

1 Corinthians 15:1-28

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 0 0] Well, please keep 1 Corinthians 15 open as we go through this evening! I discovered this week that Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris will be open again to the public! at the end of next year. Just check in every so often with the updates to find out how it's getting on because I was particularly moved by the images back in 2019 when the fire struck this great cathedral in Paris and brought it to its knees. I don't know, it struck me because it felt like a bit of a parable of our time. The great edifice to religion, this great skylight-dominating monument to God was brought to its knees in Paris of all places, Paris, France.

Because, you see, we're told by our secular culture that this is actually what needs to happen. As secularism gathers pace in Western culture, we're told that God needs to be driven out of things. God needs to be brought down. So, when the spire collapses, when you see on the television the fire take hold and the spire comes down, it just feels then like the irrelevance of an ancient creed is seen for all of us. This thing that really captivates the hearts of really only the primitive or the deluded. It's, well, it's clear for all to see in this image as the cathedral burns. After all, we're told, aren't we, that Christianity has no place in the modern world. In a recent book by David Baddiel, comedian David Baddiel, called *The God Desire*, he says that he understands why religious people believe. He says that they want there to be another world that's better than this one. He acknowledges the difficulty of life in a fallen world. He recognizes that this world is painful and full of struggle and full of difficulty. And he says that religious people are religious because they want to believe that there's something better than that. But there's just no proof. And his point is, well, it's the age-old wish fulfillment idea that he says that he has put together an equation to describe. The equation goes like this, desire plus invisibility equals God. Desire plus invisibility equals God. He says, quote, early Christianity became popular because it was in tune with what people want. But now it's, and well, whether it's Baddiel or anybody else, you can fill in the negative noun, can't you? It used to be, okay, people like Christianity back at some point in the past, but now it's... So the question is, when that's the culture that we live in, what on earth are we doing here this evening? Why are we here? It's a Sunday evening. It's a lovely evening. These are school holidays. Why are we here? Surely there are better things that we could be doing with our time.

The answer is because it's Easter Sunday. It is still, you know, Easter Sunday. We come out in the morning, and it's full of joy and excitement, Easter day. It's still Easter Sunday this evening.

And what I mean by that is not that it's one of the two annual visits that we make to church. We're here this evening because it's Easter Sunday. That's what you do on Easter Sunday. There's a Christmas as well that you do, but you can also do Easter Sunday. I'm not talking about that.

[3 : 2 9] I'm saying we're here because Easter is the reason that we don't give in to the cultural tide. Easter is the reason why we push on with confidence, even when it feels like everyone else is going the other way, when it feels like we're going in this direction and everyone else is going in that direction, when the cool people in the culture sneer at us. Easter is the reason why we keep going, because the resurrection of Jesus Christ changes everything. That's not hyperbole. That's not overstating the case. The empty tomb changes absolutely everything. That is the point that the Apostle Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 15 as he gets towards the end of this letter that he wrote to the Corinthian church. And what we'll see this evening is that the Apostle Paul holds up the resurrection of Jesus as the centerpiece of so much that he has been talking to them about as a church and really so much that is at the center of the Christian faith.

And what he's doing is pointing to the implications that it has for us and for our world. If you like, you could say that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 is theologically applying the historic material that Paul Levy preached this morning, if you were here. So, this sermon will inevitably have some overlap with this morning's, but I hope that it's the sort of overlap that the New Testament gives us, because the New

Testament gives us the historical accounts with all of their implications in the Gospels, and then also obviously material like 1 Corinthians 15 as well.

So, this evening I want to point to two things, two things that Paul highlights about the resurrection that change everything. The first is its centrality, and the second is its credibility. That is why the resurrection is vitally important for the church and for the world, and why we can believe that it happened.

Point number one, centrality, the centrality of the resurrection. Look at verse 1. I would remind you, brothers of the gospel, I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

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. Paul says that this issue, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the thing of first importance. It is the top of the priority list. Christ died, yes, but three days later, He was raised again.

[6 : 13] And if this didn't happen, verse 2, we've all believed in vain. If you go down to verse 14, not only have we all believed in vain, but Christian ministers should look for another job.

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. If Christ isn't raised, our faith is vanity, literally breath of no substance.

It is a dream, and preaching is a nonsense. Everything that we're doing here this evening is a total waste of time. I was at a dinner one evening a number of years ago, and in the course of discussion, a gentleman had invited a number of people that didn't know each other. We came together to discuss things and to have an enjoyable evening together. And over the course of the discussion, it emerged that there were two of us that were Christians. And after a while, after a bit of time had passed, one particularly punchy guest stopped the conversation. He was clearly irritated by the fact that two of us were Christians, and he said, listen, hang on a second. I want to ask these two guys, what if it's not true? What if it's not true, and you have staked your life on this Jesus and who He has claimed to be? What if that's not true? I was a guest of somebody there. I didn't want to just jump in. I gathered my thoughts for a moment, and the other Christian jumped in, and he said, well, my faith gives me a sense of purpose, and I've made great friends, and I've done some good things for other people over the course of my life. So, if I get to the end and it's not true, well, I'd be happy with that. I've lived a good life. I had a decision to make in that moment. I was a guest of somebody who was hosting the dinner who wasn't a Christian. This chap had said something that was the complete opposite of what the Bible says, and so, do I risk offending the host and embarrass this other Christian? And I chose to do both. So, I said, well, I want to say to you, if I get to the end of my life and Christ isn't raised, living as a Christian will have been a monumental waste of time for me and for Him, and the bottom line is that the Bible is clear. It is all vanity. If it didn't happen, it's a waste of time, and we're wasting our lives. Why is that? Well, look at verse 16.

If there's no resurrection, there's no forgiveness. 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're still in your sins.

[9 : 00] Christ has not been raised. We have no answer to the problem of sin in our world, because it means that Jesus didn't actually defeat death. It means that He wasn't vindicated as Lord of all, and it means, therefore, that we don't have a Savior. If Christians entertain the idea of being forgiven by God, but Jesus remains in the ground somewhere, we are simply plain wrong.

No forgiveness. But also, if there's no resurrection, there's no hope. Verse 18, then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, if believing that Christ is raised from the dead, it only gives us hope for the here and now, we of all people are most to be pitied, Paul says. If Christ is not raised, all we have is an idea.

All we have is a philosophy to live by that we might hope gives us a few pointers how to live well in this world, because that's all it can do. If Jesus didn't defeat death, we have no hope for anything beyond that, and we can make of the few years we get the strut upon life stage, whatever we want, but hopefully it'll help us for that, but there's nothing beyond that. If Christ can only help us with that, then He's no better than Jordan Peterson or Brene Brown or pick your guru of choice.

And if we've staked everything on Him, Sarah was baptized to identify with this Christ. If she's done that, like all the rest of us have who have been baptized, if it's just for this life, we should be pitied.

The pity here, the way Paul uses the word, it could have the sense of scorn or mockery, that kind of thing, but I think it's more benign than that. I think it's more of a kind of, oh. David Baddiel takes that

tone in his book. He's adamant that religion is for those who have an emotional need. He says it's, quote, babyish, in contrast to atheists who are, quote, too hard an adult to require comfort and hope in the face of death. Are you with the Christians who are babyish, or are you with the grown-up atheists who are too tough? It's all very, you know, oh, poor you Christians. Of course, it's not just Baddiel. It's like that, is it? Plenty of people think this way today. They think that Christians are deluded fools. Why can't they just get with the modern program? Why can't Christians just catch up with the rest of us with our enlightened perspective on the world? By the way, how's that going? How's that working for your emotional health, your social cohesion, your human flourishing? That's a debate for another day.

[12:04] But that said, that kind of, oh, poor then. That's exactly the right sentiment if Jesus is still in the grave. The resurrection is so central to the Christian faith that if Christ didn't rise, the pity of the world is well-deserved. Well, Paul presses this into the corners for us here in this passage a bit more. The resurrection is also central to us having, not just is it central because if it didn't happen, it's a waste of time, but positively, it's also central to having life, eternal life. See, we often equate life with the death of Jesus. We often equate eternal life with Good Friday. But look at verse 22. But in fact, Paul says, verse 20, 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. Christ's death on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Day should be viewed as one event. One old theologian talks about them being the morning and evening of the same day.

It doesn't quite work given that Easter morning is, you know, you understand they're connected. We're to see them as together. They are two parts of a whole. And together, those things, the death and the resurrection of Jesus are the grounds, the very grounds of our salvation. So, resurrection is the point at which we're assured of Jesus' victory over sin and death. Romans 4.25 tells us explicitly that it is the resurrection that secures our justification before God. The resurrection is central to us having eternal life. When you know that you've been forgiven, when you know that your guilt before God has been removed, when you know that you're accepted by the One who made everything and before Him, we're all going to have to stand one day, there is great assurance. I have a friend who by any worldly category, we would say he has made a success of his life. He's probably in his mid-70s now. He's absolutely loaded, and there are lots of things about his life that would look like success. But despite the great wealth and despite all of the security that that is supposed to bring, he often talks about climbing the wall of worry. He talks about life as climbing the wall of worry. Can you relate to that?

If you know you have eternal life, all that worry evaporates. Now, there may be worry in the cut and thrust of life, but the idea that the whole picture is one of worry, with all of this uncertainty that is the thing that cultivates that worry. If you know you have eternal life, all of that worry evaporates. And how can you know you have eternal life? The tomb is empty.

Well, it's not just life. The good things keep coming. The resurrection is also central to us having hope. Look at verse 23. Verse 22, The resurrection means that we can be sure that death is not the end.

And we can be rock-solid certain that if we have our faith in Christ, we will follow Him through the grave. He is the firstfruits of God's harvest. He is the bit that goes in ahead of the rest that will follow. The firstfruits signify that there's more to come. That's why Paul uses the language that he does. Christ goes ahead of us as the firstfruits of God's harvest, and we will follow Him into a bodily resurrection. As Paul, when he preached this morning, emphasized, Jesus wasn't raised as a disembodied spirit. Some people in the history of the church have tried to say that because, of course, the resurrection is miraculous. There's got to be some sort of earthly way of describing what's gone on.

[17:14] Well, he wasn't raised as a spirit in some sort of metaphorical sense or some sort of... You get the point. He was physically, bodily raised. The disciples were able to touch him, share food with him. Jesus had a glorified physical body when He returned to them. And the truth is that if you're with Jesus, if you are in Christ, you're coming out of the grave one day as well, and you'll receive the same glorified body that He has. What is true of Jesus will be true of you.

No more sickness. No more suffering. No more death. No more decay. No more as time passes, you think, I'm losing a bit of myself. I'm not what I once was.

So, your future is secure. If you're in Christ because of Easter, your future is secure. The resurrection also means that what we do now in the world, how we live now, that also really matters. The secular view of the world is that we live and we die, and that's the end.

We're just atoms, skin bags full of atoms that do what atoms do at this temperature. And then, when we go, that's it. But if you think about it, if you take that... If you draw that out logically, if that's the case, then nothing that we do ultimately matters.

It might matter for a time. It might matter for those that live around you or live with you or whatever it might be. But ultimately, in the end, it's meaningless.

[19 : 03] If there is no resurrection, if there is no judgment, no calling to account for the way people have lived, if there is no future where what we have done in the present actually matters, we're wasting our time. The whole thing is a waste of time. It's all meaningless.

The thing is, though, none of us live like that's true. The most vociferous atheist is always, thankfully always, inconsistent because they care about their relationships.

Everyone knows that truth and faithfulness and kindness are important things. Everybody wants truth at some level in their life, and truth to be true has to be objective.

There has to be an objective standard against which it can be measured, right or wrong. All of us, no matter what we say we believe, live like life has more meaning than whatever well-meaning words we can fit onto a headstone amount to. And that instinct is there. It's there in all of us because we were created for more than this life. And it's the resurrection of Christ that holds out the hope that everything we value in this life isn't going to be destroyed at the end.

If we live a long life, if we live a short life, if we live a full life, if we live a life that has been, for whatever reason, incredibly diminished, that life means something because of the resurrection of Christ. The good things that you've invested your time in, the things that you've done at cost to yourself for the sake of others, the things that you've done that have diminished you in order to do good for other people, those things matter because of the resurrection. And you can know that because Christ was raised, because there is something beyond the grave, those things aren't destroyed either. What we do doesn't just go into the ground with us when we die, or when those who come after us die.

[21 : 19] It's all taken up into eternity because of the resurrection of Christ. Now, that's really liberating. I want to propose to you that that is really liberating because when you know that your future is secure, it means that you don't have to have everything now. What is the thing that our culture is trying to press on us all the time, the thing that our culture stresses us out with all the time, the idea that you have to have more and bigger and faster and the better and the newest and the fastest and the whatever, whatever. And you have to because if you don't, you're nobody you get left behind. The resurrection tells us that you don't need to do that. We do not need to live with that tyranny. We don't need to have the master of the slave driver of more and better whipping us all the time because actually Christ has been raised and there's better ahead. If Christ hasn't been raised, this is as good as it gets and we need to go dog eat dog because we've got to have it all now.

But the very distinctive of our message as Christians is the tomb is empty, so we don't need to strive. We don't need to have. We don't need to be for the sake of others.

Easter Sunday liberates us to trust ourselves to God, to give our lives away for the sake of others, to give our time, to give our resources for the sake of others and for the sake of the gospel.

We don't need to have it all now because we know there is better to come. The ground of this hope is the empty tomb. How do we know that that's not just a nice idea? The tomb is empty. Easter day happened. And don't miss this. Don't miss this. Christ is raised in order to rule and reign. Look at verse 25. The risen Christ this evening, as we gather here, the risen Christ is seated at the Father's right hand and from there He is keeping and sustaining His people.

Easter means that you do not live the Christian life in your own strength. Easter means that it's not just down to you to do the best that you can because, you know, there's no one else that's going to pick it up for you.

[23 : 45] Easter means that you don't go out into the day tomorrow or later this week in your own strength. Easter means that you don't have to be able to do the best. It isn't just, you see, about hope for the future, but help in the present. The ruling Christ, the reigning Christ, He has ascended.

He was raised from the dead by the Father and ascended back to rule and reign at His right hand, and He goes with us by His Spirit. He sends His Spirit to fill His people. And the Spirit of Christ is our help and our guide to empower us to live for Him through all the trials and temptations, through

all the struggles. When we're going one way and the culture is going like waves the other way, He goes with us because He's risen. All of this is why the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith. It's central to a life of meaning and a life of purpose in our world. So, great, it's only good if it's true. The question is, is it legit? All of that is fine if it really happened, but it is an axiom of life, is it not? Both in the ancient and in the modern world, dead men don't rise.

More than that, if this is just a story, the teaching is fraudulent, and Jesus' death is just another regrettable injustice, and we're back to where we began. This is a waste of time. If this didn't happen, the world has every right to laugh at us because there's no God, no judgment, no hell below us, above us only sky. You had Dolly Parton this morning, that's John Lennon this evening. So, we must establish, secondly, the resurrection's credibility.

Much shorter point, you'll be glad to hear. Number one, the centrality, the resurrection. Number two, the credibility. This is where Paul goes in verses 5 to 8. For I delivered to you, as of verse 3, 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, and that He appeared to Cephas, Peter, then to the twelve, then He appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.

Why does Paul give that list? He does it because he's saying, listen, there are eyewitnesses who have seen the risen Christ. When He was raised from the dead, He wasn't just seen by one special person who is the keeper of the story, one person whose word you have to take, nor was it just a one or two people, an in-group, who could easily have cooked up the story to suit themselves. Do you notice the way Paul talks about it? It's He appeared to them, then them, then that group, and then all of these people in the same place at one time. Look, verse 6, He appeared in full public view, more than 500 people at the same time. This is really significant. This adds to the point from this morning about women being the first witnesses in the gospel accounts. If it was cooked up, you wouldn't have written women in as the first witnesses. If this is cooked up, you wouldn't have said, there are 500 people who all saw Him at one time. And it's significant because what He's saying here is, listen, you Corinthians, you can check with them to see if what I'm saying is true, because He's doing this within the lifetime of those who saw Jesus firsthand. This letter is written before the generation of those who saw Jesus firsthand have all died. He says, verse 6, very clearly, some have fallen asleep, some have died, but there are plenty of people who will corroborate this account that I'm giving. The eyewitnesses, they're very, very important. Peter, then the 12, then 500, then James, then Paul himself. And again, Paul writes himself into the story because how unbelievable is this? Paul, the persecutor of the church, the man whose mission it was to destroy the church, the guy who had set his heart on this one thing, I'm going to take out all the Christians. But he's on the Damascus road, and who does he meet? He meets the risen Christ miraculously. And he meets them in a different way to the others. That's why he says, as to one untimely born. And he was convinced. The whole course of his life was changed. Why? Because he saw Christ risen.

[28 : 26] Every single one of these people that he lists, they know that dead men don't rise. It's common. I have this when I talk to people about the Christian faith. It's common to hear people say that, well, back then people were like that. They were more gullible. People believed that this sort of thing happened back then, but of course not. No, we don't think that anymore.

That whole idea is something that C.S. Lewis calls chronological snobbery, thinking that with the passing of time, we're smarter in some way than others.

None of those people expected to see Jesus after his death. But he appeared to them, and they were convinced. Can I say, if you're here this evening and you're looking into the Christian faith, when it comes to the resurrection, can I ask you, have you allowed yourself to take the historical accounts at face value? It's easy. I dare say it's lazy to draw your conclusions before considering the evidence. To say resurrections don't happen, the end, that's not enough. Because to conclude that because something doesn't happen as a rule, that it can't happen is a fallacy. Let me ask you, what do you do with the historical records?

What do you do with the accounts of those who saw Christ after his resurrection and would have freely said so if the stories that were being circulated at the time had all been made up? If these people hadn't seen him, when Paul says they did, they could have debunked the whole thing and the story wouldn't have got off the ground. Paul's point is this is credible. On the basis of the eyewitnesses, this is credible. Look, if you reject this, you need a credible alternative explanation to

the account that Paul provides. What is it? I'd love to hear it. And to press, let me press even further. Let me take that dinner guest's question from the dinner that I was at and turn it around. What if your worldview isn't true? You've staked your life on the Christian story being false, and you get to the end only to find that you were wrong. It said Jesus is ruling right now as God's king. One day he will judge the whole world. Verse 25, when every person who has ever lived will have to give an account to him for the way that they've lived in his world. Yes, Christians stake their eternal future on the resurrection being true. Those who don't believe, however, stake their eternal future on it being untrue. We all stake our future on whether we're right about the resurrection. Are you sure that you can write it off? If you're ready to take another look, I'd love to talk to you. Come and find me afterwards. Be down there. I'd love to talk to you. Well, we need to land life and hope, life and hope because of the resurrection. If you're a Christian, this is your story. You may not know every twist and turn as the chapters unfold. Of course, we don't know that. But you know that it has a happy ending. And the reason you know that it has a happy ending is because the tomb is empty. It had a happy ending for Jesus. So, trust him. Don't be put off course by the criticism of a confused culture. Cathedrals may fall. Even cultures can fall, but Christ is risen. And that changes everything. Let's pray.