

Easter 2026 - 1 Corinthians 15:1-22

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Date: 05 April 2026

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[0 : 0 0] And do turn back to 1 Corinthians 15, page 961 in the Black Church Bibles. And if you're here as a guest of somebody, you're really welcome.

I'm really pleased to see you. And I'm going to be speaking mainly to you this evening, so it's great to have you. Quote, I believe that humans cannot bear to look directly at the face of death, and so have invented the face of God as a shield.

I believe that humans cannot bear to look directly at the face of death, and so have invented the face of God as a shield. That's David Baddiel, the comedian, in his 2023 book, *The God Desire*. And with no shortage of wit, obviously, Baddiel argues that humanity's deep-seated desire for an answer to death has led us to fashion a God who can deal with that problem.

Now, the book is badly argued, and it's just a bit silly, but David Baddiel is right about one thing. We have a problem with death.

[1 : 1 0] Both the inevitability, we can't avoid it, one out of one dies, and the finality, we can't reverse it. And the implications of that for our lives are almost too much for us to bear.

The Russian author Leo Tolstoy understood this and puts it as well as anyone when he said this, My question, that which at the age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide, was the simplest of questions, a question without an answer to which one cannot live.

It was, what will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live or do anything? Anything? The question can also be expressed like this, Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

Do you see Tolstoy's point? If death is the end of everything, what grounds do we have for thinking that anything matters? Here was Tolstoy. He'd written some of the greatest works of literature that have ever been written.

He had what we would say to be a decent legacy. And yet, when he thinks of the inevitability and the finality of death, he just can't see the point.

[2 : 3 1] Can you fault his argument? When you think about it, can you fault his argument? It's true for us all. When you think about our lives, if death wins in the end, how can our lives or the lives of our loved ones have any meaning?

If our existence is entirely accidental, as some would tell us, we just come and we go, it doesn't really matter whether we use our time to build things, families, businesses, create jobs, or tear things down.

Whether you paint the Mona Lisa or destroy the Mona Lisa, it doesn't matter. The Epstein files have been pretty shocking when we've looked at them.

Sordid, corrupt, and all that has gone with that. And we kind of knew that was coming. But it is true that when we've seen the emails and read some of the things that were in there and seen some of the pictures, it is still pretty shocking.

If death, Jeffrey Epstein's death, and then our death, and then the death of everyone who comes after us, if that is just the end, all that they did, Epstein and all of his cronies, it doesn't matter.

[3 : 3 8] What about our relationships? We invest time and energy in establishing loving relationships. We put ourselves out for people. We do things for people. Sacrifice for them. We take risks.

We put other people first. And then we die. And we're no different to the person who spent their life destroying other people's lives, abusing people, treating them badly.

If the grave wins, how you treat people just doesn't matter. If you cared for them or you used them, ultimately, nobody will care.

I'll never forget standing in the A&E, accident emergency, of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, 30 years ago last week. I'd been playing rugby.

My flatmate appeared at the side of the pitch, very strange, telling me I needed to come. There was something wrong with my dad. He drove me to the hospital. I walked into the A&E.;

[4 : 34] I was still wearing my rugby boots. I skidded on the floor. I still had my mouth guard in. I was completely in a daze. I was led to a room where my family there, I was told my dad had had a brain hemorrhage, and he wasn't going to make it.

I can still tell you the signs that were on the walls. I can still see the pattern of the fabric on the chairs in the room. But I remember most of all standing there and just thinking, is that it?

Is that what life is? Here and then gone. Here and then not here. David Baddiel is right.

Death is a big problem. Maybe even bigger than he realizes. But here's the thing. What if our instincts that tell us that life does matter are actually real?

And our desire for meaning and hope in the face of this is something that God actually put in all of us. David Baddiel says that atheists, quote, are too hard and adult to require comfort and hope in the face of death.

[5 : 48] Too hard and too adult to require hope in the face of death. But what if there was actually real hope, regardless of what those atheists thought, however grown up they were?

Well, the Christian claim, the Christian claim is that because of today, because of Easter Sunday, there is hope that enables us to stare in the face of death and not fear.

And do you see the hope? It's there in verse 4. Look at verse 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. And then go all the way down to verse 20 on the other column. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

The firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. The great banner over Easter is that three days after He was professionally executed, Jesus Christ walked from the grave and death has been defeated.

[6 : 58] And He didn't just defeat death for Himself. Do you see that verse 20? He defeated death for all who have put their faith in Him. He is the firstfruits of a big old harvest of men and women and boys and girls who will share in His resurrection.

This is the only answer to the inevitability and the finality of death. But let's be honest, it's all very well me simply stating this. How do we know that this isn't just an invention to help us cope?

This isn't just the shield against reality that David Baddiel suggests. Well, we've got to start here where the apostle starts in this chapter. And that is with the history.

That's point number one. Look at the history. Christianity stands or falls at this point. If the resurrection hasn't happened, everything is a waste of time. We'll come to that in a moment. It all stands or falls at this point.

People rising from the dead, that's not run of the mill. So we need to go to the eyewitnesses. Here's how Paul puts it. Look at verse 4. Christ was buried, raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and then He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

[8 : 05] 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 to me.

Paul is saying that there are eyewitnesses who have seen the risen Jesus. When He was raised from the dead, He wasn't just seen by one special person whose word we have to take for it.

It didn't happen in secret. Nor was it just an in-group who could very easily have cooked up the story to suit themselves. They get the story out, and, you know, that's it. No, He appeared in full public view.

Verse 6, do you see? More than 500 people at the same time. And what Paul is saying here, by listing these eyewitnesses in this way, is saying, check with them to see if it's true.

Because he's writing to these people who are within the generation of those who saw Jesus firsthand. Now, some have died, verse 6, some have fallen asleep, but there are plenty who will corroborate this account.

[9 : 09] These eyewitnesses, they're very important. Cephas, that is Peter, then the 12, then 500, then James, then Paul himself. If David Bedale is a critic of Christianity, he has nothing on the apostle Paul.

If you've got problems with Christianity, take your place in the queue behind the apostle Paul. His whole mission was to destroy the church. He held the coats of a group of people who killed one of the early preachers.

He wasn't a nice church boy, but on the Damascus Road, he was met by the risen Christ. It was in a different way to the others. That's why he says he was as one untimely born.

And in that moment, he was convinced. Every single one of these people that he has listed here knew that dead men don't rise. It's very—I hear people all the time say to me, Oh, it was a common thing back then.

People used to rise from the dead all the time. No, they didn't. Or they might say, Oh, well, people were more gullible back then. You know, they would believe this sort of thing easily. That's what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery, the idea that with the passage of time, we're more superior in some way to them.

[10:17] None of these people expected to see Jesus after his death, but he appeared to them, and they were convinced. One historian says this, If you're looking into the Christian faith, can I ask you, when it comes to the resurrection, have you allowed yourself to take these historical accounts at face value?

It's easy. It's easy. I would say it's even lazy to draw your conclusions before you've considered the evidence. To say, Resurrections don't happen the end, it's easy to say that.

But to conclude that something doesn't happen as a matter of course means that it can't happen is actually a fallacy. Let me ask you, what do you do with the historical records?

The accounts of the eyewitnesses who would have said that if the story circulating at the time, that this man who was dead was now risen, had been made up. They would have said that. These people hadn't seen them when Paul said they did.

They could have debunked the whole thing. Go to Cephas. Go to James. Go to all those 500 people. He's saying some of them are still alive. You can go and talk to them. If you'd done that and it was all made up, they would have said so.

[11:40] Paul's point is it isn't made up. It is credible history. I want to say, look, if you reject these things, you need an alternative explanation to the account that Paul provides here.

What's your explanation? My oldest friend isn't a Christian, and he doesn't want to discuss Christianity. And a few weeks ago, we were in the car together, driving somewhere, and we were talking together about, you know, motivation in life and the things that we want to achieve and that kind of thing.

We're both middle-aged men. We're both, I think, probably on the cusp of a midlife crisis. And so those are the kinds of things you talk about. What do you want to achieve? Why do you ask somebody that at 53?

Anyway, he was saying about something he wanted to do. And I said, as a throwaway, I said, well, I've got eternity to enjoy that. And it was a kind of throwaway comment.

And he said this, You've staked everything in your life on the resurrection. What if you get to the end and find it isn't true? I said to him, You've staked everything on the resurrection not being true.

[12:57] What if you get to the end of your life and find that you were wrong? Here's the thing. All of us stake our future on whether we're right about the resurrection of Jesus.

Are you sure enough to write it off? Well, if you're ready to take another look, and I hope you are, come back to the Christianity Explored course.

We're running this three evenings, the 13th, the 20th, the 27th. You can come and consider one of the firsthand historical documents of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

What the eyewitnesses saw. Have a look at it again. Bring your questions. You can ask any question you like. You'll not be a bigger critic than the Apostle Paul was. Come and ask your questions.

We'd love to see you. Come and talk to me about that afterwards. Come back on any given Sunday. We're here every Sunday. We talk about these same things. If this really happened in time and space, it changes absolutely everything.

[14:03] And that's the other point I want us to see this evening that Paul really presses. So he moves point number one from history to point number two, hope. Do you see how unashamed he is to start with?

To stare in the implications. To stare at the implications of death. If, verse 14, 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're still in your sins. If there is no resurrection, if Easter Sunday didn't happen, what I'm doing now is pointless.

And if you're a Christian and you believe this stuff, what you're doing is wasting your time as well. In fact, he says you're lying about God and you're lying about the goodness of Christianity. If that's the case, David Baddiel is right.

[15:01] You've invented something to shield yourself from reality. Apostle Paul, he is unflinching when it comes to the implications of this. Here he is, like Tolstoy, if death is the end, Christ has not been raised, there is no meaning, no point, and no hope.

But then why this intuition that our lives should be meaningful when the only world that we've ever known is one where everyone dies? Well, the Bible teaches it's because death is an intruder. It's a sign that something has gone wrong. It's a sign that our relationship with the source of life and meaning and significance, the God who made us, is broken. That's why Paul introduces Adam. Right down at the end of the reading, verse 22, As in Adam all die. Saying we have inherited the sinful nature that we have from our first parent, Adam. And we've chosen to follow his lead by living life on our terms in God's world.

We've said no to God. We've taken all of his gifts and we've said no to him. And we've lived life on our terms. That is why death exists. Death is not just a biological accident.

[16:10] It is a moral and spiritual reality that leaves us guilty before God. And yet, it's into this dark and selfish and broken and painful world that the Lord Jesus steps.

Verse 20, 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 also come the resurrection of the dead.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. Yes, Adam plunged our world into sin and death.

But the Lord Jesus, the second Adam, defeated death that first Easter. And so he brings us life and hope. And can I say, this is really important.

He also brings us the justice that we long for in this world. I mentioned Epstein earlier on. Epstein didn't get away with his filthy behavior. The resurrection means that he will one day have to answer for it.

[17:17] That's what we want, isn't it? We want these people that treat others so badly and seem to get away with it. We want there to be a day of reckoning. We want there to be justice. But here's the thing.

It is also true that Jeffrey Epstein will give account for his life alongside the rest of us. We all have to answer for how we've lived in God's world. And our only hope on that day is the risen Christ.

The one who has dealt with all of our sins in his death on Good Friday. And has been raised to life on Easter Sunday. Defeating death and uniting us to God.

Can you see how this changes absolutely everything? When death, you see, goes from being our greatest enemy, the end, the final word. When it goes from those things to being a bump in the road to eternity, light cracks through the darkness and begins to shine.

A weight is lifted off our shoulders. The great enemy of mankind is defeated. And if you put your trust in Christ, if you put your trust in the one who won this victory, you will share in his triumph.

[18:26] And your life will then be shot through with this kind of hope. As a minister, I've taken plenty of funerals. And the experience of a funeral where the deceased has put their trust in Jesus and one where they haven't is vastly different.

One is, I am sorry to say, just nice thoughts and platitudes. It's stop all the clocks and wind beneath my wings. The other is rock solid hope.

I was at a funeral of a Christian lady this week and her husband and her children gave tributes. And of course, they're sad. Death is that horrible enemy, the intruder I mentioned. But they know that because Christ walked out of the grave on that first Easter Sunday, their mother will one day rise as well.

And that hope is sure. Can you see? Jesus didn't die and rise again to resolve the philosophical problem of human experience.

He died and rose again so that you could share his life for eternity. The empty cross of Good Friday, the empty tomb of Easter Sunday, they invite you into this life.

[19 : 37] All your sins forgiven. The relationship with God that you were created to enjoy restored. And the assurance that the way that you live now, what you achieve, the relationships you invest in, those things will all have lasting effect.

So can I urge you this evening? The end of this week of invitational events that we have had, can I urge you, take the invitation that Christ holds out to you this Easter.

Put your faith in Jesus Christ. When you do that, you can stare death in the face with hope, knowing that out the other side there is life.

Life that is truly life. You know, if you want to do that, if you... These service sheets, we put a couple of prayers on here. Page 5. As we go to the Lord's table, you can ponder the words in this prayer for belief and consider there how you might give your life to Jesus.

The one who has defeated death so that you can have hope. Let's pray together.