

“If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile”

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Today we live in the age of “tweeting” which are very short statements that may or may not be true. I was thinking about Bible verses that would make good tweets.

The obvious verse is what has become known as “the gospel in miniature” – John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”.

It’s short. It’s one verse. And it’s true.

A great go-to place for tweets is the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 11:22 – “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without good sense.

Proverbs 15:17 – “Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

Here’s one they love in Washington, D.C. Proverbs 17:8 – “A bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of those who give it; wherever they turn they prosper”.

When Danette, Micah, Jasmine and I drove to Florida this past December 27 and 28th, whenever I saw a billboard that I thought would make a good tweet or could motivate discussion, I had Danette write it down. The only ones she censored were the “Adam and Eve” billboards. For anyone who knows the Adam and Eve story in Genesis, living in the Garden of Eden where there were no man-made products, knows this is a total misrepresentation of how Adam and Eve lived.

These are the billboard proverbs and where we saw them . . .

► “Do the beantime boogie”. – Canton

- ▶ “Our pancakes never waffle”. – Marietta
- ▶ “Let’s work together. Let’s choose healthier”. – Parkersburg
- ▶ “An Oasis of fine craftsmanship”. – Tamarack
- ▶ “Use your outside voice”. – Mahan
- ▶ “You need to tap twice. It’s as big as it gets”. – Beckley
- ▶ “Who is Jesus? Read Matthew’s gospel”. – Jonesville, N.C.
- ▶ “Marriage = 1 man + 1 woman by God’s design”. – Union Grove
- ▶ “Hey I still love you. I do Jesus”. – Harmony
- ▶ “Dang it feels good to be a pancake”. – Charlotte
- ▶ “Don’t wait. Communicate”. – Charlotte
- ▶ “Helping you get back to being a Mom”. – Charlotte
- ▶ “Your lamp can bring others a bright future”. – Rock Hill, S.C.
- ▶ “Do you hear that? Your future is calling”. – Gladsen
- ▶ “Live generously and life will treat you royally”. – St. Matthews
- ▶ “After you die, you will meet God”. – St. Matthews
- ▶ “Where are you going? Heaven or Hell?” -- Kingsland, Georgia
- ▶ “Living life like a song”. – Jacksonville, Florida
- ▶ “Elevate the way you live”. New Smyrna Beach

“Elevate the way you live”. How would you interpret this “billboard proverb”? Do we elevate the way we live when we buy a beachside house or condo? Do we elevate the way we live when we have a strong faith that Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected from the dead?

If we were to just use verse 17 from our 1 Corinthians 15 text on a billboard or in a tweet, what questions would people be motivated to ask?

“If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile”.

Here are some questions people might ask after reading this verse on a billboard or in a tweet . . .

- ▶ “Didn’t Christ rise from the dead?”
- ▶ “Who said he didn’t?”
- ▶ “Who said he did?”
- ▶ “Why is one’s faith connected to the historical reality of this event?”
- ▶ “Why is it futile?”
- ▶ “What should we do or believe?”
- ▶ “What would remain of the gospel if we stripped away the resurrection?”

Paul is responding to his first century Greco-Roman audience by assuring them that Christ was raised from the dead. He is responding to the “what if?” questions of the first century and the “what if?” questions of the 21st century. St. Paul is forcing us to confront the meaning of the resurrection for our own lives.

It helps to understand the context in which Paul was doing ministry during his three missionary journeys around the Mediterranean world.

Greco-Roman philosophy taught that most people spent eternity in Hades miserably longing for the lives they once knew. A few lucky ones get to spend eternity in paradise as their reward for rare, heroic acts that did the bidding of the gods on Mt. Olympus.

As for classical Judaism Paul knew equally well, Sheol – the realm of the dead – was no more cheery a place than Hades.

This is why the Christian resurrection of the body that Paul is teaching and preaching brings such hope. Christ died for all of us. “All of us are saved by God’s grace through our faith in Jesus Christ”, Paul wrote to the Ephesians. “If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile”.

What would the world be like, Paul asks, had the resurrection never happened? Would we even want to live in such a world? In how many ways would our lives be different without the resurrection?

“If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile”.

C. S. Lewis, the author of the “Chronicles of Narnia” and many other books, writes about the resurrection of the body, especially after his wife died at a young age from cancer.

Lewis writes, “What the soul cries out for even more than the resurrection of the body is the resurrection of the senses – the means by which we know our bodies and know the world”.

“We already have”, says Lewis, “some feeble and intermittent power of raising dead memory sensations from their graves”. Lewis is talking about memory.

Through memory we can remember how last Thanksgiving’s turkey tasted, especially the jalapeño smoked turkey that we had. We remember the soft touch of our grandma’s long ago kiss on the forehead, the distinctive laugh of one we have loved deeply and well, but who has been separated from us by death. The rich experiences of our lives live on, in memory – not so intensely as when we first felt them, but enough that they can touch us again, in our dreams and in our working recollections.

Lewis writes, “memory as we know it is a dim foretaste, a mirage even, of a power which the soul, or rather Christ in the soul will exercise for eternity. At present we tend to think of the soul as somehow inside the body. But the glorified body of the resurrection as I conceive it – the sensuous life raised from its death – will be inside the soul. As God is not in space but space is in God”.

“Then the new earth and sky will rise in us as we have risen in Christ. The birds will sing and the waters flow, and lights and shadows move across the hills, and the faces of our friends laugh upon us with amazed recognition”.

C. S. Lewis in his creative way, tries to help us wrap our minds around the resurrection of the body. But it’s still our all-too-human minds trying to race ahead to touch the thing we can never fully know in this life.

The apostle Paul in his first century preaching and writing knows he needs to keep it short and simple. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” Seventeen words.

It’s a story of a world in which Christ did not rise, the stone was not rolled away, and the linens were not discarded. It’s the story of a world in which faith is useless and where hope is shattered. It’s the story of a world in which billboard proverbs have more influence on people than Holy Scriptures.

St. Paul finishes our text not with a tweet, but with a fact.

Verse 20 – “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead”. End of story!

May the peace of God . . .

#367 – Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds