

1 Corinthians 15:1-36

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0:00] You're a great voice this evening. Stand up here and hear that. It's striking as people lift their voices to praise God in that way. But what if it's all completely pointless?

! What if we've gathered together this morning, we've bothered to come back this evening, and it's all actually just hot air. And not just today, but what about tomorrow as well?

What about if your work actually will account for nothing in the end? Your family life, it's pointless.

Your life. What if the world is just a cosmic accident, and we're all actually just playing pretend?

Some people play pretend in one context, some of us play pretend in another context, but the bottom line is that it's all meaningless, really. Think about what it is that drives you in life. What gets you out of bed in the morning?

You think, I want to achieve things in life. I want to be a success. I want to get stuff done, and I want to have stuff to show for it in the end. Ambition is what drives you. You want to get out there and get after it. You think, well, I get out of bed in the morning because I've got responsibilities.

I've got overheads. I've got bills to pay. I've got to keep the family afloat. There are expectations to be met, the expectations of my bosses and my family and my friends and those that I'm responsible for.

[1:38] You do what you do out of a sense of duty. Or maybe somebody asks you that question, what motivates you? You say, I actually don't know what motivates me. I'm just going along with everyone else. It's really important to me that I don't stand out, that I'm not seen as weird or different.

I just do what everyone else does. The thing that motivates you is that you want to belong. You want to be part of a group. You want to be accepted. We're motivated in all kinds of ways, all of us, but the reason that you're ambitious or you're dutiful or you want to belong is because you think that that ambition or that duty or that belonging will deliver the good life.

That's really what's underneath it all. Ambition is about success, and you think the good life is about being an impressive person. Duty is about reputation and being seen as a good person.

Following the crowd is about being accepted, the sort of person that people want to have on their team. But what if none of it matters? None of it. See, plenty of people, many of whom you'll rub shoulders with tomorrow or some of whom you'll rub shoulders with tomorrow, they've started down one or more of these paths, and then they've asked themselves the question, why am I doing it?

What is the point? Why in the end, when all's said and done, does it matter how I live my life? And of course, punk bands and indie singers have made this the theme of their songs for years. Angry, nihilistic rage. Maybe the earliest voice was Johnny Cash, the great Johnny Cash. In the same year that Max Bygraves was singing about pink toothbrushes and blue toothbrushes, Johnny Cash grabbed his gun. I shot a man in Reno. Why? Just a one.

watch him die. Because what does it matter? In this hard and painful and meaningless world, what does it matter if you shoot someone just to watch them die? And who can disagree?

[3:53] If we're prepared to lift our heads and be honest and face facts about the world that we live in, we're surrounded by pain, and in the end, it all, all of it ends in death. Maybe you'd prefer to play pretend, but that is the cold, hard truth. Even if your life is broadly good, whatever that means, death casts its shadow. Many of us know the pain of losing loved ones, and we know that that shadow is hanging over us. We know that it's coming for us. So, are the nihilists on to something after all?

If death is the end, why not shoot someone just to watch them die? Because it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter in the end. You live, you die. Who cares?

If we're going to be honest about reality, that's the bottom line. And that is why what the Apostle Paul says this evening in 1 Corinthians 15 is such a relief. He turns our eyes at the end, or nearing the end of this book, 1 Corinthians, he turns our eyes to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and he makes us look at it, and look at it, and look at it again, not just that it happened, but also what it means for us, and what it means for the whole world. And he shows us how this event in history, all those years ago, completely reframes our ambition, imbues our duty with lasting meaning, and cements over our nihilism with hope. Some of you will have heard of Simon Sinek.

He had a TED Talk that went viral a few years ago. He's a business coach online. He pops up everywhere. He made a ton of money off the back of a TED Talk called Start With Why. And in his work, he realized as he was going around these businesses that people would often talk about what they do, and they talk about how they do it. But he thought that they should start further back by asking the question of why they exist as a company. And of course, this was eye-opening for so many people.

That's why his book is sold so hugely. Ask yourself why you do what you do, why you exist, why everything that you're about is the thing that you do. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Christian's why for everything. Boys and girls, why do you learn language? Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and some other things as well. But in the end, it's about the resurrection.

[6:33] Really? Really? Is that right? See, I think lots of us believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and we know it's important historically, and it makes his earthly ministry credible, but we can't really say why it matters now. And that's exactly where these Corinthians have gone wrong. Look at verse 12. Now, if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? That's their problem. There's no sense in which they're looking forward to a resurrection. They believe, of course, you see, we've seen this, that spiritually, they're already there. They've arrived. Look at their gifts. Look at the experiences that they can point to. They have arrived. And this mistake explains why they've fallen into the errors that Paul has written about in the letter to date. So, they have a low view of the body. They're about the spiritual, and they think they're there now. The body isn't spiritual, so some see their bodies as irrelevant. The only thing that matters is the spirit, the soul.

So, what you do with your body, whoever you sleep with, chapters 5 and 6, doesn't matter because it's not spiritual. For others, their view was that truly spiritual people shouldn't be hampered by physical matters. So, they chose asceticism. We saw that in chapter 7. People were embracing celibacy as true spirituality. Because there was no anticipation about the future, a future bodily resurrection, they were focused on the present. And that explains their insistence on their rights and their gifts being recognized and them being at the center of everything. Chapter 6, chapters 9 to 11. And as those who were on the highest plane of spirituality or so they thought, they should have their gifts recognized. Chapters 12 to 14. They should get special treatment. Paul, you'd know if you've been laboring all the way through this big long series we've had in 1 Corinthians, Paul has exposed all sorts of sinful behavior. And now he draws it all back to this one theological mistake.

And the point is this. If you fail to grasp the fundamental theological significance of the resurrection, you can veer off course really badly. And the Corinthians show us that you can do this while all the while thinking you're actually really spiritually mature. They thought they were flying spiritually. And Paul has gone, problem here, problem here, problem here, problem here, and I'm going to tie it all back to this one theological issue, and that is you're wrong about the resurrection.

Believing the gospel of the Lord Jesus is not a one-time thing. We must hold fast to that gospel all the days of our lives. Look at verse 2. Paul is really clear. It is possible to have believed in vain.

[9:18] And by this I take Paul to mean that saying you're a Christian is different from actually being a Christian. Saying you have faith in God is very different from having that faith shape everything about your life and persevering in it until the very end of your life. The Corinthians received the gospel when Paul brought it and the church was planted. And his point here isn't that they need to hear something that they didn't already know, but that they have forgotten the foundational truth of the resurrection. And chapter 15 is Paul saying, look at it, look at it. No, keep looking at it.

And trace out the implications and understand this. And the thing is this. He says the resurrection of Jesus is absolutely central, first of all, to the gospel. It is central, point number one, to the gospel.

The message upon which the whole Christian faith rests, this matter of first importance, Paul says, verse 3, necessarily involves the resurrection. 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. When the Messiah, the Christ, comes, he will suffer at the hands of a corrupt religious regime. He will be crucified under the judgment of God for the sin of the world. He'll be buried in a tomb, and three days later he will walk from that tomb alive.

This is the message that Paul preached when he came to Corinth. And it is the message that the Corinthians received and believed. And it is the same message that faithful preachers declare today and will continue to proclaim until the end of history. And it is the message that unfaithful preachers will edit or avoid in order to please their hearers.

But can you see, this is the good news at the beating heart of the Christian faith. It is why we get up in the morning and why this life has meaning. If there's no resurrection, death wins, and everything is actually pointless. There is no good news for anyone. But if Christ has been raised, then we can be raised too. If he gets through death, he can get us through death too. But this can't just be wishful thinking or true in a person's heart. It has to be true, true. And because dead people don't rise, Paul is at pains to assert the fact that it really happened. You see, there's six different sources. He lists six sources that saw Christ in the flesh after he'd been raised from the dead. Verse 5, Peter. Verse 5, the twelve disciples.

[12:02] Verse 6, five hundred people, some of whom, he says while he's writing, are still around if you want to go down the street and ask them. Knock on number 42's door and ask them. They were there as part of the crowd of five hundred. And then verse 7, there's James. Then verse 7, all the apostles. And then verse 8, Paul himself. If you don't ask them, you don't ask some of the five hundred, ask me. I'm telling you, I saw him. Without the resurrection, there is no good news. Do you understand that? Without the resurrection of Jesus, if he is in the grave, this life that we live is Macbeth's poor player.

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. This life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But all these people saw him.

They saw him raised. They saw him eating, talking. He wasn't a hologram. There was no AI involved. There is a gospel. There is a message about Jesus Christ that you can trust, and you can trust your life to, and the resurrection is central to that message. But it's also central, I want us to see, it's also central to how that message is worked out. So secondly, we see the resurrection is also central to the church. Point number two, to the church. Paul explains this by highlighting the negative verse 13. If there's no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. Well, the Corinthians say there is no general resurrection of believers at the end of history, and Paul seems to be pushing their logic to its end. And he's saying if there's no resurrection of the dead at the end of history, then there's no resurrection of the dead in Jesus in the middle of history. What that means is, if Jesus was not raised, the elements of what make the church the church are all in vain. Look at verse 14. He says, preaching is pointless. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. The word for vain here is empty.

If there's no resurrection, then Paul's preaching was empty. There was nothing in it. It was a complete waste of everyone's time, and it's the same today. If Jesus' bones are rotting in the ground somewhere, what I am doing now is about the most pointless thing in the world. It's empty. It's nothing. There's nothing in this. And if you believe it, just is empty. Preaching is pointless. Secondly, verse 15, the New Testament is false. There's no resurrection. Christ has not been raised, verse 14. 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. If there's no resurrection, then Paul and all the apostles that we hear have told us a big old lie. Our New Testament is made up of their writing.

[15:10] The church is founded on their teaching. So, if Jesus wasn't raised, it's all a big hoax. When I say to you, turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians, it is no more significant than if I said to you, turn to page 7 of your favorite book. Without the resurrection, the New Testament is false. The apostles have misled us. And thirdly, our doctrine is useless. Verse 16, If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you're still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. So, if there's no resurrection, we are still in our sins, which means there's no forgiveness. If Jesus is still in the grave, those who have gone ahead of us, I'm sorry to tell you,

they are lost. There is no salvation. The doctrines of forgiveness and salvation are right at the heart of the church's teaching. If there's no resurrection, those doctrines are useless. We have simply nothing to hold on to ourselves or to offer a sin-sick world. So, can you see how central to the church the resurrection of Jesus is? Without it, the church is teaching. Her scriptures, her theology are all empty. And that is why to believe otherwise is vanity.

It's futile. It's empty. Can you see this? It's so important that we grasp this. If there is no resurrection, it's no exaggeration to say that the church is a joke, and all our faith and all our devotion and all our service is laughable. We are, verse 19, look at verse 19 and allow that to sober us here. We are to be pitied of all people, of all the poor souls that you come across, those wretched souls that you see around you in London, the beggar outside the tube, the people with psychological or physical challenges, and you see them and your heart goes out to them. The pity is drawn from you when you see them. You are more to be pitied than them because you have fallen for a big old ruse.

Can you see? Don't fall for the idea that if Christianity isn't true, it's kind of basically okay because it gives you good things like morality and values and peace of mind and a, I don't know, social group in the church that you can go and hang out with and drink tea, and it's all very good socially and everything else. Nonsense! I'm grateful, I have to say, for the high-profile people that are talking more about the Christian faith and particularly people that are talking about the goodness of things like cultural Christianity. Of course, we want to recover Christian culture. We want to recover the fruit of the Christian faith in our society for the good of everyone. But it's only good because it is founded on truth. It's only good because it's founded on something substantial that we can build our lives on, and the central truth at the heart of it all is the resurrection of Jesus. If the resurrection of Jesus didn't happen, you have spent your life for a lie. You've made a foolish investment. You are a fool, and so am I.

Two things. The Corinthians believed this when they started out, but they'd forgotten it. That's why he's writing to them in this way. Have you forgotten this? Inasmuch as you see worship as a drudge, inasmuch as you're just going through the motions in the Christian life? One of the implications of our confessing of Christ each Lord's Day when we say that on the third day He rose again is that what we do here when we gather in this way is profoundly important because the opposite of what Paul is saying here is true. Preaching is substantial. Christ speaks to us in this context because the New Testament is His true and living Word. The Holy Spirit inspired and preserved this document. Remember, we saw last week for our upbuilding and our encouragement and our consolation, and when it offers us forgiveness for our sins, we can trust it. When it holds out to us salvation and a glorious future on the new earth, we have a hope that endures anything. That is what's contained in the church's worship. Can I also say, if you're not a Christian, can you see—if you're looking into this, we're delighted you're here—but can you see how this raises the stakes on the decision that the

Christians that you know have made to follow Jesus? Your friend or family member who is a Christian knows that if the tomb isn't empty, they've wasted their lives. They know that, but still they're prepared to follow Him. They're convinced of its truth. Given how high the Apostle Paul pushes the stakes here, I wonder, would you ask them why they're prepared to do that? And would you think carefully about the answer that they give? There are more reasons to believe the empty tomb than any of the alternatives. Maybe you've been conditioned to think that, well, dead people don't rise, therefore this can't be true. Well, would you have another look? Maybe look again at the evidence for yourself.

[20:45] Right, the resurrection is central to the gospel. It's central to the church's ministry. And then Paul presses this out further. Third thing we need to see is it is central.

The resurrection is central to the Christian life. So, Paul has laid out the negative implications of there not being a resurrection, and then verse 20, can you feel the stunning relief? 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. I'm preaching away next week, but Lord willing, the week after that, I'm going to come back to this section again, 20 to 34 in more detail.

But for now, I want us to see how the Christian life is lived in light of the resurrection of Jesus. Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The principle of the firstfruits comes from the Old Testament. The first portion of produce was given to the Lord, Leviticus 23 verse 10, as a sign that the whole belonged to Him, and that there was the rest of the harvest to come. Gave the firstfruits to the Lord as a way of marking out that He was the one that had provided all of it, but the firstfruits presupposed that the rest would follow. And this is what it's like with Jesus. And Paul makes the point with reference to the two great covenant heads of history. Everyone is born in Adam as their covenant representative head. We are born in Adam, all of us, every single one of us, and that is why we all die. But those who have faith in Christ, those who are in Christ, have Christ as their covenant head, there is life. Just as Adam draws everyone into the grave, so Christ makes alive all who put their faith in Him. And he does this through his resurrection.

Verse 21, Paul says this, it's as if Christ has come, the second person of the Trinity has taken on a human nature in order to come down here, in order to go into the grave, in order to get those who are there and bring them out. Christ goes to get us. And it's as He rises again, He draws out all who are His. That is the promise of future glory. And what I want us to see is that this resurrection life is the reason why we do everything that we do. So, why do we baptize people? Verse 29.

[23 : 38] 29. I take it to mean, why mark people with the sign of belonging to Jesus if they're going to the grave for eternity? That's what he's talking about there, about baptism for the dead. I think he's saying, why would we mark people as belonging to God if they're just going to go to the grave forever?

The resurrection is why we identify with the Lord Jesus in our baptism. It is the reason why Paul would choose to suffer for the gospel, 30 to 32. It's why Paul would forego the pleasures of life in the here and now, 32 and 33.

The Christian life is a life that is patterned after the example of Jesus. The Christian life is a life of self-giving. It is a life of personal relinquishment. You remember what Jesus so clearly stated when He defined what it means to be a follower of His. If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me. If anyone would come after me, let him lay down his life, his desires, his ambitions, his goals for life, and take up my way, my ordering of things. Follow my path, the Lord Jesus says. And the path that Christ took was the path of self-relinquishment all the way to the cross. That is the path that He calls us to. Now, why on earth would anyone do that if it wasn't the path to glory?

Why would you do that if there wasn't resurrection? There is no reason. And Paul has made that clear, reason after reason after reason. He says the only alternative, the only way to live your life if there is no resurrection, verse 32, eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Fill your boots for tomorrow, or next week, or 30 years later, it's all over. Paul says no resurrection, nihilism is all that's left. Party on the lip of the abyss. But in fact, Christ has been raised. He's been raised from the dead, so you can deny yourself. You can take up the cross of Christ and follow Him. You can suffer for the sake of truth. You can forego pleasures in the here and now. You can endure in a difficult situation out of obedience. You can forego promotion. You can forego recognition. You can forego praise, all of those things, for the sake of Christ. You can deny yourself the pleasures of sin in order to honor Christ.

[26 : 23] In a culture that makes a virtue out of sinning, that is a really hard thing to do, but you can do it. Why? Because the tomb is empty. Because Christ is real. Because He has given you His Spirit who lives in you, and He is keeping you for glory. Suffering and self-denial for the sake of Christ, the Christian life that Jesus calls us to, we can live it. It only makes sense if Christ has been raised, but we can live it because He has been raised, and that changes everything. May God help us. Let's pray.