

# Eternal Matter to Eternity Matters

Choosing Wisely Series, November 13 & 14 | 1 Corinthians 15:12-26  
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## TODAY WE'RE TALKING ABOUT WHAT LASTS FOREVER

**Frances Gerety convinced us that a diamond is forever.**

During the Depression, sales of diamond engagement rings plummeted in the United States.

The diamond industry looked to recover market share, so they turned to an advertising firm in New York City to shore up demand.

The ad agency conjured up the idea that diamonds are precious and nearly indestructible.

They set out to convince young men that the measure of their love and success could be seen in the diamonds they gave to their future wives.

They convinced young women that successful dating ended in diamonds.<sup>1</sup>

In 1947, Gerety summed it up in the slogan, "A Diamond Is Forever," and we believed her!

**Of course, our ideas about what is forever have changed a great deal in the past few centuries.**

Our culture has shifted away from spiritual things we can't see or predict.

We shifted toward faith in things we can see, touch, measure, describe, and predict.

**It may surprise you that the big change began nearly 2,500 years ago.**

It starts with a question: When you look up at the night sky, what do you see?

When the ancients looked up at the night sky, they saw the heavens. The ancient Greeks looked up and saw a dense swath of stars they believed was milk one of the gods accidentally spilled across the sky. Hence, the word "galaxy" that comes to us from Greek originally meant "milky way."

Then along came Democritus. He looked up at the sky and concluded that the Milky Way was a massive collection of stars far, far beyond the earth.

He also hypothesized that matter was constructed of tiny, indivisible particles he called "atoms."<sup>2</sup>

What we see in the galaxies and in matter itself has changed dramatically over time. Do we look at the sky, see the future and past, and sense the glory of God? Or do we see the cold, impersonal universe? Is matter eternal? Or does eternity matter?

**Paul wrestled with the same question in 1 Corinthians 15.**

Paul wrote about resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The Christians in Corinth had a very difficult time wrapping their minds about resurrection. They questioned it.

What Paul wrote to THEM encourages US to make another mental move: **Let's move from believing in eternal matter to trusting that eternity matters.**

This move is even more important to us even than it was to the Christians in Corinth.

Materialism has a much stronger pull in our culture than it did in theirs.

Just as importantly, our culture's pull toward materialism causes us as Christ followers to stop thinking about eternity. If we don't think about eternity, then our faith eventually crumbles.

## SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IN ETERNAL MATTER

**Surprisingly, Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 15:12 that some people in Corinth denied that there is a resurrection of the dead:**

***Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?***

### **What does resurrection mean?**

Resurrection is when a normal, physical body is transformed into a glorious, spiritual body.

However, resurrection is different from resuscitation. Resuscitation means that an old body that had stopped functioning is caused to function again. That's not resurrection.

Resurrection is also different from reincarnation. Reincarnation is the belief that an old soul left an old body and migrated to a new body. Reincarnation is an idea in multiple other religions, but that's not resurrection.

Resurrection means that an old body is glorified in a new body.

### **Some people in Corinth denied that there is a resurrection because they were spiritualists.**

Coming from a pagan background, the idea of resurrection made no sense to them.

They believed in the existence of a spiritual reality they could not see.

However, their specific pagan beliefs taught them that when they died, their souls were released from their bodies to travel somewhere else.

Some of them carried this assumption into their Christian life and assumed that when they died, they would be set free to live as powerful spirit beings for eternity.

### **Others in Corinth denied that there was a resurrection because they were materialists.**

Growing numbers of people in the first century argued that death brought everything about human life to an end. They believed that there was no life beyond death.

When they became Christians, they too had a very difficult time believing in resurrection.

### **Materialism has gone on to dismantle progressively belief in anything spiritual or mysterious.**

Materialism: the belief that everything is or can be explained in relation to matter.

Materialism has worked hard to dispel superstitions like ghosts and magic.

Also, materialism has frequently targeted religions as just organized superstition.

Materialism opposes all forms of spirituality and even questions the notion that our consciousness is anything more than the sum of describable chemical and electrical processes.

For a materialist, matter is all that exists. Matter has no origin. It can be transformed but never truly destroyed, so it has no end. To a materialist, matter is eternal. There is no resurrection.

# THEY DENY THE IDEA THAT ETERNITY MATTERS

**In 1 Corinthians 15:13-19, Paul writes about the implications of believing there is no resurrection.**

*But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. **And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.** We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

**There are implications to saying that there is no resurrection of the dead.**

Paul outlined them in 1 Corinthians 15:13-19.

First and most critically, Jesus cannot be raised from the dead. If there is no resurrection, then Jesus can't be resurrected!

Consequently, if there is no resurrection, then everything else we preach as Christians is false. The Gospel hinges on Jesus' resurrection.

Beyond that, we are still sinners. If Jesus isn't raised from the dead, then he is just another dead guy, and our sin is still our unpaid sin debt.

Consequently, every Christian who died expecting resurrection is wrong; he or she is just dead.

Worse still, we are living lives of sacrifice and service, expecting that they mean something when we are resurrected, and God's Kingdom comes.

Paul concludes that if Jesus isn't resurrected, then our faith is in vain; we're pathetic.

**That's why I never understood my college religion professor.**

He knew the Bible and taught the Bible.

However, he told us openly that he didn't believe in the resurrection.

He didn't believe in Jesus' literal, physical resurrection. He thought that somehow Jesus is alive because we remember him and recognize his importance for life today.

Nor did he believe in our resurrection. He thought that life after death was just wishful thinking.

He chose to obey God to the best of his ability simply because he admired Jesus' example.

I could never understand him. Why bother with Christianity at all if there is no life after death? Why sacrifice and serve if there is no reason at the end? Paul agrees with me.

**Studies indicate that faith in eternal matters and denying that eternity matters have consequences.**

Valley had a Grace & Mercy Team meet this past year to study our history as a church in local outreach as we try to share the Good News with Hartford and Litchfield Counties.

They also studied who lives in this area and how they think.

We discovered some things that may surprise you.

First, as you've heard in multiple places, there are now more "nones" in American society than in recent decades. As of 2019, the Pew Research Center reports that 26% of Americans are "nones." "Nones" are those who have no religious affiliation. Most of them simply don't have a religious preference, but a growing minority are atheists or agnostics.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond that, nearly 20% of our neighbors agree with the statement "I don't believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is."

Broadly speaking, our culture believes in eternal matter. We deny the idea that eternity matters. Therefore, we walk away from doctrines like "resurrection."

## RESURRECTION IS REAL, SO ETERNITY MATTERS

**In 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, Paul reminded us that resurrection is real.**

*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. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

**Resurrection is real; it's the core of what we believe.**

Paul began chapter 15 by calling the Church in Corinth to remember what he had taught them. It was the stuff of greatest importance. Without it, their faith would be in vain.

Then he laid out his message in **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**:

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...*

This is the stuff of first importance. Jesus died. Jesus rose again.

Resurrection is real! It's the very core of what we believe.

**Resurrection is real; Paul noted eyewitness testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.**

In verses 5-7, Paul mentioned that the risen Jesus appeared to Peter and the disciples.

Then Jesus appeared to James, his half-brother, and to 500 other people.

Paul mentioned that many of these people were still alive and could verify that they saw Jesus risen from the dead.

Then Paul added that he himself had seen Jesus alive and glorified.

Resurrection is real; too many people saw Jesus and lived to talk about it!

**Resurrection is real; Paul demonstrated his firm faith in his own resurrection by his sacrificial lifestyle.**

In other parts of chapter 15, Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth that he was serving Jesus and sacrificing for the Kingdom of God solely because of the resurrection.

He gave up all kinds of security and faced all kinds of hardships.

Why? Because of Jesus' resurrection and his own anticipated resurrection.

**Resurrection is real, so eternity matters. That's what Paul argues in verses 20-26.**

Jesus has inaugurated a new humanity.

If we are "in Jesus," then we can be new people.

Jesus is defeating sin, evil, and even death.

As descendants of Adam, we get death; in Jesus we get resurrection.

In Jesus we are made alive now and forever.

**Resurrection changes everything.**

## RESURRECTION GIVES US HOPE

**When Abraham looked up at the sky, he saw something very different from Democritus.**

In Genesis 12, the LORD called Abraham (then Abram) to leave the land of his fathers and to go to a new land the LORD would show him, the Promised Land.

By Genesis 15, the LORD met with Abraham in the Promised Land one night in a vision.

The LORD promised to be with Abraham.

Abraham had no child through whom to pass anything to the future.

The LORD told Abraham to go outside and look up into the night sky.

God invited Abraham to count the stars if he was able. He told Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Do you have any idea of many stars there are in the sky?

The stars in the sky speak to the majesty and glory of God.

In this instance, the stars in the sky spoke to the future and God's plan. In a sense, there was a star in the sky for every one of Abraham's descendants.

Jesus is a descendant of Abraham. There was a star in the sky that night for Jesus.

Galatians 3 says that Christians are considered adopted sons and daughters of Abraham, so one of the stars lit in the sky that night was for you.

Abraham could see it all; I'm sure he didn't understand any of it, but he saw it.

However, **Genesis 15:6** says that he believed it:

***And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.***

What a different way of looking at the sky!

What a hopeful, forward looking way of looking up in the dark night!

Instead of staring into the cold void of space, Abraham looked up and saw the future, the plan, the goodness, and the glory of God.

We don't live in a universe of eternal matter. We live in a cosmos created by God where eternity matters; God has a plan, and it leads toward resurrection. It is all real!

Knowing that eternity matters, and that resurrection is real gives us HOPE!

**Resurrection gives us hope that makes us fearless.**

Resurrection means that no matter what happens now, we will be resurrected and live forever with God. If I know that my future is secure, then what happens now matters a whole lot less.

People may take my life, but they cannot take my eternal life!  
If that's true, then evil can only take so much from me. I have nothing to fear.  
I can stand against what's wrong and do what's right.

**Resurrection gives us hope that makes us faithful.**

Eternity matters.

If eternity matters, then what I do now matters.

If what I do now matters, then I will not relent and I will not give up. I will sacrifice. I will serve. I will keep my faith.

**Resurrection gives us hope that makes us fierce.**

Resurrection means that Jesus has already beaten the biggest enemies we face.

Resurrection means that Jesus wins against sin, evil, and death.

Jesus wins against Satan himself.

If Jesus defeats the biggest enemies we face, then I can be fierce and face enemies and problems that seem impossible to defeat otherwise.

**Is matter eternal? Or does eternity matter?**

Everything hinges on how we answer that question.

If matter is eternal, then enjoy today, for that's all we have, and the universe is a cold, impersonal place.

But if resurrection is real, and if Jesus is resurrected, then eternity matters. That fact changes everything. Resurrection gives us hope, and hope makes us fearless, faithful, and fierce.

Paul knew that fact, which is why he called us make a defining mental move:

**Let's move from believing in eternal matter to trusting that eternity matters.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/how-an-ad-campaign-invented-the-diamond-engagement-ring/385376/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.worldhistory.org/Democritus/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>