

Study 24. 1 Cor 15:12-34

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Big idea: our future makes us fearless, because nothing can break us in a way that God won't fix

Introduction

Would you rather know the exact date of your death or the exact way you will die?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

- Paul's logic can be a little tricky to follow here. For Paul, what is the fundamental problem with people believing there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead?

It seems that some of the Corinthians rejected (perhaps on philosophical grounds) the whole idea of a resurrection of the dead, favouring a more "sophisticated" Christianity, which didn't involve a body walking out of his tomb. This may be what is behind Paul's warning that "bad company corrupts good character" (verse 33): i.e. don't be led astray by people who deny the resurrection!

- Either Christ "has been" raised or "has not been raised" - but in either case it is not Christ but someone else who is actually *doing* the raising. Who? (I.e. who is the agent in these passive sentences?)
- Why would no resurrection mean we are still "in our sins"?

N.T. Wright puts it really well when he says: "For Paul the point of the resurrection is not simply that the creator god has done something remarkable for one solitary individual ... but that, in and through the resurrection, 'the present evil age' has been invaded by the 'age to come', the time of restoration, return, covenant renewal, and forgiveness." (N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, cited in Rosner and Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*). If Christ has not been raised, therefore, then Christ is a sham, Paul is a con-artist, and we have no right to claim any of the benefits of the resurrection kingdom. False hope is no hope at all.

- Is it important that Christ was raised in a physical body (as opposed to some sort of spiritual elevation to a higher place)?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

- In what way is Christ the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”?

“Firstfruits is an Old Testament idea - the first part harvested of a bigger crop, which gives hope that the rest of the harvest is coming and will presumably be of equal quality. It has interesting sacrificial overtones because these “firstfruits” were normally owed to God as a sacrifice expressing confidence in God (Exodus 23:19).

- What is the point of Paul’s comparison between Christ and Adam?

This links to the creation story in Genesis 1-3. Paul is highlighting our membership of either “team Adam” or “team Christ”; we are “in Christ”, or we are still “in Adam”; one or other of these men is our representative; which team we are on determines our destiny. What the two teams have in common is that a reality (death, in Adam’s case; resurrection in Jesus’ case) came through a human being. But they differ obviously in the desirability of that reality! See Romans 5:12-21, and also Rory Shiner’s excellent books *One Forever* and *Raised Forever*.

- How does Christ defeat the last enemy of death?

Some of the details in this passage may raise questions about the end times. Paul here doesn’t seem to envisage a clear chronology of events to come (unlike the way that some people find a clear timeline in Revelation 20). The point is bigger than mere chronology: a future is coming when God in Christ will put the world the right way up again. See also Psalms 8 and 110.

Application / Implications

If your group is up for it, you could centre the Bible study around this exercise (i.e. you could potentially skip some of the observation questions and build them into this exercise, particularly if you stop along the way to talk about interesting or passages). If they are not into tables, feel free to skip to the questions below.

Alternate realities exercise: In this passage Paul puts things in the negative - but under the surface there is a much more positive reality which Paul believes is actually true.

Try filling in this table as a group on a whiteboard or big piece of paper.

First find statements in the passage belonging to the negative version of reality and write each element in the left column. Then try to find or work out the corresponding positive statement in the right.

Alternative Reality A	Alternative Reality B
If...	If...
<i>Christ is not raised,</i>	<i>Christ has been raised</i>
<i>There is no resurrection of the dead</i>	
<i>Our faith is useless</i>	
<i>Etc...</i>	

Read 1 Corinthians 15:29-34. Paul thinks that his life choices are madness if the dead are not raised.

- What parts of your life would be madness if Alternative Reality A is true?
- Are Christians really to be “pitied more than all others” if Alternative Reality A is true (i.e. if there is no resurrection)? Surely there is some benefit in living a good life here and now?
- How would you live differently if you truly weren’t afraid of death?
- When do you find it hardest to believe that the dead will really be raised? What might help us to hope more certainly for the resurrection?

This section contains a confusing phrase: “baptised for the dead”. This probably is referring to people who were particularly motivated to become Christians because of their concern for what happens after death.

Prayer ideas

- Pray in thanks and praise that Christ was indeed raised from the dead. You might also like to try opening up a time when people in the group can pray in short “God you...” sentences. E.g. “God you are the one who raises dead people to life!”.