

THE MOST DREADED “WHAT IF”—EVER!

Many of you know that my wife and I enjoy the Christmas classic “It’s a Wonderful Life.” For those of you familiar with the story-line, George Bailey’s Uncle Billy mishandles a bank deposit of \$8000 and inadvertently hands it over to Mr. Potter in a folded newspaper. George Bailey is beside himself with despair and contemplates taking his own life. He was spared from doing so when Clarence, a rather simple-minded angel, jumps off a bridge into the water first. Clarence’s reasoning was simple: “I knew if I were drowning you’d try to save me.” And that is exactly what happened—George jumped in to save the drowning angel.

While drying off in the tollhouse keeper’s shack, George and his angel Clarence have a conversation about life. During this conversation, George states: “I suppose it would have been better if I’d never been born at all.” Those of you familiar with the movie know what happens next—George is given the opportunity to go back in time and see what life would have been like **for others** if he had never been born.

George Bailey’s life was important—and affected many other lives. In fact, Clarence shows George how because he had not been born, his kid brother Harry died. And because Harry died as a boy and never became a fighter pilot as an adult, hundreds of men aboard a ship died during the war. So, what does a Christmas movie have to do with Resurrection Sunday?

The passage of Scripture we are going to look at this morning details for us a far more tragic situation than hundreds of lives being lost if one man had not been born. God through Paul gives us a glimpse of what life would be like **if Christ did not rise** from the dead. George Bailey’s life affected a lot of people, but no one except Jesus Christ affects the life of every single person that has ever been born. Please turn in your Bibles to I Corinthians 15:12-19.

Is it important to believe in the Resurrection? It most certainly is! It is also important to know **why** we believe in the Resurrection. Depending on how you count them, there are six or seven “what if’s” that would take place had Christ not risen from the dead. This morning we are just going to look at three:

- 1) The first is in v 17—If Christ be not raised, we have a worthless faith
- 2) The second is in v 18—If Christ be not raised, we have a hypothetical homecoming
- 3) The third is in v 19—If Christ be not raised, we have a miserable—instead of wonderful—life

Corresponds with 3 things we deem important—getting to heaven, seeing loved ones in heaven, and having a blessed life down here.

1. If Christ be not raised, we have a worthless faith

Notice again verse 17 “And if Christ be not raised your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.”

I chose the word “worthless” because “vain” in this verse means just that—“fruitless, useless, worthless.”

Most of us aren’t too thrilled to find out that something we have is “worthless,” are we? Maybe you found what you thought was a great buy on an antique so you bought it with the intent to resell it. You excitedly got home and looked on the internet to see what the “treasure” you had just bought was worth. Your excitement turned to disappointment, however, when you found out that what you had just bought was worth only half what you paid for it! Or maybe you had your car in the shop to get some work done on it and the mechanic told you it wasn’t worth fixing—a nice way of saying “this car is worthless!” Or imagine buying gold from Bedouins like some of the people I deployed with while we were in Saudi Arabia. The last thing they wanted to hear when they got home and had it appraised was—‘this stuff is worthless!’

A. The pronouncement made—your faith is worthless

“And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain [worthless]...”

Far worse than having a worthless antique...or car...or gold, is having a worthless **faith**. What does it mean to have worthless faith? It means to have a faith that doesn't accomplish anything. What should our faith accomplish? Paul does not leave us wondering and gives us the answer in the last half of the verse. If your faith is vain—useless and worthless—it means ye are “yet in your sins.”

The phrase “in your sins” is used only 4 times in the Bible—twice by Paul and twice by Jesus.

John 8:21 “Then said Jesus again unto them, I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die **in your sins**: whither I go, ye cannot come.”

John 8:24 “I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die **in your sins**: for if ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die **in your sins**.”

It should be obvious from these verses that to “die in your sins” is not a good thing. It means to die unforgiven and unpardoned. It means to spend eternity **in hell** instead of spending eternity with God in heaven. And to die in our sins is the same thing as being yet in our sins. That is our plight—that is our problem—if Christ be not raised.

B. The problem explained

So why would Christ dying for our sins—but **not** raising from the dead—not be enough to get us “out of” our sins and into a state of forgiveness? Because there would be no proof that Jesus was divine if He didn't raise from the dead!

Matthew 27:62-64 “Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, ⁶³Saying, Sir, we remember that **that deceiver** said, while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. ⁶⁴Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night, and steal Him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.”

The point I'm making is this—it was well-known that Jesus claimed He would rise from the dead on the third day. If He failed to do so, He would have been a deceiver—and consequently a sinner—and not the Son of God like He claimed. If He was a sinner, He could not die for **us**—He would be dying for His **own** sins. The result—we are yet in our sins and without a substitute—or hope.

2. If Christ be not raised, we have a hypothetical homecoming

Question: Who is in heaven? Jesus...angels...loved ones that **became** believers—that were born again—before they died...and infants and children who did not reach the age of accountability. Many of us have loved ones that we are looking forward to being reunited with—forever. That meeting...that homecoming...that reunion—is a myth—it is a fairytale—it is make-believe, however, if Christ did not rise from the dead. Notice how Paul says that in verse 18: “Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are **perished**.”

A. The pronouncement made—the dead in Christ are perished

Let's consider first that phrase “fallen asleep in Christ.” Paul is not talking about someone who is physically sleeping—he is talking about someone who is physically **dead**. Notice verse 6: “After that, He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen

asleep”—an obvious reference to them being dead. We see the same thing later; look at verses 51-52: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trump shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible...” (See also I Cor 11:30 and I Thess 4:13-18)

Maybe you remember Jesus saying the same thing about Lazarus being dead. **John 11:11-14** “These things said He: and after that He saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. ¹² Then said His disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. ¹³ Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that He had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.”

Two other things that are important to consider regarding how “sleep” is used this way.

1) Nowhere does it say that Jesus “slept” when His death is being referred to. Some who deny Christ’s resurrection suggest He was only asleep—it’s called the “swoon theory”—but the Bible is careful not to use the word “sleep” when referring to Christ’s death with the exception of possibly verse 20.

2) A second thing that is important to realize is that the word “sleep” is never used to refer to the death of an **unbeliever**. Why? Because the word “sleep” is used to remind **believers** that to be physically dead is a comforting thing and is not the end—it is the dawning of a new day. An unbeliever is given no such comfort...

B. The problem explained

So why would Christ dying for our sins—but not raising from the dead—stop reunions from taking place with loved ones in heaven? Because the fate of the **saved**—of those that are in Christ—will be the same fate as the **lost**—they will perish; they will be separated from God forever! There will be no heaven—only hell—because there will be no difference between those that are saved and those that are lost. And if there is no difference between those that are in Christ and those that are without Christ, then it is obvious that God was not satisfied with Jesus’ work on the cross because He left Him in the grave.

Let that sink in for a moment. The Prophet Samuel—and Saddam Hussein—in the same place.

Paul and Nero together; Peter and Hitler together; Joseph of the Bible and Joseph Stalin together.

Daniel and Vlad Dracula—also known as Vlad the Impaler—together.

And no hope—ever—of being together with loved ones in a place free from crying, pain, or torment. What a horrible “what if!”

What if Christ was not raised? We would have a worthless faith, believe in a hypothetical homecoming, and

3. If Christ be not raised, we have a miserable life

A. The pronouncement made

Verse 19 “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” Stated another way, “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” Why is our life to be pitied—why is it to be considered miserable—if we have hope in Christ only in this life? Because if He is not risen, we will have no benefits from Him in the next life! All we would have is this life—and nothing more.

Why are Christians to be pitied in this life if there is no next life? Barnes makes three suggestions:

1) Because no other people had so elevated hopes, and, of course, no others could experience so great disappointment.

2) Because Christians are subjected to more trials than any other class of people.

3) Because Christians—many of them, anyway—deprive themselves of some “pleasures” in this life to lay up treasures in the next. It may be time, talents, or money; it may be the challenge of choosing to do right when it would be easier to give up. It may be giving up a comfortable life to go to the mission field...the list goes on.

B. The problem explained

So why would Christ dying for our sins—but not raising from the dead—make us miserable in this life? Because as stated earlier, there would be no **next** life—death was not conquered—and Satan had won! There would be no rewards, there would be no “well done; thou good and faithful servant—enter thou into the joy of the Lord.” And there would be no songs like: “There is coming a day when no heartaches shall come—No more clouds in the sky, no more tears to dim the eye. All is peace forevermore on that happy golden shore. What a day, glorious day, that will be!”

MacArthur tells the story of a man visiting the art museum in Glasgow, Scotland. He was walking along looking at pictures and came to one where a young boy was staring wide-eyed and transfixed. Noticing the boy had been there for quite some time without moving, the man walked up and put his hand on his shoulder and said, “Son, what picture is that?” “Why, sir,” replied the lad, “Don’t you know? That’s the picture of our Lord dying on the cross for our sins.” The man said, “Thank you, son,” and went on his way.

As he walked down the hall looking at other pictures, he stopped in front of one particular picture and hadn’t been there long when he felt a little tug on his sleeve. He looked down and there found himself gazing in to the soft eyes of the same little fellow he’d seen just a few minutes before. He said, “What is it, son?” The boy replied, “Pardon me, sir. I forgot to tell you the rest. He didn’t stay on the cross. He rose, you know.”

Verse 20—“But now is Christ risen from the dead...” Barnes writes: This language is the bursting forth of a full heart and of overpowering conviction. It would seem as if Paul were impatient of the slow process of argument; weary of meeting objections, and of stating the consequences of a denial of the doctrine; and longing to give utterance to “what he knew,” that Christ was risen from the dead.”

In the song, “In Christ Alone,” the songwriter captures this thought well: “Then bursting forth in glorious day, Up from the grave He rose again. And as He stands in victory, Sin’s curse has lost its grip on me, For I am His, and He is mine, Bought with the precious blood of Christ.”

4. Because Christ is Risen...

Verse 20 “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.”

A. Our faith is not worthless—we can be free from the penalty of our sins because Christ was sin-free **II Corinthians 5:21** “For He [God] hath made Him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” How do we know God acknowledged Christ’s sinlessness? **Romans 1:4** “And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:” The fact that He rose from the dead declared—it demonstrated—that He was who He said He was—God’s Son.

B. Our homecoming is real—not hypothetical

How can we be certain of that? Because God approved of what Jesus did on our behalf by raising Him from the dead. **Romans 4:25** “Who was delivered for our offences, and was **raised again for by our justification.**” Justification is a legal term that means to pronounce someone righteous. God proved that He accepted what Jesus did by declaring us righteous.

C. Regardless if this life is hard, we are not to be pitied. Why? Because we have the **next** life to look forward to! **Romans 8:18** “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” And we have a certainty of the next life because Christ’s resurrection proved He conquered death. “But now is Christ risen from the dead...”

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

1. Is your faith worthless? Kind of a blunt question, but here’s why I ask it. On occasion I have people knock on my door with so-called Christian literature. As early as possible in the conversation, here is what I like to ask them: “If I was on my death-bed and seeking to get into heaven, what would you tell me?” If they cannot take the Bible and show me how to be forgiven of my sins, what good is their faith—their belief system? God says we can ***know—in this life***—that we are heaven-bound.
2. Second, if you are a child God, are you living a life that demonstrates you believe Jesus is alive—and coming back—and will reward you for what you have done for Him? If not, what are you waiting for?