

Epiphany 6th Sunday “Oh! For Me!?” 1 Corinthians 15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

A woman walks into her home, and there on the table is a bouquet of beautiful flowers. It's not her birthday or anniversary, or Valentine's Day. She looks over toward the living room and her husband is smiling. She says, “Oh! For me!? What a surprise!” An unexpected gift is always a pleasant surprise.

God's grace is like that. The ultimate gift for us is new life. And although our new life cannot yet be fully seen, our sure and certain hope is based upon the fact that Jesus Christ, true man and true God, was raised from the dead. Crowds of people were witness to His death. And crowds of people were witness to His resurrection. He is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. The beginning of what is to come. All this God did **for us** while we were still sinners.

So where might we turn for light in the darkness which would come upon the world if this central tenet of Christianity were given up by those who hold it?

In our Epistle reading, St. Paul had to deal with a radical group within the congregation at Corinth which said that there is no resurrection of the dead (v. 12).

By this bold denial these Corinthians were rejecting the raising of the bodies of the dead. They seemed to know about Paul's teaching of a spiritual resurrection, the raising of the spirit from the death of sin and unbelief by conversion in this life, but they misunderstood and distorted it in a puffed up, self-serving way, not guided by apostolic teaching (1 Cor 4:8). They had commingled the general Greek cultural denial of physical resurrection (Acts 16:18) with Christian beliefs.

God intended that the human beings He created live in His service and be forever blessed. But Adam, the first man, became separated from God by sin, and all his descendants have been born into this sinful condition and its curse of death. The alienation from God leading up to and continuing after physical death is also called death in Scripture (Eph 2:1)—these are parts of the terrible curse of death.

But God longed for the sinner's reconciliation, deliverance from the curse, and restoration to life in everlasting fullness, and Jesus came to bring all this about (Jn 3:16). But if the dead really do not rise, the Christian proclamation is empty and all our faith in Him is useless. For a dead savior is no savior at all and cannot give life, and we then are to be pitied as our hope crumbles.

But Christ is risen, bringing light into our darkness. He has risen as the representative of sinful human beings and the new head of the human race, the Second Adam through whom come new life and restored humanity. Paul declares the Resurrection as a fact. He has said that Christ's death and resurrection is the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy and that the fact of this fulfillment has been confirmed by eyewitnesses of the risen one. As the Second Adam, He sacrificed himself as the representative of sinful mankind and procured forgiveness and new life for the whole race of which he is the new head.

Those who belong to Christ will share in the harvest of which he is the firstfruits. The non-Christian world is condemned. Not all will share the benefits of the risen one (2 Thes 1:7–10), only those who trust in Christ.

The risen Christ is the Second Adam, who came to restore what the first Adam lost for himself and his posterity by the corruption of body and soul. Therefore, the glorious resurrection of the body at the second coming will be the climax of that restoration and redemption. The Spirit-led children of God eagerly await the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:23). Then the Redeemer will hand over the kingdom by presenting it to his Father as a spectacular sign of "mission accomplished." But the benefits and gifts showered upon those in fellowship with him—will never cease (Is 9:7).

The Corinthians, and we, should never doubt this basic tenet of our creed, nor should we doubt its implications for our own resurrection. For the risen Christ is not the only one who would rise; He is the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Just as the Israelites brought the sheaf of firstfruits to the Lord on the "Sunday" after Passover as a sign that the whole harvest of wheat belonged to Him (Lev 23:9–15), so Christ's resurrection was the pledge that all who fall asleep in Him, in the last human harvest would be physically raised as He was.

Through one man's disobedience, the tragedy of human suffering and death had become the common lot of all (1 Cor 15:21–22). It was fitting, then, that it would be through the obedience of another man, the second Adam, that resurrection and life would come to all men. Later Paul would spell this out more fully in his epistle to the Romans (5:12–21). But here he sketches the Adam-Christ comparison in the briefest terms.

Paul explains that just as Adam's sin and death affected not only himself but all humanity, so the Corinthians needed to appreciate that Christ's resurrection was not only for his own benefit; through this Man, the resurrection from the dead had become the destiny of all believers. For just as Adam was the head of the old humanity so that his fall left a legacy of sin and death to all, so Christ stands as head of the new humanity to be made alive in Him. And—to use Luther's fine analogy from the birth of humans and animals—“after [the head] is born, the whole body follows easily.”

You see, all of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection was done “**for you.**” And although that is an oft repeated phrase in Christian theology, it is important for us to hear these words spoken into our ears. Because, like the woman in my opening illustration, we find it hard to apply the love, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ to ourselves personally, in the light of our own, sins, failings, afflictions, and disappointments.

The incarnation and birth of Christ, were for you and me. He bore the indignities of humanity so that we could be certain that we had a high priest who “is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, (and) who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).” His circumcision, His dedication, and His entire ministry, was part of fulfilling the law **for us**, living the perfect life on our behalf and showing grace, mercy, and love to even the least of us. His transfiguration was to assure us of His majesty.

His Baptism was not about the washing away of **His** sins, for He had none. Instead, it was done **for us**, a reverse baptism, so to speak, soaking up the sins of the world **for you and me**. Like charging a battery, He provided the cleansing power to baptismal water that enables it to wash away our sins.

In the Lord's Supper we get to hear Jesus speak into our ears the words, "Take, eat. This is my body given **for you**. And afterward, when He took the cup after supper, He gave it to them saying, "Drink of it, all of you. This cup is the new testament in my blood which is shed **for you** for the forgiveness of your sins.

His suffering was **for your** healing and comfort. His death paid the price of your sin. And His resurrection was the guarantee of new life **for all** who trust in Him. And the Resurrection is the heart of the gospel message.

I think sometimes we focus on the cross a little too much. It was the resurrection of Jesus that stunned Paul on the road to Damascus. It was the resurrection of Jesus which pushed Paul into a deep re-reading and re-imagining of his Old Testament. It would be the resurrection of Christ which made Him, in Paul's eyes, the fulfilment of all those OT promises. Paul puts the resurrection in this sort of a central place.

So, how can we let that resurrection fact take its place in our lives today? What will it have to muscle out of the way? What will need to cede that central place in our thinking, doing, speaking, and feeling? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword, or pandemic, or depression, or family strife, or betrayal?

Jesus has risen from the dead and **that, changes, everything**, from the way we approach brushing our teeth in the morning, to the way we spend our money, and how we love our families. Jesus has risen from the dead! And neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 38-39).

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!