

## Saving the Resurrection

Every year the church in America consecrates a day where we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. “He is risen indeed,” we say, responding back to our Sunday morning greeters. Yet within Protestant theology, the focus of Christ tends to be on his atoning death every other Sunday of the year. Because of this, Easter Sunday may seem underwhelming, like a group of people paying homage to a “fun fact” which is not relevant to our lives.

No doubt, the significance of the death of Jesus needs to be stressed in our churches. *Christ died for our sins*. Yet for whatever reason, our gospel presentations seem to stop there. We get the impression that all soteriological conversation can be found at Golgotha. However, in Paul’s view, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). Evidently, the cross is not enough to capture the full depth of God’s saving work; we need the resurrection of Jesus as much as Jesus needed the resurrection of Jesus. This paper will argue that the resurrection of Jesus is necessary for soteriology for two reasons. First, the resurrection of Christ functions as the reality of our past resurrection from the death of sin and our future eschatological resurrection. Second, in addition to our resurrection, the resurrection of Christ presents Jesus as the one who justifies us before the Father.

As I previously mentioned, 1 Cor. 15:17 is perhaps the most explicit reference in the Bible which stresses the necessity of the resurrection in soteriology. Paul stresses that without the resurrection of Jesus, “your faith is in vain” and you are “still in your sins.” Commentators differ over how this verse is to be understood. John Calvin suggested that Jesus “has by death destroyed the power of death, and the devil himself, (Heb. 2:14;) yet there would have been none

of all these things, if he had not, by rising again, come off victorious. Hence, if the resurrection is overthrown, the dominion of sin is set up anew.”<sup>1</sup> This response seems to create more questions than it solves. Was death destroyed at the cross or at the resurrection? Is the cross only a temporary fix? If the resurrection never happened, how long would it take the dominion of sin to be set up again? (Hopefully, it would take longer than three days!)

Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner take a different direction. They say “Paul had pointed out that Christ died ‘for our sins’ in v. 3, but if God had not vindicated him by raising him from the dead, there would be no reason to believe that those sins had been dealt with... Paul’s understanding of faith and its role in our justification is fully developed in other places in his letters (especially Galatians and Romans) but it is also clearly reflected in his verse. If faith were futile, believers would still be in their sins (culpable for them and standing under divine judgment).”<sup>2</sup> I find this to be a weak explanation. First, it seems presumptuous of Paul to suggest that the Corinthians *don’t* have faith in their atonement because there’s not enough evidence for them. What if they believe *despite* having no reason for belief? Second, Ciampa and Rosner seem to assume that Christ dying “for our sins” (v.3) necessarily means that we are no longer “in our sins,” (v.17) and their explanation is an attempt to view them as the same kind of salvific work. As I will demonstrate later in this paper, such an explanation misses the point because Christ dying for our sins is a different kind of work from Christ taking us out of our sins.

In order to understand 1 Cor. 15, we need to know what Paul is logically doing. In our Passage, Paul is trying to convince the Corinthians that there is a resurrection of the dead. Evidently, the Corinthians thought that their faith and atonement was a fact to be celebrated only

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 757.

during their lifetime on earth. One might read this and expect Paul to explain how such a view trivializes salvation. But for Paul, it is even worse than that. To deny the resurrection of the dead denies the resurrection of Jesus, and to deny the resurrection of Jesus *ruins* the Gospel! If Christ is not raised, they are still in their sins! For our purposes, it would be nice if Paul told us why this is the case. Why do we need the resurrection of Jesus to get out of our sins? Paul doesn't answer that here, and I believe we will need to look elsewhere for that. However, we are not ready to depart from this passage. Paul does provide a *different* soteriological function of the resurrection as he continues to argue for a bodily resurrection.

As Paul continues to argue for a bodily resurrection, he says "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." (1 Cor. 15:20-23). This passage has been used by Richard Gaffin (among others) to show that the resurrection of Christ serves as the prototype for our resurrection, (which is obviously a necessary component in order to be saved into eternal life). In other words, our resurrection mimics Christ's resurrection. According to Gaffin, "Throughout the governing presupposition is the unity of the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers... [Paul] views them not so much as separate occurrences [but] as two episodes of the same event."<sup>3</sup> We can see that Christ, in a sense, carved out the path which we will eventually walk on our journey from death to life. Our lives are so connected with Christ that his resurrection means our future resurrection. So if Christ had only died and never came back to life, then our path too would be to die and never come back to life (1 Cor. 15:18). But since Christ has died and come back to

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<sup>3</sup> R. B. Gaffin, *The Centrality of the Resurrection : a study in Paul's Soteriology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 40.

life, so too will we come back to life! Without this, there is no salvation. If Christ has not been raised, then neither will we.

Let us now return to our previous question. If Christ has not been raised, why are we still in our sins? Paul does not explicitly tell us why, so any answer must allow for some level of speculation. I suggest that perhaps Paul is thinking something similar to what he spoke of in Ephesians 2. We learn in Ephesians 2 that the problem of humanity is not just that we are *in sin*. The problem is that we are *dead* in our sins. Gaffin points out that Paul uses the resurrection of Christ not only as the basis for the future resurrection of believers, but also as a basis for the past resurrection of believers from the death we experienced in sin. "This resurrection," says Gaffin, "...is an experience in the actual life-history of each believer. This is apparent from Ephesians 2, where the Resurrection in view terminates on being dead in your transgressions and sins (vv. 1, 5)."<sup>4</sup> This is a valuable insight, and it seems to help us understand what Paul meant when he told the Corinthians that a dead Christ means they are still "in their sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). Perhaps "in your sins" was Paul's shorthand for *dead* in your sins, similar to Ephesians 2:1. If God has not "made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5), we are still (dead) in our sins.

Thus far, we have seen that the resurrection of Christ speaks into soteriology because it functions as the reality for our past and future resurrection. Another reason that the resurrection is important for our salvation is because the resurrection of Christ makes it possible for Jesus to be the one who justifies us before the Father. To this end we now turn.

Perhaps the most explicit verse which connects the resurrection of Christ with our justification is Romans 4:25. This verse speaks of Jesus "who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." Despite the verse's apparent clarity, some commentators are

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<sup>4</sup> R. B. Gaffin, "Redemption and Resurrection: An Exercise in Biblical-Systematic Theology." *Themelios* 27, no. 2 (2002): 20.

hesitant to affirm that the resurrection specifically deals with our justification. According to Robert Mounce, “Without his resurrection there would be no proof of the redemptive reality of his death.”<sup>5</sup> But Paul does not say Jesus was raised for proof (although it is very helpful for Christian apologetics!), and even if there was no proof of justification, that doesn’t mean justification never happened. Another reason that some commentators do not believe the resurrection of Christ brings justification is that Romans 4:25 appears to be more rhetorical than mechanical. It is said that the work of Christ’s death and resurrection are not to be distinguished here. Further, Paul goes on to say that “we have now been justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9). So which is it? Are we justified by Jesus’ resurrection (Rom 4:25) or by his blood (Rom. 5:9)? Such problems imply that we ought to hold these terms loosely, and not make distinctions. However, Douglas Moo insists that we must not disregard the distinction of Christ’s death and resurrection altogether. Commenting on Romans 4:25, he says “Paul would obviously not want to separate Christ’s death... from our justification... But when due allowance is made for rhetoric, we must still insist that Paul is affirming here a theological connection between Jesus’ resurrection and our justification.”<sup>6</sup> Michael Bird tells us that “Without driving a wedge between the effects of Christ’s death and resurrection we can still maintain a minor distinction between their function... Death and resurrection both effect justification although their respective functions in doing so may not be identical. Christ’s death constitutes the verdict against sin for justification to proceed, whilst resurrection enacts or executes the verdict both now and in the future.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 132.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 290.

<sup>7</sup> Bird, Michael F. 2003. "Raised for our justification': a fresh look at Romans 4:25." *Colloquium* 35, no. 1 (May 2003): 45-46.

Although Moo and Bird argue for a distinction of Christ's death and resurrection in Romans 4:25, is such a distinction warranted? To help us answer this question, we need to look at where Romans 4:25 comes from. Bird points out that the Servant Song of Isaiah 53 is likely the basis for Paul's statement of Jesus in Romans 4:25. Specifically, Bird says "Isa 53:5 is most likely behind the first stich [of Rom. 4:25, that Jesus was crucified for our transgressions.] and Isa 53:11 is the background to the second stich [that Jesus was raised for our justification]."<sup>8</sup> In Isaiah 53, we learn about the suffering servant in a section of prophetic poetry known as the "Servant Song." Isaiah 53:5 says that "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;" The song goes on to say that this servant is led like a lamb to the slaughter (v. 7). In this way, Jesus was "delivered up for our trespasses." However, this passage in Isaiah continues to talk about the work of the servant after he was delivered for slaughter. In verse 11 we read, "by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous." Similarly, Jesus was "raised for our justification." It seems that Isaiah is presenting a difference between atonement and justification of the servant. For this reason, we have reason to believe that Paul also differentiates the atonement and justification in Romans 4:25. (Granted, Moo is hesitant to connect Isaiah 53:11 with the second half of Romans 4:25.<sup>9</sup> But for the sake of our argument, such a hesitation does not remove the fact that Isaiah makes a distinction, or that Paul still has Isaiah in mind in the first half of Romans 4:25.)

Furthermore, Paul speaks of Justification as an event distinct from the death of Christ earlier in Romans. In fact, Paul tells us that justification is the work of the Father! In Romans 3:25-26, Paul says "[Jesus,] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received

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<sup>8</sup> Bird, Michael F. 2003. "'Raised for our justification': a fresh look at Romans 4:25." *Colloquium* 35, no. 1 (May 2003): 33.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 289.

by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." According to this passage, Jesus acts as propitiation through the shedding of his blood. But God the Father does the work of justification, a work which is not to be confused with Jesus' propitiation. It is one thing for your debt to be paid. It is quite another thing for your debtor to look at your ransomed debt and say, "All right then, you are now free." This passage helps us to see how justification is separate from atonement. Later, Paul says "It is God who justifies," (Rom. 8:33) which in context sits best with the Father, not the sacrifice of Jesus. But if the Father, not the son, stands as our justifier, why was Jesus "raised for our justification"? Why does Isaiah say that "the righteous one, my servant, [shall] make many to be accounted righteous"? The resurrected Jesus must still have a role to play in the process of justification. Perhaps the best place in the Bible to learn about this role is in Hebrews.

It is a well-known fact that the priests of Israel would offer up sacrifices to God on behalf of the people (c.f. Lev. 4:20, 5:10, 9:7, 10:17). This was done through the sacrificial blood of certain animals such as bulls or goats, and it was a very important role that the priests took on. However, it is worth noting these priests did not work from home. On the Day of Atonement, they would need to enter the temple, into the presence of Yahweh, to present their offering before the Lord. It is not just the sacrifice, but the sacrifice *to* Yahweh. In this sense, the priest served as a mediator between God and Israel.

In Hebrews 6:20, we learn that Jesus became a high priest for us, and then in Hebrews 7:16 we discover that Jesus' priesthood is on the basis of an indestructible life. What does this all mean for our salvation? "Consequently," writes the author of Hebrews, "he is able to save to the

uttermost those who draw new to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Heb. 7:25). Christ was raised for our justification because he, the great and eternal high priest, intercedes for us! Similar to the high priest of Israel, Jesus stands in the presence of God, serving as the mediator between the Father and the rest of humanity. “Who is to condemn?” asks Paul in Romans 8:34, “Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

This argument has been presented by Jeffrey Gibbs, who summarizes Hebrews 7 in the following way: “God heard Jesus’s obedient and trusting cry and answered by raising him from the dead. Now, living forever, Jesus has been appointed a great high priest, and intercedes for us based upon the one-time sacrifice of his own life... You cannot be a great high priest forever without the power of an indestructible life.”<sup>10</sup> As Gibbs points out, the intercession of Jesus (and therefore our justification) is the work of the resurrected Jesus and it is based on the sacrifice of Jesus. So when Romans 5:9 states that we are “justified by his blood,” Paul is not saying that the blood justifies you. He is saying that the blood is the basis of our justification.

We can strengthen the importance of the resurrection further if we are able to demonstrate that this “indestructible life,” (a qualifier of Jesus as high priest) is a result of his resurrection. David Allen says that Jesus’ indestructible life is applied not to his resurrection, but to Jesus as the eternal son, believing that such a view “suits the overall tenor of Hebrews.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Peter O’Brien argues that “the ‘life’ mentioned in this context was most clearly manifested in the act of Christ’s sacrifice ‘through the eternal Spirit’ (9:14)”<sup>12</sup> I appreciate O’Brien’s more concrete use of context. It seems quite evident that the death and subsequent

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<sup>10</sup> Gibbs, Jeffrey A. "Christ is Risen, Indeed: Good News for Him, and For Us." *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spr 2014): 123.

<sup>11</sup> David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 424.

<sup>12</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 264.



resurrection/exaltation of Jesus is in the mind of the author of Hebrews. I would also add that Hebrews is largely about the work of Jesus in space-time to bring about salvation, and so we could just as easily argue that the “tenor of Hebrews” lends itself toward an *event* (namely, the resurrection), not something which was eternally true of Jesus as the divine Son. I agree with O’Brien that such an event is the basis for which Jesus is known to carry an “indestructible life.”

In summary, Christ was raised to life to intercede for us, based on his atoning death, so that we would become justified by the Father. Without the resurrection of Jesus, there would be no intercession on our behalf, and therefore no justification by God. In 1 Samuel 2:25, Eli asks “If someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” This was a very good question. Praise be to God that Jesus is resurrected for our sanctification!

This study has shown that the resurrection of Jesus is crucial for soteriology. To put it bluntly, the cross is not enough. We need the resurrection of Jesus to serve as the reality by which we are resurrected, both from our past deadness in sin and in the future coming of Christ. We also need the resurrection of Jesus so that he would stand before us as our eternal high priest to intercede before the Father that we might be justified. From the very beginning, the proclamation of the church has been summarized in two simple words: Jesus saves. Evidently, he can’t do that if he’s dead.

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