WHY THE RESURRECTION MATTERS

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

By

Steven J. Cole

April 11, 1993

© Steven J. Cole, 1993

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition © The Lockman Foundation
April 11, 1993
Special Easter Message

**Why the Resurrection Matters**
1 Corinthians 15:1-19

A man named Jones took his car to the mechanic for repairs. Jones ignored the signs posted in the garage that told customers to keep out of the working area. He kept looking over the mechanic’s shoulder, getting in the way. The mechanic had had a rough day, and he was getting frustrated. Finally he took Jones by the shoulder and led him out of the working area. He said, “Let’s play a game.” He drew a circle on the floor with a piece of chalk and said, “The rules of the game are that you stay inside this circle while I fix your car. I’ll bet you can’t do it!” “It’s a deal,” said Jones.

The mechanic went back to the car, but before he went back to work, he glanced up at Jones, who had a silly grin on his face. The mechanic thought, “I’ve had it with this dumb yokel.” He felt like he had to relieve his tension. So he picked up a sledgehammer and smashed it into the fender of Jones’ car. He looked over at Jones, who was cracking up with laughter, still inside the circle. That made the mechanic angrier yet. He smashed the car two more times with the hammer, and looked over again at Jones. Jones was doubled over with laughter, but still inside the circle. The mechanic was furious with rage. He started smashing Jones’ car all over with the hammer. Jones was rolling on the floor and holding his sides from laughter, but still inside the circle. The mechanic couldn’t believe it. He went over to Jones and said, “Why are you laughing while I’m smashing your car?” Jones got control of his laughter long enough to reply, “While you weren’t looking, I stepped outside the circle three times!”

You say, “Jones was crazy!” You’re right. Jones was crazy. He was taking seriously something meant to be taken lightly, and he taking lightly something that was rather serious. But many who would laugh at Jones and call him crazy are doing the same thing on a far more serious matter.

Let me explain: The Bible proclaims the fact (which we celebrate today) that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, and that
He appeared to a great number of witness over a 40 day period, giving many convincing proofs of His resurrection. Then He ascended bodily into heaven. The Bible also affirms that this risen Lord Jesus some day will return to judge all the living and the dead on the basis of their response to Him (Acts 10:42; 17-31).

That’s serious! What you do with the risen Christ now will determine where you spend eternity. Eternity means forever! Jesus said, “What will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

And yet most people spend the bulk of their time and efforts trying to gain the things of the world, which will perish, while neglecting their own souls and the souls of others, which are eternal. They are doing just what Jones did—they are taking seriously something that isn’t very important, and taking lightly something that is really quite serious.

If Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, it’s the most important fact in all history. Tremendous consequences hang on your response to the resurrection. It’s extremely important on this Easter Sunday and every day of your life that you understand why the resurrection of Jesus matters so that you take it seriously. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 Paul shows us why the resurrection matters.

1. The resurrection matters because it is true (15:1-11).

The resurrection is not a religious myth, which coincides with springtime to inspire us with hope and positive thinking. Rather, it is an historic fact that Jesus of Nazareth rose bodily from the dead. It was a physical, not just a “spiritual” resurrection. To be sure, Jesus arose with a resurrection body, which has different properties than our earthly bodies, as Paul explains (15:35-49). But it was a body that could be seen and touched, that could eat and drink.

There are people in our day who say, “Well, if it helps you to believe in things like the resurrection, that’s fine. If it’s true for you, that’s great. But it’s not true for me.” But they misunderstand the nature of verifiable truth. The resurrection of Jesus Christ isn’t something that’s true for some, but not for others. It’s like the law of gravity. You don’t have to believe that gravity is true for it to be true. It is true, whether you believe it or not. And it makes a great deal of difference whether you believe it or not if you’re standing
on the edge of the Grand Canyon and decide to jump off! Even so, it makes a great deal of difference whether you believe in the truth of the resurrection.

How can we know that the resurrection wasn’t just the invention of Jesus’ early followers? Paul is not exhaustive, but he lists a few evidences for the resurrection in 15:1-11.

A. The is the evidence of the prophetic Scriptures (15:4)

The Scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would be raised from the dead. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted from Psalm 16 and showed how David referred to Christ: “You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay” (see Acts 2:24-32). In our text, Paul refers to Christ’s resurrection as the “first fruits” (15:20, 23). In the Old Testament, the first fruits were presented to God on the day following the Sabbath after Passover (Lev. 23:9-14). Since Jesus the Passover lamb was slain on the Jewish Passover, His resurrection on the day after the Sabbath fulfills this scripture.

Other Old Testament Scriptures, when read in their context, clearly refer to the death and resurrection of Christ (Ps. 22:22ff. with Heb. 2:12; Isa. 53:10-12; Jonah, with Matt. 12:38-41).

Jesus Himself predicted on a number of occasions that He would be killed and raised up on the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; 27:63; John 2:19). Since the Scriptures are accurate on hundreds of other prophecies, and since Jesus Himself is not known to lie, these prophecies lend weight to the fact of the resurrection. It was not a story that was made up after the fact by a bunch of dejected disciples. The death and resurrection of Jesus were in accord with God’s eternal plan.

B. There is the evidence of eyewitness testimony (15:5-8).

Paul lists a number of people who saw the risen Savior. None of these were expecting a resurrection, especially not Paul. The sheer number of witnesses argues against the possibility of hallucination. The moral integrity of the witnesses—men who gave the world its highest moral teaching—precludes the possibility of fabrication. To doubt the resurrection of Jesus you have to say that all of these witnesses were deceived or deceivers.
C. There is the evidence of changed lives (15:9-11).

Paul mentions his own transformation as exhibit A. He had been a persecutor of the church of God, but now he was pouring out his life on its behalf. We also know that Peter and the other apostles were transformed from depressed, fearful men after the crucifixion to joyful, courageous witnesses after the resurrection. It is hard to explain that change and their willingness to suffer for Christ even unto death, if they knew the resurrection to be a hoax.

And then there is the evidence of the changed lives of those who have believed through the witness of the apostles. The Corinthians had believed (15:11) and were transformed (6:9-11). Millions of others in every century and culture have testified to the life-changing power of the risen Savior.

The evidence is solid. We must begin by realizing that the resurrection matters because it is an historical fact: thus we must take it seriously.

2. The resurrection of Jesus matters because apart from it, the Christian faith is worthless (15:12-19).

The Corinthians were not rejecting the resurrection of Christ per se, but there were some that were saying that there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. Paul is showing them the logical consequences of the wrong belief. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised (15:13), and if that’s the case, a number of other things follow, which make the entire Christian faith worthless:

A. The Gospel is worthless (15:14a, 15).

“Our preaching is vain” (= “empty”). There is no substance to the gospel if Christ is not raised. Christianity may have some nice moral platitudes, but it simply takes its place among other powerless religions and ethical systems if you remove the living Lord Jesus.

Worse that that, all the New Testament writers would be lying if Christ is not raised. If they lied about something as crucial as that, how could you trust them as teachers of ethics? So you must throw out the entire Bible if Jesus Christ is not raised from the dead, because it would discredit those who wrote the Bible. Thus...
B. Believing the gospel is worthless (15:14b, 17).

Apart from the reality of the resurrection, faith is no good. Have you ever heard, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe”? That’s absurd. That’s faith in faith. Faith is only as good as its object. You can believe with all your heart that your car will fly. You can drive it over the edge of the Grand Canyon at 80 miles per hour, firmly believing that it will fly. But your believing it doesn’t make it true. If your car had been designed to fly, then believing that fact would be necessary for you to benefit from that feature. But faith is only as good as its object.

Why is it worthless to believe in Jesus if He is not raised from the dead? Because we have a sin problem. God is absolutely righteous and cannot accept us into His presence if we have any sin. Christ died on the cross as the substitute for our sins (15:3). If He is not risen, then His death is no different than any other death, and faith in Him is worthless. We would still be in our sins (15:17). Jesus must in fact be risen if our faith is to be of any effect with regard to our sin problem.

C. Hope beyond the grave is worthless (15:18).

Paul says that if Christ is not risen, then those who have fallen asleep (died) in Christ have perished. There is no ground for believing that your departed loved ones who had put their faith in Christ are in heaven, if Christ is not raised.

You hear a lot of false ideas about death. Many people have invented a god just a bit better that they are. Their theory about eternal life is, “If a person does the best he can and helps others and is a good person, then he’ll make it to heaven.”

Hear me carefully: Such an idea is diametrically opposed to the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament. Such thinking grossly underestimates the absolute holiness of God and the awful sinfulness of the human heart. It assumes that a person can be his own Savior, with just a little boost from God. Nothing is farther from the truth, and nothing could insult what Christ did on the cross more than that kind of thinking. If men and women can save themselves, do you think that Jesus Christ would have laid aside the splendor of heaven, taken on human flesh, endured the suffering He did at the hands of sinners, and died upon the cross?
The only reason He went to the cross is because that is the only way the justice and righteousness of God could be satisfied. It is the only way sinful people can be saved. If Jesus didn’t die on the cross for our sins and rise again on the third day, triumphant over the forces of evil and death, then there is no hope beyond the grave! Hope based on human theories about God and eternity is worthless. Our hope for eternal life for us and for our loved ones can only be built upon the death and resurrection of the sinless Savior who bore our sins.

Thus if Christ is not risen, the gospel is worthless; believing the gospel is worthless; and hope beyond the grave is worthless.

D. Your suffering and toil are worthless (15:19).

Have you ever thought, “Even if Christianity is not true—there is no God and nothing beyond this life—I would still want to be a Christian because of the good life it brings me now”? I have. Where else can you find a way of life that brings you as much joy and happiness as Christianity?

But we forget one factor, and we minimize another, when we think like that. We forget that we are not facing persecution on account of our faith. Paul was. If there is no God and no eternity, then why suffer for your faith? If Jesus is not risen, then why endure persecution? And we minimize the fact that we are called to live sacrificially and work hard for the cause of Christ. We American Christians are too soft. Biblical discipleship as Jesus presented it is costly. It involves giving of yourself, your time, and your money. It’s not the easy road. That’s why Paul says, “If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied” (15:19).

What’s the bottom line if Jesus is not risen? Paul gives it in 15:32: “If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” In other words, live for yourself and for pleasure now, because that’s all there is. As Peggy Lee sang a few years ago, “If that’s all there is my friend, then break out the booze and have a ball.”

I’m concerned that some of you may be thinking, “I believe in Jesus and the resurrection,” and yet, if you were to stop and examine your lifestyle, you would find that it is described by verse 32.
You are living for yourself, or perhaps for yourself and your family. Your goal in life is to pursue personal comfort, pleasure and affluence. Your dream is to get a little nicer house, a newer car, and a few other trinkets to make life more enjoyable.

And God? The church? They fit into that scheme. To the extent that God and His church make you feel good and increase your happiness, you get involved. But in the final analysis, the controlling value in your life is personal happiness. But that’s how a person lives if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not true! A person who truly believes in the risen Savior seeks first His kingdom and righteousness.

Be careful! If you claim to have been a Christian for a long time, but Christ and His kingdom are not central in your life, you may have believed in vain (15:2, 10)! If the grace of God and the fact of the risen Christ are a reality in your life, then, like Paul, you should be denying yourself and following Jesus, no matter how hard that may be. Paul labored hard for Jesus Christ as a result of his meeting with the risen Savior (15:10).

“But,” you say, “that was Paul, but I’m not Paul.” True, but look at 15:58. Paul’s conclusion, in light of the fact of the resurrection of Christ and His coming back (which stems from His resurrection, 15:50-54) is, “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” That’s written to the whole church in Corinth—and in Flagstaff. Every believer—not just full time Christian workers—but every Christian, as a result (“therefore”) of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is to be involved in the work of the Lord. Work for the Lord is not in vain. It is the only source of true fulfillment.

Is the goal of your life to seek first the risen Savior’s kingdom? Or is it to work for your own happiness and fit in the Lord’s work when it’s convenient and doesn’t interfere with your happiness? Does the resurrection of Jesus Christ matter to you this morning? Or, like Jones, are you serious about something that really isn’t very important in the light of eternity—the things of this world; and not serious about something that is really quite important—the eternal destiny of your soul and of other souls for whom Christ died?
Conclusion

The resurrection of Jesus Christ matters because it is true and apart from it, the Christian faith is worthless.

A few years ago there was a TV game show called, “Let’s Make a Deal.” The contestants often had to choose between a prize that was visible to them or another prize which was concealed behind a curtain. The visible prize was usually a nice item, like an expensive stereo or TV set. Sometimes the unseen prize turned out to be an impractical gag gift, such as 10,000 boxes of toothpicks. But at other times the person chose the visible gift and discovered to their horror that they had passed up, behind the curtain, a new car worth thousands of dollars. Whenever that happened, you felt with the contestant that awful feeling in the pit of your stomach that comes from making a major wrong choice.

Each person here faces a far more serious choice: You can live for the things you see in this world and miss the unseen eternal prize or you can let go of the things of this world and pursue the eternal reward. God has told us in His Word that the eternal prize behind the curtain far outweighs any temporal prize you can pursue. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the sure evidence that what He taught is true. It is the central fact of history. If you base your life on it, you have a sure hope for time and eternity. If you pursue anything else, it will ultimately result in futility. Don’t be like Jones! Don’t take seriously something that doesn’t matter and take lightly the truth that matters most of all! Jesus is risen! You can build your life on that fact!

Discussion Questions

1. How would you answer the person who said, “If Christianity works for you, that’s fine; but it isn’t for me”?  
2. Are those who claim to be Christians but who are living for self and this world “believing in vain” (15:2)? What does that mean?  
3. Why is it important to base your faith on truth rather than on “what Jesus can do for you”?  
4. Does 1 Cor. 15:58 mean that a Christian can’t pursue a “secular” career? How does it apply?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 1993, All Right Reserved.