

Easter Sunday

The Great Reversal: How the Resurrection of Jesus Christ Changed Everything!

1 Corinthians 15:21-22

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²¹For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

The most famous cemetery in the United States is Arlington National Cemetery. The simple white stone markers of over 285,000 people, the rolling hills, and the numerous and famous monuments make Arlington a very special and sacred place.

But do you know how Arlington came to be the famous resting place for so many heroes in our country? Recently I was watching a documentary on the Civil War, and I learned that when there were too many dead bodies in Washington D.C., the Union commanders decided to confiscate a nearby property and use it as their new burial ground. However, the choice of this property had a significant back-story: It was the family property of Robert E. Lee, the famous Confederate general. So it was chosen not only for its prime location, but also because burying Union soldiers in Mrs. Lee's rose garden made a bit of a statement.

I found that to be a fascinating aspect of the story of the Civil War and our national cemetery. Knowing the "back-story" helps us understand things in new ways.

Today I'd like to talk with you about the "back-story" of Easter, probably the most significant Sunday that the church celebrates each year. It seems to be the one Sunday when churches are full and energy is high. But why? What is the back-story of Easter? What is so significant about this day?

The text that I just read is very brief, but it gives us a very important – an eternally important – truth about what lies beneath Easter. It tells us the story behind the story when it comes to Easter.

What this text is saying

We are only looking at two verses of a large and important letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a church in the city of Corinth, a thriving metropolitan, sea-port city on a major highway that connected the Roman world to Athens. Paul wrote this letter to an established body of believers, a church that had been planted during Paul's second missionary journey and one that he had personally pastored (see Acts 18).

The church in Corinth was an influential and significant ministry, but it was not without its share of challenges, problems, and issues. One of those problems related to the views of certain people about the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus and the implications for fellow believers who died. Some were questioning the legitimacy of the resurrection of Jesus and, therefore, the resurrection of those who had died. Paul saw these two issues – the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the believing dead – as absolutely linked. To deny one was to deny the other. And if there was no resurrection, then Christianity was a hopeless, shallow religion.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:12-14).

Clearly, the resurrection is important – even central – to the Christian faith. But verses 21-22 give us a clear contrast between Adam and Christ, between death and life. This is the back-story, and it is eternally important that we understand this.

As we read the text again, notice that there is a parallelism – two statements both beginning with the word “for” which contain a contrast:

*²¹For as by a man came death,
by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.
²²For as in Adam all die, so also
in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:21-22).*

On one side of the contrast ledger are the following words: “man, death, die, and Adam.” And on the other side of the ledger are another set of words: “man, resurrection, alive, and Christ.” The common denominator between these two statements is the word “man.” The first man, Adam, is associated with all that is bad, broken, and negative. The second man, Christ, is associated with what is good, whole, and hopeful.

So if we were to boil down the basic meaning of this text or explain it exegetically it would sound like this: There was a man named Adam whose actions introduced death into the world and through whom all people are now exposed to the reality of death. But there was another man named Jesus whose actions created a way to overcome the mess that Adam created – a way of life and resurrection. That’s the over-arching message of this text - two men and two paths. And it is all related to the resurrection.

What the resurrection is all about

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a central part of the plan and mission of God, and that is why Paul says that if he had not been raised, then our faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:14). The resurrection of Jesus is a spiritual marker – God is working out that plan. And what a plan it is!

The message of the Bible can be summarized in four key words: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Creation – The opening words of Genesis 1:1 read *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* Everything that exists owes its life to a creator God who made everything perfect. And for a time, Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, lived in the Garden of Eden enjoying uncompromised and innocent fellowship with God and with each other.

Fall – However, there was one command that Adam and Eve were required to keep. They were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But after being tempted by the devil, they directly disobeyed a known command of God and ate from this tree. The effect was cataclysmic. Sin entered the world, and its presence affected everything. The entire created order was compromised. Every aspect of the spiritual and physical world was impacted by the introduction of sin. There was separation from God, banishment from the garden, and the ultimate consequence of sin was death. Romans 6:23 summarizes this reality so well: *“For the wages of sin is death . . .”* The entire created world became an arena of rebellion and fell under the judgment of God. Romans 5:12 says: *“ . . . sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* The Fall was total and tragic and universal.

That is why our text in 1 Corinthians 15 says that *“by a man came death . . . and in Adam all die.”* The effects of the rebellion in the fall are so serious that if nothing ever changed, the world and all human beings would be under the eternal wrath and judgment of a holy God.

Remember the order that I talked about before? Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. I want to skip to the end before I talk about redemption.

Restoration – Where is this universe going? God’s aim, and his mission, are to restore what was broken by sin. His ultimate purpose is, for his own glory, to take back what has rebelled against him and to graciously restore his relationship with his wayward people. We hear about this gracious spiritual endgame in Revelation 21:

*³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.
⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. ⁵And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new (Rev. 21:3-5).*

In so many words, this amounts to a return to Eden, a restoration of a world that was broken and marred by sin. God is on a mission of restoration; that is what the Bible is all about. It is the story of restoration, but it doesn’t just happen; it comes through redemption.

Redemption – Let’s go back to our text in 1 Corinthians 15. Remember that it highlighted a contrast between the problem that Adam created and the solution that came through Christ. Adam brought death; Christ brought life. If God’s aim is the restoration of his people and this world, then the means by which he accomplished this goal is his son, Jesus Christ.

Since God is holy, all sin must be punished. To not punish sin at every level would be a violation of the holy justice that is implicit in what makes God who he is. A judge would be severely criticized and disbarred if he or she continually granted pardons because it would violate the undergirding and appropriate sense of justice. So too God cannot pretend that sin doesn't exist. The rebellion must be dealt with, punished, and atoned for.

Here is where we find what the Bible calls "good news," and it is central to the story of Easter. God's aim is to restore his creation and specifically his people, and Jesus is the means by which God can be both just and justifier; it is the means by which God can serve the demands of justice and also forgive sin.

The good news of the Bible is that Jesus, the fully divine son of God, became a human being. He lived a perfect life on the earth, he was free from the presence of sin, and he should have been free from the penalty of sin – death. Yet on Good Friday, Jesus was crucified. He willingly endured suffering and death, something that was completely undeserved. It was part of God's plan of redemption.

On the cross Jesus absorbed the wrath of a holy God as payment for the sin of fallen human beings. Jesus took our place. The second man, Jesus, experienced the spiritual penalty of the first man's (Adam's) rebellion so that redemption was possible. Jesus bore the punishment to make rebellious sinners righteous: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21)*. And because of the death of Jesus, those who by faith receive Christ as their savior are counted righteous and forgiven; Jesus' death becomes theirs. This divine exchange – Christ's death for my sin, his righteousness for my rebellion – is what makes the gospel "good news."

When a person receives Christ, he or she becomes a new creation – from the inside out. Those people are considered to be "in Christ," meaning that they share in everything that Jesus did and was. *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1)*. And the effect is a peace with God which will ultimately lead to the final restoration: *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1)*. Jesus made it possible for sinful people in a broken world to be restored initially and ultimately to their creator. That is what this weekend is all about.

Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. That is the mission and purpose of God. That is what the story-line, the message of the Bible, is all about. Redemption through Jesus made reconciliation with a holy God possible. John 1:12 says, *"but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* Redemption through Jesus made it possible to reverse the curse of sin.

But this good news is not just about the death of Jesus; it is also about his life. It was not enough for Jesus to have died. Redemption would not be complete and restoration would be a pipe-dream if he had not been raised from the dead. His resurrection is a vital part of this redemption story. In fact it is the moment when everything changed!

How the resurrection changed everything

The resurrection of Jesus is central to redemption because the biblical story of redemption is not just about making things better or rescuing people from a world of evil; it is the “remaking of creation, having dealt with evil that is defacing and distorting it.”¹ The resurrection of Jesus was redemptive, restorative, and revolutionary. It changed everything. That is the message of 1 Corinthians 15:21-22. Let me show you how the resurrection changed everything.

1. It confirmed the deity of Jesus

Prior to Jesus there had been numerous people who claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of God. However, rulers and governments would always, in the end, win by using the ultimate weapon of oppression: death. Jesus claims to be the Son of God – that he is divine. So if a Roman ruler at the behest of a corrupt Jewish court can kill the “Son of God,” then surely one would know that his claim to deity was a sham.

That is why the religious rulers were so fearful about the resurrection. They knew what would happen if people believed that Jesus had defeated death (see Matt. 27:64). There would be no limit to their hope since they would be following the one man who defeated the unconquerable foe of death. The religious rulers sound very much like figurative President Snow in *Hunger Games* when he says, “Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective; a lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine as long as it’s contained. So, contain it.”²

The affirmation of the deity of Jesus through his resurrection became the ultimate motivation for his followers and it struck great fear into the hearts of those who killed him.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

*“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
³⁵until I make your enemies your footstool.”’*

³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:32-36).

The resurrection confirmed that Jesus really is the Son of God.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, (New York, New York: Harper One, 2008), 97.

² Suzanne Collins, *Hunger Games* (New York, New York: Scholastic Press, 2008).

2. It affirmed the sufficiency of his death on the cross

Second, the resurrection affirmed that Jesus' death worked! The empty tomb verifies that his death was acceptable to God. A death on the cross with no resurrection would have meant failure; it would have been just another death.

But the resurrection makes a clear statement that his death was part of God's plan for restoration through justification (making people righteous). The apostle Paul said that Jesus was "*delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*" (Rom. 4:24-25).

A dead Jesus does not work. Without the resurrection, Jesus cannot be the embodiment of righteousness or the source of spiritual life (1 Cor. 1:30).³ The resurrection means that the cross works! Forgiveness is possible! Justification can be a reality! There is hope!

3. It announced the ultimate defeat of death

Death is the ultimate consequence of sin, the greatest foe of mankind, and the glaring declaration of the brokenness of the world. Death is not normal; it is an aberration of the worst kind brought about because of the penalty of sin.

The beauty of the coming restoration is what we hear in Revelation 21:4: "*and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more . . .*" The resurrection of Jesus announced that the defeat of death has begun. Death is a defeated enemy because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul speaks directly to death in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

*⁵⁵"O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?"*

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus defeated death!

4. It modeled eternal life for those "in Christ"

As Jesus walked on the earth in a resurrected and glorified body, he modeled what the future is for those who are "in Christ." In other words, what happened to him is what will happen to all those who put their faith and trust in him. This is what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 15:22 when he says "in Christ all shall be made alive." His resurrected body is a fulfillment of "on earth as it is in heaven."

³ John Murray, NICT – Romans, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959), 165.

The resurrection says “more to come!” That is why the Bible refers to Christ’s resurrection as being the first fruits. In the Bible, the first fruits were the early produce of the harvest, and they were a marker of what was to follow. And in the same way, Jesus’ resurrection is a harbinger of more resurrections to come. Many more will be raised to new life!

5. It created a partial fulfillment now

Finally, there is a spiritual sense to all this as well. The resurrection, and even the restoration, is something to anticipate in the future. Yet, at some level, it is experienced now. Here’s how Paul said it in Romans 6.

⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:9-11).

In other words, those who have received Christ are “alive to God” and “dead to sin.” Therefore, this day is not just about a future hope; it is also about a present freedom for life. Through receiving the death and resurrection of Jesus, a person is free to live! The old is gone; the new has come! Now!

Do you see how revolutionary the resurrection of Jesus Christ really was? Do you see how it fits into the overall plan of God to win back a world that has been wrecked by the presence of sin? Do you see the beauty of what a gracious and holy God has done here?

In Adam or In Christ?

The backstory of the resurrection is two very different positions. In fact, there are only two groups of people here today: those in Adam and those in Christ. To be in Adam simply means that you are a sinner, guilty, and deserving of death. Every person on the planet starts here. But the good news of Easter – the revolutionary news – is that Jesus made restoration, forgiveness, and eternal life possible.

So it really comes down to the question of which group you belong to. And it is our prayer that today would be the day when, in faith, you put your trust in Christ as your Savior and move from being in Adam to in Christ.

²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22).

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