

# I Believe in the Resurrection

By Brad Allison on 4/16/2006

Scripture Reference *1 Corinthians 15:1-11*

The best-known chapter in the entire Bible on the resurrection of Jesus doesn't start out as a treatise on the resurrection. Rather, it begins as a discussion on the topic of believing the gospel. Paul reminds them that he had preached the gospel to them, and they had received it and were standing on it. But then he adds these intriguing and troubling words: "unless you believed in vain" (v. 2). To believe in vain means to depend on something that has no basis in fact. It's one thing for parents to teach their children that the tooth fairy leaves a couple of dollars under their pillow at night. But if that same parent were to get into deep financial trouble and expect the tooth fairy to leave \$50,000 under his or her pillow one night, that would be a vain, empty faith. It has no basis in fact.

So the question for us this morning is this: Is your faith an empty faith? To ask it differently, would it make any difference to your faith if the bones of Jesus were discovered somewhere? On Good Friday of 1987, *The Washington Post* asked a Christian theologian that very question. She replied, "If the bones of Jesus Christ were found tomorrow, it would make no great difference to me. I would go on going to church as would the majority of Christians." According to Paul, that's a vain faith. Did you notice the four elements he includes in his summary of the gospel? Are these the same four elements you would include if a friend asked you, "What is the gospel of Jesus all about?" Paul says it's first of all about the death of Jesus. Most evangelicals stop there in their understanding of the gospel. Paul goes further and adds that it is also about the fact that Jesus was buried. He really did die, as opposed to going into some type of coma. A real resurrection requires a real death. Third, Jesus was raised from the dead, and finally he appeared in his resurrected body to hundreds of people. Believing in the resurrection is absolutely essential to a true faith. Paul says that everything both in this life and in the life to come hinges on whether or not a person has a true faith. He says that it is by believing this gospel that his readers "are being saved." So if everything depends on having a true faith instead of an empty faith, what does this passage teach us about a true faith? Notice the following three truths about true faith.

## I. It Is a Fact-Based Faith

True faith believes in these historical facts of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and appearances. It is this last fact that is most interesting for our purposes. Paul says that part of the gospel is that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter and the twelve and to five-hundred disciples. Let me point out that Paul wrote these words only about 25 years after these actual appearances. And as Paul points out, many of these witnesses were still alive. That is highly significant because Paul was stating not just a fact, but a verifiable fact as the cornerstone of Christianity. And if something is verifiable, that means that it can be either verifiably true or verifiably false. Once it became evident that Christianity was based on the fact of Jesus' resurrection, all an enemy of Christianity would have had to do to destroy the faith would be to question these witnesses and debunk their story. Don't you think some of them probably tried? I can imagine people asking questions of these witnesses in an attempt to prove false the Christian claim of Jesus' resurrection.

Illustration: Back in 1998, there was a Taiwanese sect that predicted that God was going to appear on television immediately at 12:01 a.m. on Wednesday, March 25. They had moved into a suburb of Dallas and had claimed that God would appear on channel 18 of any television set in the country. Needless to say, this new religion has not caught on throughout our country. If you wanted to start a religion, it would be wise not to begin with

such a clearly verifiable fact, unless it was true. As many enemies as it had, Christianity would never have survived past the first century if it had made a verifiable claim such as the resurrection of Jesus and Jesus in fact had not been raised from the dead.

The Anglican New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, has written and debated extensively on the resurrection of Jesus. He describes one of the modern objections to the resurrection like this. Modern people say that resurrection accounts like this reflect a pre-scientific worldview. Our worldview, on the other hand, just doesn't allow for things like dead people being brought back to life. But in the first century, this argument goes, people commonly believed in such things. So the apostles were just expressing common ideas of their day when they spoke about Jesus being raised from the dead. But Wright points out how this view doesn't fit with the New Testament account of things. The truth is that Jesus' resurrection was just as foreign an idea to those with a first century worldview as it is to us today. The apostles had the same worldview. They were not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. Consider, for example, the fact that Jesus repeatedly predicted his resurrection on the third day after dying. I would like to think that if I had been one of his followers, I would at least have been at his tomb on the third day just to see if it was going to happen. But not one of them came and waited. Furthermore, when Jesus finally did appear to them after his resurrection, they didn't believe it was him. A resurrection was just as foreign to their worldview as to our own. That means, as Paul says here, that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then the apostles are evil men, guilty of knowingly misrepresenting God, and in the process, leading many astray with a hope of the future that they know not to be true.

Let's pause for an application before moving on. The application is this: Don't attempt to tame the resurrection. What do I mean by trying to tame the resurrection? I mean that we think of Jesus as one who came just to give us good advice or to make us feel good about ourselves. The resurrection of Jesus is a "go-for-broke" claim. Paul points that out later in this chapter when he imagines the results if Jesus had not been raised from the dead. Paul says that if the body of Jesus were to be discovered, then all the apostles will have been proved to be liars. They are witnessing to something they know not to be true. Also, he says, Christians are to be pitied, because they are basing everything on a lie. If it were to be shown clearly that Jesus was not actually raised from the dead, do you know what I would do? I would quit my job as a pastor. I would tell all of you that I think we ought to close down our church. We would return all the Building Fund money to those who gave it and tell you to have a good time with it. I would further recommend that you completely ignore everything Jesus said. He claimed that he would be raised from the dead, and he was wrong. If he was wrong about that, then he's not who he claimed to be. He's a fraud. So don't dare put the resurrection of Jesus in that category of religious truth that makes me feel good but has nothing to do with real truth. Either Jesus' resurrection was a real fact, in which case he is our God to whom we give all honor and worship, or he was a fraud. There is no room for middle ground.

## II. It Is an Object-Centered Faith

There is a second important truth we gain from Paul's summary of the gospel as being centered on these four facts of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and resurrection appearances. Paul's fact-centered view of faith means that the object of our faith is more important than the amount of faith. Paul's focus is on the object of our faith, what we believe, rather than on the amount of our faith. Paul's view of faith is at odds with what is taught by so many today, who have faith in faith. The false idea this combats is that if a person just believes hard enough, anything is possible. In response to this idea of faith in faith, it needs to be pointed out that there is such a thing as misplaced faith. I can believe as hard as I want that the tooth fairy is going to bring me \$50,000, but it's just not going to happen. On the other hand, if the object of my faith is solid and true, then just a little faith will work.

Illustration: The perfect illustration of this is the man who approached the frozen river at the place where crossings were made. In the warmer months, a ferry was there to take people across. But when the river was frozen, there was no need of the ferry because people could walk across on the ice. A man approached the frozen river one day, but he wasn't at all confident that the ice would hold him up. There had been some warmer days recently, and he worried that it had thinned enough to be too weak to bear his weight. But he had to cross, so he eased one foot onto the ice and gradually transferred his weight to the ice while remaining close to the shore. He was very nervous, and he thought that if he spread his weight as wide as possible, it would help him get across the frozen river without breaking the ice. So he got down on all fours and began crossing in that manner. When he was in the middle of the river, he heard the approach of a large wagon, fully loaded and drawn by four horses. The wagon approached and went immediately onto the ice and crossed the river with no problem, in the process passing the fearful man who was crouched on all fours in the middle of the river.

There are two very important questions posed by that story. First, which man was saved by the thickness of the ice, the man on foot or the one driving the wagon? The answer, of course, is that both men were saved, and the reason had nothing to do with the strength of their faith and everything to do with the strength of the ice, which was the object of their faith. The man on foot had very little faith, and as a result was filled with fear. But both were saved from a cold swim by the thickness of the ice. The second question is also important. What is the minimum level of faith necessary? In the story of the river crossing, the minimum necessary is that a person had to leave the bank and entrust themselves only to the ice. In a word, they had to trust the ice so that if it failed them, they had no recourse. So strong faith is not necessary, but exclusive faith is. That's what Paul means when he says that he has preached the gospel, "which you received, in which you stand" (v. 1). It is not enough to receive it in the mind; one must stand in it, which refers to trust. So saving faith doesn't have to be strong in order to save, but it has to be focused on Jesus and trust him exclusively. To be saved requires a cessation from all other hope for deliverance than in Jesus. It has no plan B. This brings us to our next point.

### III. It Is a Life-Changing Faith

Paul remembers back to his first encounter with the resurrected Jesus. It happened when he was on his way to Damascus, Syria for the purpose of persecuting Christians. He was changed forever by that encounter. The one who had been the church's chief persecutor became its most hard-working apostle. Whenever we believe the gospel, our lives are changed for the better. But this change doesn't happen by our efforts, but by the grace of God. Paul was clear on this. He said, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (v. 10). True faith rests in God's grace for the changes needed in our lives. And God, who has all power, transforms sinners into saints. He delights in taking the hardest cases sometimes, as he did with Paul.

Several of us went on a prayer walk through our neighborhood this past Thursday night. One of those in my group prayed that God, by his grace, would take the most obnoxious neighbor and change him into a follower of Christ who gives to others rather than bothering others. That was Paul's testimony. He was that obnoxious neighbor. So our faith needs to rest in God's power to change us. Our biggest need is to rest. In his book, *Homesick for Eden*, Gary Moon tells of a woman he was counseling who was having a hard time believing that God loved her.

“Diane, I want you to imagine something. I want you to imagine that your son, David—he’s four, right—notices, from observing his parents, that money is something pretty important. He sees that it is used to pay bills, and buy groceries, and that, amazingly, it can even be exchanged for ice cream. It dawns on him that if he can earn some of this valuable stuff, well, he’ll be a better son and make you and his dad happy.

So, David gets up early one morning and toddles off to the local sewing plant. He applies for a job there. The manager tells David that there isn’t much a four-year-old can do. But, being a shrewd manager with an eye for the bottom line, he tells David that if he will walk around and pick up scraps of cloth and put them in the trash, he’ll give him ‘a big shiny’ piece of money—25 cents, for eight hours work in a hot sewing plant.

David is elated that he has a job and that he can contribute to the family. He works all day. At the end of the day he walks home, dragging his tired feet. He comes up to you, and with a sweat and dirt streaked hand he holds out a quarter and says, “Here you are, mommy, I hope this will make you love me better.” You are, of course, in a state of shock. You have missed your son all day. You don’t know what is happening. And, you surely don’t need his quarter. But David will not be reasoned with.

The next day he gets up before dawn. He has decided that if one quarter is good, two are better. He walks back to the mill and asks the manager if he can start working two shifts. He quickly agrees.

For the next few weeks David works 16 hours a day at the sewing plant. And each day he drags himself home, face dirty and clothes wet from sweat, and says with a tired whisper, “here’s two more monies. I hope you love me for them. I’m really trying to be a good boy.”

“So, Diane, what do you think?”

“I think that is the worst story I have ever heard! I think I want to cry.” She already was.

“Well,” I went on, trying to seem innocent, “how could he have made you happy?”

“He could hear what I was trying to say to him! He could quit that stupid job that I never asked him to do and go out in the back yard and laugh and play like a kid!”

## CONCLUSION:

So the application is simple: True faith means that you quit your job at the sewing plant and go home to your Father and play. Jesus really was raised from the dead. That’s not just some feel good religious truth. It really happened. I invite you to trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead and be transformed by God’s grace. There is an old story about a tightrope walker names Blondin who accomplished the amazing feat of crossing a portion of Niagara Falls on a tightrope. It is reported that on one occasion, after such a crossing, he approached the crowd and asked them if they believed he could accomplish the same thing while carrying someone else. Almost all believed that he could. But then he asked for a volunteer, and no one was willing. There many willing to concede his ability, but no one willing to trust his ability. To believe in Jesus goes beyond conceding that he died and rose again, all the way to trusting.