

Resurrection and Justification: 1 Corinthians 15:17

OUTLINE

The Vindication of Jesus
The Justification of believers

INTRODUCTION

What is the connection between the resurrection and our salvation? It has been pointed out that if you asked the ordinary Christian to give a short explanation of the gospel, the cross would get a mention but not the empty tomb, 9 times out of ten. They would say something like, 'Jesus died to pay for sins so that whoever believes in Him can have eternal life,' or something like that. But where is the empty tomb in all of this, how does this square up against what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:17, 'And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.' And the fact that Paul preached the resurrection as central to his message, v3-4, 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.' In fact some who have embraced various forms of liberalism that look at this cross centered emphasis and no centrality of the resurrection and accuse traditional Protestant thought of being too merit focused, too legal/forensic, and of promoting a gospel that is a form of cosmic child abuse, obsessed with punishment and making God out to be cruel not a God of love. There is a form of thinking around the atonement that wants to reject penal substitutionary atonement and wants to promote a Christus Victor view of the atonement. One example is a man by the name of Greg Boyd, he rejects hell, is an Inclusivist, denies penal substitution, is an advocate of Open Theism, believes in Theistic Evolution and denies inerrancy. So today I would like for us to explore the connection between the resurrection of Christ and justification. This is to help us see the important connection between the resurrection and justification; and to answer those who think that the resurrection automatically excludes a focus on the legal aspects of the gospel. We have two points. Firstly, we want to explore what the resurrection meant for Christ, and then secondly, what it means for us.

The vindication of Christ

If we are to build our understanding of how His resurrection works for our salvation from the ground up we must begin by reminding ourselves that Jesus is a public person, that He acts on behalf of His people as a covenant head, as a legal representative. Just as the high Priest of the OT represented the people of Israel and go into the presence of God on their behalf to obtain forgiveness of sins, Christ is presented as our Great High Priest, Heb. 5:10, 'being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.' Being one with our humanity, and one with our weakness He is both an efficient and sympathetic High Priest. Paul helps us to see in Rom. 5:12-21, that Adam and Christ are both representatives who act on behalf of others, and as they act and the consequences of their actions fall upon them, they also fall upon those who they represent. The way the NT describes our salvation is in terms of union with Christ. One scholar claims that the words, in Christ, in the Lord, in Christ Jesus,

or in Him occur 216 times in Paul and 26 times in John¹, indicating that we have to view our salvation in Christ, that what happens to Him in His death and resurrection is the grounds for how we are saved.

Paul calls Adam a type, Rom. 5:14 and is a key lens to understand Christ's work for us. Adam is called the son of God, Israel is called the son of God, and Jesus too is called the Son of God. Luke is especially at pains to emphasize this, 3:22, 'and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." V38, 'the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.' 4:2-3, 'for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." Luke is at pains to show that Jesus, like Adam was tempted, like Israel in the Wilderness, the question of whether Jesus is the obedient son or the disobedient son is in the foreground. Where Adam would sin, and as a result bring condemnation and death; Christ would obey and bring justification and life. Adam experienced the consequences for his actions moving from life to death, from innocence to guilt, and we experienced the consequences of his actions with him. So, with Christ, He was innocent but had our sin credited to Him, and He was condemned; but then He was resurrected and the Scripture says He was vindicated.

Technically speaking Christ was under condemnation, and died for sin; then He was justified/vindicated and was resurrected. 1 Tim. 3:16 gives an account of Christ's earthly ministry and speaks of His resurrection as a vindication/justification by the Spirit. 'Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.' That first couplet is giving an overview of His humiliation and exaltation; His incarnation and resurrection by the Spirit (Rom. 1:3-4). In other words, the resurrection was saying something first about Jesus and His righteousness. The Spirit by the resurrection vindicates Jesus in two ways. Jesus innocence is vindicated before men who falsely accused Him of blasphemy and lies. God does a miracle by His Spirit putting His seal of authentication to vindicate Jesus before the court of men. His resurrection proves that He is who He said He was. Secondly, the resurrection of Jesus is a vindication in God's court. Jesus rightly died because our sins were credited to Him. Jesus was literally a condemned criminal as He bore our sin. By dying He cleared Himself of that debt leaving only His own perfect righteousness. Death has no right to hold an innocent man for the wages of sin is death and Christ is raised.

But to say that Jesus experienced condemnation and justification is a difficult but necessary concept to grasp. One theologian explains how it works this way: 'In becoming identified with his people Christ was made sin (II Cor. 5:21) ['For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'] At the very least this means that he bore the guilt of sin. Solidarity involved him in becoming a curse (Gal. 3:13) ['Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'], in being made subject to the condemnation of the law (Gal. 4:5). The direct relevance of the resurrection on this guilt-bearing of the second Adam resides for Paul in the character of Christ's death as

¹ <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/raised-for-our-justification-the-resurrection-and-penal-substitution/> accessed 3/27/2024

the penalty and seal of the condemnation he bore. As long as he remained in the state of death, the righteous character of his work, the efficacy of his obedience unto death remained in question, in fact, was implicitly denied. Consequently the eradication of death in his resurrection is nothing less than the removal of the verdict of condemnation and the effective affirmation of his (adamic) righteousness. His resurrected state is the reward and seal which testifies perpetually to his perfect obedience. [Vos adds] 'Christ's resurrection was the *de facto* declaration of God in regard to his being just. His quickening bears in itself the testimony of His justification. God through suspending the forces of death operating on him, declared that the ultimate, the supreme consequence of sin had reached its termination. In other words, resurrection had annulled the sentence of condemnation.'² Notice that Jesus righteousness is not legally allowed to stay dead, He has been obedient and is rewarded with life and honors and authority and an inheritance. If death is prison and Jesus is an innocent man, then God who is a perfect judge must release Him, this is what the resurrection signifies.

The justification of the believer

We have established that the resurrection is the vindication of Christ, now we are ready to see how by union with Christ in His death and His life, we are justified by not only His death but His resurrection as well. Rom. 4:23-25, 'But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.' In the context of Romans 4 Paul is proving that Abraham was saved by faith and not works. 4:23 begins with a quote from Gen. 15:6, which is the first mention of faith in the bible and it is connected with Abraham being declared righteous. Paul says that the words, 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone but to assure all who believe that they too can be justified by faith, be counted righteous by God by believing not works. Paul highlights how we and Abraham both believe in the same God, the one who raised Jesus from the dead. V25 becomes an important summary of the work of Christ, how we are saved not by His death alone, but also by His resurrection. The words 'delivered up' are important because they indicate that God was putting Jesus forward as an offering for sin, this was not merely a political hit, or a botched revolution, but the plan of God. Of course, both Father and Son are united in their will that this might happen. The first part of v25 deals with the death of Christ which is for trespasses, and the second part, the resurrection applies to our justification.

What does the Bible say about how we are justified, by what mechanism are we justified? Romans 3:21-22 tells us that when we believe God credits to us an alien righteousness not our own, the righteousness, the obedience of our Second Adam. This is a gift of righteousness that comes by virtue of His obedience on our behalf, Rom. 5:17. But Romans 5:9 says that we are justified by His blood. So on the one hand we are declared righteous before our judge because a righteousness not our own has been given to us, but this is only half the story. Jesus blood represents His sacrificial death that He paid as the penalties for my sins. In other words the law had two requirements that I could not meet, the law demanded a death in payment for broken laws, Christ's blood was given in sacrificial death to satisfy this aspect of the law. However, I still lack a righteousness to fit me for God's presence, so by faith I receive as a gift the

² Gaffin, p121-22.

obedience in life of my Second Adam. These together satisfy the positive and negative demands of the law. But what about Romans 4:25 how does the resurrection of Christ contribute to justification?

This where we need to see what happened to Jesus as the grounds for what happens to us. The resurrection is a declaration about the righteousness that is credited to us. Our justification is not an abstracted legal declaration of righteousness, but the Father's declaration over the righteousness of His beloved Son with whom He is well pleased which is seen as ours. We do not merely get another like His, we get the same declaration that was given regarding His righteousness spoken over us. And the resurrection is the reality that shows that this righteousness is impeccable and cannot fail. There will be no different outcome for us, no variables, He is the firstborn from the dead that is a firstfruits of a resurrection harvest that guarantees our own resurrection from the dead. Think about it. Jesus was righteous in Himself with our sin credited to Him. the wages of sin is death so He dies, He fulfils all the God given parameters, a righteous high priest offering a righteous sacrifice who is also a God appointed representative for His people. Our sin is laid upon His shoulders, He takes the punishment and pays for the sin in full, 'it is finished' was His cry indicating that there was no more payment to be made. So there He is, He has died, sin is fully paid for, think of it as the stain of our sin removed from Him. all that is left now is a perfectly righteous man. Here is the issue, death has no right to keep Him. So God being a righteous judge resurrects Him from the grave for it would be unjust for a righteous man to be dead. He no longer bears our sins having paid for them in full. Now think about how this applies to you as a believer.

We are told that we receive the gift of an alien righteousness imputed to us by faith. Faith is the empty hands that we come to receive as a free gift the righteousness that we need to be Holy as He is Holy. We have no sin because we have died with Christ, His death certificate certifies that we have a death that fully pays for our sins, but what is left? You are now the righteousness of God in Christ, like Christ you are righteous, so if you die there is a problem. God cannot be unjust and allow a perfectly righteous person be left in the grave. He must be just and so in order to make your reality agree with your standing He will resurrect you on the last day because neither the grave, nor hell has any right to you for you are dressed in the righteousness of Christ. It is as impossible for a Christian to finally go to hell as it is for Jesus Himself to go to hell.

Now we are in a better position to understand some of Paul's statements, let's go back to 1 Cor. 15:17, 'And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.' Why would we still be in our sins? We know that Jesus died for our sins offering a full payment for them, but the only reason we know that His payment was accepted by the Father is because the Father as the perfectly holy judge raised Him from the dead as proof that He was the sinless sin bearer who had fully satisfied God with regards to our debt. If Jesus died and was still in the grave this would indicate that the problem of sin and death had not been dealt with, that His sacrifice was not acceptable, that He was not in fact perfect and did have some sin of His own and so death would have every right to hold him. This helps us to understand the language of Paul when in 1 Tim. 3:16 when speaking of the resurrection he speaks of it as a vindication by the Spirit. Strange language indeed to describe Christ's resurrection as a vindication or literally justification but understandable now that we see how it connects with our own justification. Likewise, Rom. 4:25, 'who was delivered up for our

trespasses and raised for our justification.' We can now see how His resurrection results in our justification.

What a wonderful teaching this is. This is important for us. Notice that Jesus righteousness is not legally allowed to stay dead, He has been obedient and is rewarded with life and honors and authority and an inheritance. This has massive ramifications for us. If Jesus deserves to die when our sins are on Him, we should fear to face death still in our sins. But if Jesus righteousness cannot be kept in the grave for God is just and must release the one who is wrongfully in death, then we who are in Christ, we who have this righteousness credited to us can know that one day death cannot keep us either. If death is prison and Jesus is an innocent man, then God who is a perfect judge must release Him, this is what the resurrection signifies. You and I have been credited with an innocence that death has no right to keep and when we die we do so with the certainty that Christ's death tested and resurrection vindicated righteousness will do for us what it did for Him. It will provoke the righteous judge to raise us to life and honors and an inheritance. This is what it means that Christ is raised for our justification. Let me end with the words of Jesus, John 14:19, 'Because I live, you also will live.'