

SERIES: Life After Death

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“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've 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's 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'll see their loved one again. But based on what?

I mean, 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're 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, turn with us to First Corinthians Chapter 15. I have no doubt we're going to raise more questions than we're going to answer. We're not going to try and dump the whole load and we're going to try to stay focused on our subject 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's the author of the letter to the Corinthians; it's probably written about AD 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?" (*NASB, 1 Cor. 15:12)

The idea of a *resurrection of the dead* probably has two parts to it because there were 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 to 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 preached 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 preached to you unless you believed in vain." (Vs.1-2)

So Paul opens up the letter with a reminder of the message upon which they stand. It's a creed that we'll 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's the message upon which they're 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 two he's got their attention.

Verse three,

"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 12 after that, he appeared to more than 500 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." (Vs. 3-7)

Paul is referring to what we believe to be the earliest creed of the New Testament Church. 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, it 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 Three, 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 a number of witnesses, including over 500 people in one citing 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.

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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.

Historians say it takes at least four, probably more like 500 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 eye witnesses 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's 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's very specific language that identifies the passing on and the receiving of a creed.

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 and the Aramaic again would tell us this was very early and helps us date this particular creed.

One other interesting note that relates to the grammar of what's being said here, when he says, Jesus *died for our sins*, the verb tense is what we call an Aris 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 Aris 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's of course the whole case he's going to make, is Jesus conquering death has relevance to us today and into the future. And the grammar 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 raised from the dead, how do 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.” (Vs. 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's 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 that 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 a 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*. 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 its 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's 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's 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.

Arnie: So Bryan, some people just can't accept the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet they make up whatever they want to believe about the afterlife. Why do they do that?

Bryan: I think there's probably lots of reasons. You know, as a pastor, I do a lot of funerals and there's a lot of people that give it no thought until a loved one dies and then suddenly they're convinced there is life after death, and they'll see them again. I think people choose views that are faddish, that are popular, that feels good to them, but honestly, they're just fabricated out of their own imagination. Those people may say that's equally true of Christians, to which we would say that's not true. We route our belief in life after death to the historical event of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead. So, we actually believe what we believe based on our belief in a historical event.

Cara: Death is real. We know this. I think the older we get, the more sobering that becomes. We know more people that pass away. It's heartbreaking. So what do we need to remember when we lose a loved one who trusted in Christ?

Bryan: Yeah, so death is very painful. I help people through that all the time as a pastor. And the reminder for believers is the story's not over. It doesn't end here. Death doesn't win. Jesus wins. And this is a temporary break in the story, but the best is yet to come. And we're thankful that the hope of the Gospel is the best days are yet to come. But I think it's also helpful to think about, so we live in America and one of the things that we try to do is create Heaven on Earth. So death is like the bully that kicks in the door and destroys that dream. A lot of Christians down through history, including Christians in the world today, life is really hard. They suffer. And death is viewed differently because this life is painful and death for them is this transition into the hope of the Gospel. So, part of what makes it so painful for us sometimes is we're trying to create Heaven on Earth and death is that constant reminder this isn't Heaven yet.

Arnie: So Bryan, how do we comfort unbelievers who are facing the pain and loss of death?

Bryan: Well, it's very delicate. I don't think in their hour of grieving is necessarily the time when it's necessary to correct their theology. Listening, asking questions, showing compassion and kindness, but also very carefully presenting the Gospel. So as a pastor, I've done a lot of funerals for people that probably weren't believers - presented the Gospel, and friends and family members come to Christ. And you would think part of that in coming to Christ, is the realization their loved one is lost. But yet God in His grace gives them great comfort in all of that. And you have to trust God with that, that he is faithful to honor His word, even when that doesn't make complete sense to us.

Arnie: So we have a lot to look forward to after our earthly death. But you gave us something to think about for where we are today as well.

Bryan: Yeah. So we can't just think of Salvation as a ticket to Heaven, and I'm waiting to get out of here. You know, so, Paul says, to live is Christ, to die is gain. So once there's clarity on what matters and what lasts forever gives us a sense of mission. There's an urgency because the days are limited and Jesus is coming back. But there's a lot to do before Jesus returns.

Cara: So if I'm describing my purpose then as a movie plot, I'm a resident alien of the planet Earth, placed on a task force, and I have my own special assignment to perform on this task force. And it has a deadline.

Bryan: Yeah. So you're a citizen of Heaven. Peter says you are a resident alien, but you're living on Earth and your assignment is to give people a glimpse today of the world come. So you think about whatever value system would be appropriate in the new Heaven, the new Earth. And that's really what we're trying to create here. And now at least create a glimpse of that as part of our witness, and because Christ is returning, there's an urgency to that.

Bryan: You know, when Paul talks about Communion in First Corinthians 11, he ends that by saying, *do this until he comes*. It's a part of Communion that's often missed is He's coming back. The days are limited. There's an urgency and we need to be about the business of The Kingdom.