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THE SUPREME 'IF'

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"If Christ be not raised." I. Cor. 15:17.

Paul is confronted with the desolation of the supreme "If". If the moulding dust of the Galilean peasant, named Jesus, is still in the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea there is more buried there than the Son of Mary. If Christ be not risen, life is left to beat out its helplessness on the barren shores of doubt and darkness and despair. We are indeed without hope because without God in the world.

Here are implications staggering. Their stark blackness stares Paul in the face. He looks level eyed into them, one after another, but he does not blink them.

Introducing this supreme "If," Paul redefines his Gospel briefly and sharply, emphasizing its cardinal features. Christ died for our sins. He was buried. He rose again the third day. He was seen. Marking the words upon which the hope of millions rest—Christ "died," "buried," "rose," "seen,"—then Paul calls the witness. For their testimony is to bulwark the hope of all generations to come. Peter saw Him. Peter, who had denied Him. Cephas, self-confident and boastful, relentlessly rejecting Christ's gentle but clear warning. Peter, the man with the burning tears in the High Priest's courtyard. Peter, the wide-eyed disciple who stood before the empty tomb. He not only saw the clothes in perfect composure, themselves a witness to the resurrection, but he also saw that face that he could never forget that turned and looked upon him as he swore heavy oaths that he knew Him not on the night of His trial. He saw that face as he stood in the early morning by the seaside while the other disciples were bringing the heavily loaded net to shore. Peter saw Him. Then the twelve. And then at one time five hundred brethren felt the awe of Christ in His resurrected body and glory. Later James saw Him, and all the Apostles, and last of all, says Paul, I saw Him myself. "I am the least of the apostles that am not meet to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God."

Paul's hand of faith is feeling for the fact of the resurrection. He knows he must lay hold thereupon or in his soul there will be futility and frustration and a dimming hope. As he fronts this supreme "If" and its implications, one by one he pictures the darkness that must settle upon the race if the resurrection is only a pious myth.

The preaching of the Gospel instead of being the "good tidings of great joy" is only a delusion. It has no resident rooting in fact. It is a vain thing, void of power in human experience.

If Christ be not risen, says Paul, we are false witnesses. We are declaring something as from God which God has never done; and faith can not rest upon falsehood.

Therefore, says Paul, that trust which you have reposed in Jesus is a vain deception, without meaning or power unless we are assured of the resurrection.

Yea, says Paul, you are still in your sins, that crushing load has never been loosened and rolled forever into the sepulchre unless out of that sepulchre has come the living Christ forevermore vibrant. There is not enough room in that tomb for our sins and a dead Saviour.

And our dead—those whom we have loved long since and lost "a little while"—no, not "a little while." They are gone forever. The sting of death is still fatal and the triumph of the grave is complete. Self-deceived are we and of all men most miserable, most to be pitied. We have hazarded all and lost unless the resurrection is confirmed.

Pausing here at the end of the dark, fatal issues of the supreme "If"; Paul reaches forth and lays hold upon the fact, the rock-fact, the accomplished, substantial, verified fact of the resurrection—"Now is Christ risen from the dead."

All the Old Testament moves swiftly and in orderly procedure toward the coming Messiah and His endless reign. So, even the Record of God's dealing with Israel in the days before Christ's coming is meaningless confusion unless undergirded by His resurrection and eternal reign.

Christ was conscious of the certainty of His resurrection and in all the Gospels whenever He speaks of His coming passion and suffering, He always steps forward through the three dark days of the tomb and declares that on that third day the resurrection. "I have power to lay my life down," declares Christ, "and I have power to take it again."

No marvel, therefore, that the resurrection was the consuming theme, from Pentacost on, with the disciples and with the great apostle to the Gentiles: "Jesus Christ, our Lord . . . was . . . declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead."

They never lost the tonic charm, the beauty, the comfort of having a Living Lord and therefore as they pressed the path they were Christians of the burning heart. Their zeal and dedication thus foundationed knew no bounds and the spread of the Gospel of this slain Lamb, and now Living Lord, moved with strange swiftness and impact across the Roman Empire.

There is much more to bulwark the resurrection, that our faith may be rested and triumphant. There was the empty tomb, with the untouched, unchanged graveclothes, still bearing the shape of that beloved body. The inexplicable change that has taken place in the disciples adds its voice to the witnesses to the resurrection. They did not expect Him to rise. They, with the women, were preparing spices for a dead body and when they first heard the news they declared it but idle tales. Yes, they were transformed by the fact, and they gladly hazarded their lives to proclaim the Gospel resting upon the resurrection.

The Church of Christ for over nineteen centuries has gone forth conquering and to conquer. Over five hundred million living witnesses bulwarking civilization and the blessings of freedom among all peoples are carrying forward the divine program of missions among every nation. Such a church is not founded on fraud or built on falsehood.

Paul, in the succeeding verses of I Corinthians 15, moves through the mystery of death into the experience of eternal life, declaring, "we shall all be changed. The dead shall be raised incorruptible, this mortal shall put on immortality, death is swallowed up in victory." "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord for as much as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."