that we need to busy about building the eternal kingdom of heaven on earth today. That's the assignment. As citizens of heaven we are bringing heaven to earth and it's a glimpse, it's a glimpse of what is to come as a witness of the promise of God. Many people have the idea that their salvation is just a ticket to heaven. I can't wait to get off this earth and go home. I understand that but you have to be really careful with that. Our assignment is not to abandon this world, but as citizens of heaven to begin building a heavenly kingdom. Begin bringing God's value system to this earth as a glimpse of what is to come, as a glimpse of our hope of the future. That's why we are supposed to be busy abounding in the work of the Lord, not being distracted in the stuff of this world, but about the stuff that will last forever. And be busy about the kingdom and it doesn't matter what we do on a daily basis.

Yes, one day we are going to fly away, but we are coming back. We are coming back to experience creation that's been redeemed and perfected by the power of God. Because this is all true, then our preaching is not vain. It's not empty and hollow. It is filled with the power of Jesus. It is the power of God into salvation. Our faith is not in vain, it's not wishful thinking, it's not faith in faith. It's rooted in the life changing resurrection power of Jesus. Therefore it is life changing. Our faith is not worthless, you're not still in your sins. We have every reason to believe that Jesus, God in the flesh, died for your sins. He paid your penalty and it's not just wishful thinking to believe that you have been washed clean, your guilt has been dealt with. You have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and you stand clean before God because Jesus died for your sins.

When you stand next to that graveside when a loved one dies, you have every reason to believe if that person has trusted Jesus as Savior, you will be together again in the future. That you will walk hand in hand and side by side and you will enjoy eternity together knowing that person as you have known them on earth. That is not the final good-bye. And rather than being of all people most to be pitied, we are a people to be envied, because in God's goodness and grace, He has made His message known to us.

The only difference between us here this morning and those people out still walking in despair, is the grace and mercy of God. We're not smarter, we're not more clever, we haven't figured something out that they can't. It's just God in his goodness and grace has made His message known to us and because we have received it, we have hope. We have the promise that no matter what life throws our way, there is a day coming more glorious than we can even begin to imagine today.

If tomorrow someone finds the bones of Jesus in the grave, we've got nothing. And then life becomes a lottery and there's only a handful of people that live that draw a winning ticket. For everyone else, all we can say is I'm sorry. I'm sorry you get one shot at this and you drew a losing ticket. I'm sorry for your struggles, I'm sorry for your suffering, I'm sorry for your pain, I'm sorry it's not working out, but you drew a losing ticket and that's all I can say. I can't imagine a message with more despair. But because there are no bones in the grave, that no matter what you have experienced, no matter how much your pain, no matter how much your struggles, no matter how hard life has been. For some of you life just hasn't been easy. You need to recognize that this life is not all there is and there is coming a day more glorious, more wonderful, more of everything you ever wanted life to be than you can even image today, and it's promised through the resurrection of Jesus. Our belief in life after death is not just some wild opinion based on nothing. It's rooted in the historical, literal, physical resurrection of Jesus and on that basis, we have every reason for hope. There is a better day coming. That is the hope we have in the resurrected Jesus.

Our Father we are thankful this morning that Jesus died for our sins, that He was buried, but on the third day rose again, not only conquering His own death, but conquering death, because sin once and for all had been paid for. And because of the literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, we have every reason to believe that we too one day will be resurrected. Lord I pray that we would understand this to the point that we would be busy about building the kingdom. That we would be busy about your work, understanding our assignment is to give people a glimpse of the heaven to come as citizens of heaven live out their new lives in Jesus on this earth. Lord I pray this morning that we would walk away from this place with a renewed sense of hope no matter what we are going through, no matter how difficult the pain, no matter how deep the struggle. We have every reason for a glorious hope. Lord we pray this in Jesus name.

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March 29/30, 2008

Study Questions
Life After Death Series
Is there Life after Death?
I Corinthians 15:1-34
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. In what ways in our culture do you see an interest or curiosity concerning what happens after you die?
2. What do you think most people base their opinions or thoughts concerning life after death on? Are those reliable sources?
3. Is life after death just something we should worry about when the time comes or does it have relevance to how we live our lives today? Be specific.

Bible Study

1. Review the case for the historical resurrection of Jesus as presented Easter weekend. Based on historical fact, is it a greater leap of faith to believe or deny the resurrection of Jesus?
2. Read I Corinthians 15:1-7. Verses 3-7 are considered the earliest Christian Church creed we have. Why is it important to know what the early Church believed concerning the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus?
3. Read I Corinthians 15:12-19. What is the relationship between believing in a resurrection of the dead for those who believe and the resurrection of Jesus?

There are those who deny the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus (to the point of mocking such a belief) yet they themselves hold some strange view of life after death. If Jesus did not conquer death, then what is the basis for life after death and how great of a leap of faith is it to believe such a notion versus what we as Christians believe based on the historical resurrection of Jesus?

4. If someone discovers the bones of Jesus in a grave tomorrow, what is the consequence to our Christian faith according to Paul in I Corinthians 15?

This book was written around A.D. 50 (roughly 17 years after the resurrection of Jesus). Wasn't Paul giving the opponents of Christianity the recipe for how to stop the movement—just disprove the resurrection?

What does that tell us about his confidence in the historical reliability of the resurrection (see verse 6)?

5. Read I Corinthians 15:20-28. Notice Jesus is the “first fruit” meaning He is the first of what is to come. In other words, His physical, literal bodily resurrection is the prototype of what is to come for believers. Notice too that it is yet to come, even for those who have already died (see verse 23). How does challenge the notion that we are disembodied souls floating around somewhere?

Note: This text teaches that those who believe the Gospel will be resurrected to new, literal, physical bodies like Jesus. Between now and that resurrection day, believers that die are present with Jesus in some “intermediate” state awaiting the great day of that resurrection that will define eternity.

6. Because the resurrection is true, what is true concerning our faith, preaching, forgiveness and hope according to I Corinthians 15:12-19?
7. Read I Corinthians 15:58. What is the practical response to this great promise and hope of a resurrection?

Application

1. What is the basis of our belief in a resurrection of the dead for those who believe? Is it merely wishful thinking or it does it have a basis in historical fact?
2. According to I Corinthians 15:58 this truth should dramatically affect how we live today. List five practical ways this truth should affect your life today.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.