

1 Corinthians 15:1-20  
Hope Rooted in History  
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April 15, 2001  
Easter Sunday

Which is better? A strong faith in an unworthy object or a weak faith in a worthy object? Let me give you an example of each.[1]

An inventor stands perched on the roof of a barn. Strapped to his arms and across his back is the flying contraption he has made out of wood, wire and canvas. He stands ready to jump off of the barn and take flight. He strongly and sincerely believes that he has conquered the age-old problem of flight. Down on the ground, he has arranged for a cameraman to record this momentous event for posterity. He waves to the cameraman and prepares to jump off the roof.

One hundred years later, an elderly lady straps herself into the seat of a jumbo jet. Her hands are shaking as she does so. She has never flown before. She truly fears that all on board will die. She is tense with anxiety. The plane taxis down the runway and positions itself for take off.

Now I want you to ask yourself two questions: Which of these two had the most faith? and Which of these two had a successful flight? Of course, the inventor had the most faith, and the elderly lady had the safe flight.

What was the key to the success of the flight? Was it the amount of faith, the strength of faith? No, the key was the faithfulness of the object of faith. The key was the worthiness and the reliability of that which was believed.

The inventor put **great faith** in a **faithless** flying machine. The elderly woman put **a little faith** - just barely enough to commit herself to going on the flight - **a little faith** in a **faithful** flying machine. It is better to have a little faith in a faithful object than a lot of faith in a faithless object.

Many people today put a lot of faith in a faithless object. There are many examples, but I will address only one, and that is the strong faith many people today have that life originally arose long ago through mere chance or accident apart from any personal Creator. The more we learn about the incredible complexity of even the most primitive life, the more and more difficult that is to believe.

Would it mean anything to you if I told you that the odds of something happening were one in ten to the power of sixty? Ten to the power of sixty is a one with sixty zeros after it. That number is so big and those odds are so small that they probably don't mean anything to you. Maybe this will help. Physicist Paul David equated the odds of one chance in 10 to the 60th power as the odds of hitting a one inch target with an unaimed rifle bullet from a distance of 20 billion light years. Twenty billion light years is the distance light travels in 20 billion years, and light travels at 186,000 miles per second. The distance to the moon is 1.28 light seconds. The distance to the sun is 500 light seconds.

The distance to the nearest star is 4.3 light years. And one chance out of ten to the power of 60 is about the likelihood of hitting a one inch target 20 billion light years away with an unaimed rifle bullet.

Wouldn't you agree that although hitting such a target from such a distance without even aiming is theoretically possible, yet it is, for all practical purposes, an impossibility? I think you would agree with that, but the number ten to the power of sixty is really not relevant to what I am saying. The odds against the accidental origin of life are far smaller than one out of ten to the power of sixty.

Let's say that you had a chemical mixture containing all the amino acids necessary for the formation of a living cell. And let us say that these amino acids randomly joined together chemically. Sir Fred Hoyle, an atheist and a Nobel prize winning astro-physicist, calculated that the odds of these randomly ordered amino acids being in a correct sequence to form a living cell are one out of ten to the power of 40,000. Ten to the power of 40,000 is a one with 40,000 zeros after it. Those are the odds against the amino acids randomly, accidentally appearing in the right sequence for one living cell. And that is without even considering all the other difficulties. These are the odds against overcoming just one of the many obstacles, the odds against the amino acids appearing in a correct sequence. Yet many people today strongly believe that life in all its complexity arose by mere chance.

Beloved, strong faith is not enough. Our faith must be in a faithful object. And today on this Easter morning, we remember

that Jesus is faithful. Our faith is no leap in the dark, no hope against hope, no flight of fantasy. Our faith is in Jesus Christ, and there is something unique about Jesus. Only Jesus can say,

"Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys of Hades and Death."

Revelation 1:18

Neither Charles Darwin nor Carl Sagan can say that. The Buddha can't say that. Mohammed can't say that. Joseph Smith can't say that. Only Jesus of Nazareth can say that with any credibility. Jesus rose from the dead, and this makes Christianity unique among all the religions and belief systems of the world.

We are today going to look at the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We are going to examine its reliability and its importance.

## I. The Reliability of Jesus' Resurrection from the Dead

How can we be confident that Jesus really rose from the dead some 2,000 years ago? Paul answers that question for us in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

The first and foremost reason we can be confident in the resurrection of Jesus is that it was according to the Scriptures. This is what Paul puts first and foremost in 1 Corinthians 15:

"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ..."

The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, and as such the Scriptures are our ultimate measure of truth. There is no higher authority. There is no higher measure of what is true and what is right. This is our first consideration in considering the validity of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The question, "Is it true to the Scriptures?" is our touchstone of truth.

Remember what Paul said about the Jews at Berea:

"These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."

If we want to know if something is true, our first and most important recourse is to search the Scriptures.

Look at what the resurrected Jesus said to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Luke 24:25-27

"Then He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."

Then later that very day Jesus appeared to the apostles at Jerusalem, and here is what He said to them:

Luke 24:44-45

"Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures."

In 1 Corinthians 15, the divine testimony of the Scriptures is purposely placed before all the apostolic testimonies. The Scriptures had said that this event would happen. The eye-witnesses then declared that it has indeed happened, just as the Scriptures had predicted.

First we have the divine testimony of Scripture, and then the apostolic testimonies and other eye-witnesses. Paul says that over 500 saw the risen Christ on one occasion. Paul wrote this about 20 years after Jesus' resurrection, and he says the majority of these 500 were still then alive. He is in effect saying to his original readers, You can ask these witnesses about this if you so desire.

This would be like today someone claiming that hundreds of witnesses had seen the resurrected Richard Nixon or Lady Diana or Elvis Presley. No one would believe such a claim because these deaths are recent enough that if hundreds of people saw these famous personalities risen from the dead, most of the witnesses should still be alive to tell about it. And where are all the witnesses? Paul was able to say with confidence that most of the witnesses to the risen Jesus were still then alive and available for confirmation.

And then there was the testimony of the empty tomb. Paul here mentions the burial of Jesus because the empty tomb also continued to bear testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. He had been buried in a tomb newly cut out of rock. No one had ever used it before. The cave entrance had been closed by a heavy round stone rolled into a groove cut in the rock before the opening. The stone door had been sealed with the seal of the Roman government and had been guarded by professional soldiers. Yet on the third day, the tomb was empty. And all the authorities whose great interest was to prove that Jesus had not risen were never able to produce the body.

There is also the psychological transformation of those who claimed to have seen the risen Christ. After His crucifixion, the disciples were scattered, afraid, dejected and disappointed. After witnessing the resurrected Jesus, these same apostles preached the message of Jesus boldly. Threats and persecutions unto death could not stop them. And there is no record of any of the witnesses to the resurrection ever retracting their testimony, even though many of them died a martyr's death. We have their unified and consistent witness sealed in their martyr's blood.

Because of the divine testimony and the apostolic witness, we can be confident in the resurrection of Jesus.

## II. The Importance of the Resurrection

### A. As It Relates to the Past and the Accomplishment of Our Salvation

Jesus had to rise from the dead if He was to be our Savior for at least two reasons. First, He had to rise from the dead to demonstrate that He had indeed paid for all our sins. Before Jesus died on the cross, He cried out, "It is finished!" He went to the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of His people. He then experienced the wrath of God poured out upon His soul. In His humanity, He experienced the loneliness of divine rejection as the heavenly Father turned away from Him when He the Savior became sin for us. At that moment, He cried out, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Then later He cried out, It is finished! The atoning work which Jesus came to accomplish was complete. Then Jesus died physically and gave up His human spirit. If Jesus had failed to pay for any of the sin burden He had taken upon Himself, then the grave would have held Him. For the wages of sin is death. By rising from the dead, Jesus demonstrated that His statement "It is finished" was true. He had indeed successfully atoned for every single sin He had taken responsibility for. His atoning work was complete.

Second, Jesus had to rise so He could administer the atoning work He had accomplished. He had to pour out His Holy Spirit to apply to the hearts of His people the saving work He had accomplished upon the cross. And He had to sit at the right hand of God the Father so he could intercede for His people and administer His kingdom. Jesus died to pay for our salvation, and He lives to see that that salvation is applied to our hearts and lives.

B. As It Relates to the Future and the Full Application of Our Salvation

The resurrection of Jesus is also important in regard to our future and the full application of our salvation. Ever since Adam's fall into sin, history has been characterized by death and decay.

I remember a short story I had to read in high school which looked at life from the perspective of atheistic materialism. The story acknowledged that a future was coming when all would be dead, when all would be forgotten, when the sun and the earth would be cold rocks hurtling through space, when humanity would not exist even as a memory, for no conscience personal being would be alive to remember

That is indeed the direction history appears to be going, but for one significant event, and that is the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus went against the downward flow of history into death and decay. Jesus did not experience a mere temporary resuscitation. He was resurrected with a gloriously transformed body free from all the effects of the curse which resulted from humanity's fall into sin. Jesus' resurrection body was the same flesh and blood body that suffered upon the cross, but it was raised to a new and glorious level of existence. And that resurrection body is our towering testimony as to what the future holds for the people of God. He rose from the grave as the first fruits of a mighty resurrection harvest.

Paul reminds us of how important the resurrection of Christ is. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul tells us that if He who died on the tree did not also rise from the tomb, then

"your faith is vain,"

"you are yet in your sins,"  
"they which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished,"  
"we are of all men the most pitiable."

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then our faith is a leap in the dark, a hope against hope, a flight of fantasy. If there were no reliable witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, our whole faith system would be on a level with that of those who believe, in spite of the overwhelming, astronomical odds against it, that life originally arose by mere chance.

There is a life and death importance to the resurrection of Jesus. We should be grateful that there is a reliability to the resurrection of Jesus that is worthy of its importance. We have the double witness of the divine testimony of Scripture and the eye-witness account of the apostles and others. What could be more sure?

Faith is worth no more than the object it is placed in. Pray that God will give you a living faith in the resurrected Jesus. I can't imagine a more precious gift.

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1. The idea for the flight illustration came from the article "Jumping Off the Barn" by Doug Wilson, found in the magazine **Credenda/Agenda**, Vol. 4, No. 6.