

## **The Resurrection Changes Everything** **1 Corinthians 15:1-20**

**Main Idea:** Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) of that which is of first importance: the gospel. He explains what it is, and the effects it produces.

- **How to Respond to that Which Is Most Important (1-3a)**
- **The Basics of the Gospel (3b-11)**
  - The gospel is Christological
  - The gospel is biblical
  - The gospel is historical
  - The gospel is doctrinal
  - The gospel is personal
  - The gospel is doxological
  - The gospel is practical
    - Effect #1: Humility
    - Effect #2: Hard Work
    - Effect #3: Harmony
    - Effect #4: Hope

As I sat on the plane with my Bible opened, I was hoping that the seat beside me would remain empty. It was Saturday night, and I wanted to pour over my notes for Sunday's sermon without distraction. I had been speaking at a youth camp all weekend in Ridgecrest, NC, and was on my way home to New Orleans where I was a pastor.

But this didn't happen. At the last minute, a large man dressed in black made it onto the plane right before the door closed. He managed to get his bag through the thin aisle, and put it in the overhead bin. He proceeded to tell me that he was sitting by the window next to me. He sat down, buckled up, and then opened his Hebrew Bible to the book of Esther. He saw that I was reading the Greek New Testament. He asked, "Are you in seminary?" I replied, "Yes. Are you?" He said, "Yes, I'm a Jewish cantor. I'm on my way to New Orleans to celebrate the Feast of Purim." He smiled and added, "This is going to be an interesting flight isn't it?" I put my notes aside and said, "Yes. I think will be!"

He was a nice guy, and we had a very good conversation. Eventually, I told him that I was preaching on Galatians 6:11-18 the following day. I shared with him how Paul passionately speaks about of the centrality of the cross, and the need for internal transformation (new creations) not external ritual (circumcision). My new friend went on to tell me that he took a class on the apostle Paul's use of the Old Testament in his Jewish seminary. He said, "I would have become a Christian if I lived back in the first century." I assured him that he could become a Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well! He then said, "I think it was all socio-political." I asked him to explain.

He went on to say that Jesus was a charismatic leader who gained quite a following, but he was no different than others today who claim to be messiah. He illustrated with the story of a guy in New York who was a self-proclaimed messiah. My friend told me that this man was really no different than Jesus.

I told him that he might have an argument if it weren't for one thing: *Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead*. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then yes, Jesus was just another

charismatic religious leader. But if he did rise from the dead, then he *isn't* like every other self-proclaimed messiah.

We continued our discussion until we landed. My friend didn't believe on the spot, but hopefully our conversation led him to study the person and work of Jesus more diligently.

Paul says that if there's no resurrection, then our preaching is in vain. Our faith is in vain. We are still in our sins. We should just go live it up. But that's not what he believes. HE states, "Christ has been raised!" (1 Cor 15:12-20)

The resurrection changes everything. It is at the heart of our faith. It reveals that Jesus is our Messiah (2 Tim 2:8). He is the promised descendant from David. He is the Holy One who didn't see corruption (Acts 2:27-31). He is the exalted one, reigning at the Father's right hand (Acts 2:32-33). Because the tomb is empty, Jesus' words can be trusted. Because the tomb is empty, believers possess innumerable blessings. Because the tomb is empty, we have something to proclaim. Michael Bird summarizes, "The church exists only upon the premise and in the power of the resurrection."

## **1 Corinthians 15**

In the book of Acts the resurrection is more pervasive than anything, even the cross (though the cross is preached and is also assumed when the resurrection is proclaimed). The resurrection dominated the preaching of the early church. The OT texts most often cited in the NT are Psalm 2 and Psalm 10, which focus on Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. We also find what seems to be early confessions highlighting the resurrection: Early confessions: Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3-8; 2 Cor 5:15; 1 Thess 4:14. These all emphasize that Jesus died *and* rose again.

Today we're going to consider one of those early confessions: 1 Corinthians 15.

### **How to Respond to that Which Is Most Important (1-3a)**

Paul highlights several awesome truths here. Take note of how he says the gospel is of "first importance" (3). When the apostle Paul says something is of "first importance," we should pay close attention! Indeed, the mighty apostle had a lot to say. Just look at all his letters! He was extraordinarily brilliant. He had an incredible education and experience. Some have suggested that he had the equivalent of two PhD's before he was 21 years old (Sproul). But if you pressed Paul with the question, "What's *the most important* thing you know?" I think he would say, "It's the gospel."

Gospel means "good news." When the Greeks would fight a battle (like against the Persians), everyone back in the city-states would wait to hear the outcome. The Greeks would send back a messenger after the battle to give the report of the war. The Greeks wondered, "Have we been conquered?" "Will we be slaves?" Often the messenger would run on foot and report the good news: "We triumphed!" That was *euaggelion*; the good news. Here's the good news for us: Someone has triumphed on our behalf! We aren't slaves. We're free. Christ has triumphed. The ultimate battle is over. Let shouts of holy joy erupt!

This is the most important news. Not who's winning the political election, or the NCAA tournament. It's more important than many of our religious interests as well.

You see, there's an order of importance for what we believe in the Christian life. At the top of the list is the good news. Interestingly, the Latin word for "cross," *crux*, is where we get the English word "crucial." The gospel is crucial; it's the "crux of the matter."

Notice also that Paul says that he "received" the message. He didn't make it up. Our job, like Paul, is to pass on that which we have received.

He also says that he wanted to "remind" the Corinthians of the message (15:1). If you're

not a Christian, we want you to receive the gospel. If you're a Christian, you need to be reminded of it constantly.

### **The Basics of the Gospel (3b-20, 55-58)**

I'm not going to try to sound profound today. Just the basics. But you know, we never get beyond the basics – really in any field. We just get a better understanding of them, and a better application of them into our life. A review of the basics is what we all need, all the time. I mean Paul had a messed up church here. But what he give them? Well, he addressed their problems, but he did it in view of the gospel, and he did it with some classical reviews of the gospel. If you're afraid, greedy, anxious, or angry – you need the gospel. Consider seven basics of the good news. They all end in "Al." So Seven "Al's."

**First, the gospel is Christological (3-8).** It's about Jesus. Paul says, "*Christ* died for our sins ... *he* was buried ... *he* was raised ... *he* appeared... *Christ* has been raised" (3-5, 20). John Stott says, "The gospel is not preached, if Christ is not preached." Calvin says that "the whole gospel is included in Christ ... if any removes one step from Christ, he withdraws himself from the gospel" (Calvin, *Romans*, 43). Luther says, "The gospel centers in the Son of God" (Luther, *Romans*, 35).

**Second, the gospel is biblical (3-4).** Twice Paul says this message of Christ is "in accordance with the Scriptures" (3-4). In this context, "Scriptures" refer to the Old Testament. Paul is saying that the whole story is pointing to Jesus. Jesus himself said this in Luke 24. We should always study the Scriptures with Jesus' ministry in view. We should study every little story, or passage, in light of the big story of Scripture. For the Bible is telling one big story. Carson says, "The whole Bible pivots on one weekend outside of Jerusalem about two thousand years ago." You see this view in the preaching of the early Christians in the book of Acts (cf., Acts 26:22-23).

**Third, the gospel is historical (3-8).** The gospel is about events that happened in human history. Christ "died" (past tense) and he "was raised" (past tense). More than five hundred people actually saw him (5-8). Paul wrote this about 20 years after the resurrection! He dared people to go talk to these eyewitnesses who were spread in various areas. Jesus was raised bodily. The good news is rooted in first century Palestine as Jesus lived, taught, died, and was resurrected with a real body. There was a real cross, real blood, and a real empty in the Middle East. These things didn't happen in a corner!

Some want to deny that Jesus existed at all. But even Agnostic New Testament Professor Bart Ehrman (no friend to Christianity) argues that Jesus did in fact exist historically. In his book *Did Jesus Exist?* he says, "Jesus did exist whether we like it or not" (340). At an event, someone in the crowd challenged Ehrman by stating that there is no evidence for Jesus ever existing. Here's his response (you can watch him say this on YouTube):

Look, I know, in the crowds *you* all run around with it's commonly thought that Jesus did not exist. Let me tell you, once you get outside your conclave, there's nobody who, I mean, this is not even an *issue* for scholars of antiquity. It is not an issue for scholars... There is no scholar in any college or university in the Western world, who teaches classics, ancient history, New Testament, early Christianity, any related field, who doubts that Jesus existed.... The reason for thinking Jesus existed is because he is abundantly attested in early sources. That's why.... *Early* and *independent* sources indicate that, certainly that Jesus existed. One author we know about *knew Jesus's brother*. And *knew* Jesus's closest disciple Peter. He's an eyewitness to both Jesus's closest disciple and his

brother. So, I mean, I'm sorry, but, again, I respect your disbelief, but I, I, you know, if you want to go where the evidence goes, I think that atheists have done themselves a disservice by jumping on the bandwagon of mythicism. Because, frankly, it makes you look foolish to the outside world. If that's what you're gonna believe, you just look foolish. ("Did Jesus Exist Historically?")

Jesus of Nazareth existed, and He was crucified. On this, I agree with Ehrman.

But was the crucified Jesus raised from the dead? That's the question. Unfortunately, Ehrman arrives at a different conclusion than myself. He thinks Jesus was just an apocalyptic Jewish preacher. I think Jesus was the promised Messiah, Son of God, who is Lord over all. So, what happened on the third day? I think if one follows the evidence, then it will also lead to the affirmation that Jesus rose from the dead bodily.

You have to do something with the empty tomb. If you reject it, you need to have good evidence for claiming that He didn't. You need something better than to claim that the early believers were more *primitive* than us, and more prone to believe in miracles. They weren't more *gullible* than we are today. They weren't more likely to believe in miracles." Read the gospel accounts. No one was expecting a resurrection! They were as astonished as any modern skeptic. Even after seeing Jesus' miracles and hearing him say repeatedly, "on the third day, I will rise again." No one said, "Hey maybe we should go check on this tomb."

Another popular view is this: people *spiritualize* the account. They say, "Well, it didn't really happen. What matters is the message. You can start over. Spring comes after winter." One scholar says, "Emmaus never happened, Emmaus always happens." But this won't work either. The details of the gospel don't read like this at all. They include little incidental facts (like Jesus eating "*broiled fish*" Lk 24:42) that provide historical documentation of what literally happened. It's not a parable. It's point of human history.

And the mythicists' view doesn't work. The resurrection accounts read like the rest of the historical accounts about Jesus' pre-resurrection accounts.

The alternatives don't work. Christianity requires faith, but it's not a leap into the dark; it's a leap into the light. Paul told Agrippa, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8). The gospel is historical. It didn't start in a hidden corner somewhere. It's the hinge on which all of human history turns.

***Fourth, the gospel is doctrinal (3).*** The gospel contains certain foundational truths that must be explained. Paul mentions or alludes to several key truths in this chapter, including the doctrines of *sin* and *substitution*, and *eschatology*.

Regarding eschatology, Paul says later in the chapter that "we're not just celebrating the resurrection; we're anticipating one!" (Rev. Matt Foshee). What is sown in dishonor will be raised in glory! (43)

Here in our text, Paul speaks of substitution saying, "Christ died *for our sins*" (3). Christ dying is a matter of human history. Christ dying for our sins is a matter of doctrine. In Adam, we die. In Christ, we have life.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul says "He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the great exchange. Christ received our punishment, and we received his righteousness. The problem for us is that only righteous people are going to heaven. But not of us our perfectly righteous. We're sinners. Therefore, we need someone else's righteousness. By faith, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. We now stand perfectly acceptable in God's sight because of Christ's obedience and death on our behalf. In other words: The very righteousness that God requires from us is the very righteousness that

God provides for us in Christ Jesus. Jesus is our Substitute. Apart from Him, we can't stand before a holy God. John Stott says: "The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God; the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man."

This view of salvation distinguishes Christianity from other religions. Other religious teachers say, "Do this." The gospel of grace says, "It is finished!" Every child of Adam has one great hope, and he is the second Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:22). Jesus lived the life we couldn't live, and then died the death that we should have died. He died in place of us, instead of us, on behalf of us. He rose victoriously, triumphing over our enemies of sin, death and hell.

**Fifth, the gospel is personal (3, 11).** While historically rooted, the gospel is personally experienced today. It's not enough to affirm that Christ died. You have to see him dying for you! You have to embrace Him as Lord and King. Paul says "Christ died for *our* sins" (3). Paul states, "I preached to *you* ... *you* received [it] ... *you* stand ... *you* are being saved ... if *you* hold fast to the word I preached to *you* – unless *you* believed in vain (1-2). Later he adds, "we preached and so *you* believed" (11, my emphasis). The gospel demands that individuals personally respond in genuine, persevering faith. The gospel changes our lives because "it is the power of God for salvation for *everyone* who *believes* (Rom. 1:16).

You should know that the gospel, then, is exclusive and inclusive. It's available to all – every race and age of person is invited to respond. But it's only experienced in Christ. There's no salvation outside of Him. He's the only one who conquered death! Christ is the narrow door that all must enter through.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ He is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." This is what happens when you become a Christian. You get new life! Christianity isn't about being a nicer person, or turning over a new leaf; it's about becoming a new person.

People have various journeys, but the results are the same. (Include examples: Augustine, Lewis, my dad). Those in Christ get new affections. You might compare it to a teenager, who gets his first girlfriend. All of a sudden his behavior changes because he gets a new love. That's what happens when one embraces Jesus. Everything changes – time, gifts, money, desires, ambitions, relationships, view of the world, etc.

**Sixth, the gospel is doxological (55-57).** That is, it inspires praise. Paul gets to the end of this chapter and he erupts into worship saying:

*Death is swallowed up in victory.*

*O death, where is your victory?*

*O death, where is your sting?*

1 Cor. 15:55

He then cries out "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (57). This is what we were made for: worship. We will worship something or someone. The gospel satisfies this deep human longing. The gospel isn't merely about getting the proper information; it's about informed adoration.

**Finally, the gospel is practical (9-11).** The gospel has daily implications for life. As Keller says, "The gospel isn't the A, B, C's of Christianity. It's the A-Z of Christianity." All of life has to do with the gospel. In this particular passage, we see how the gospel produces four particular effects. This should be happening to you if you get grace:

**Effect #1: Humility.** Paul is *humbled* by grace, leading him to say, "I am the least of the apostles" (9). He adds, "By the grace of God, I am what I am" (15:10a). That's the attitude of

someone who understands that salvation is all of grace. It's an attitude of humble gratitude. John Newton said, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am." There is no room for boasting in the gospel. Such gospel humility makes us kind, gracious, hospitable and generous. Paul tells the Corinthians here's what happens when you get grace:

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). The proper response to grace is a humble attitude and humble acts of grace.

**Effect #2: Hard Work.** A person who really gets the gospel will develop a serious work ethic. The apostle notes that he "worked hard" by the grace of God. The gospel reminds us that we don't work *for* grace, but *from* grace and *by* grace. This perspective changes everything. The gospel fuels the Christian life, leading to a life of loving, passionate pursuit of God's glory. Notice what Paul says at the end of the chapter: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (15:58). *How do you end 57 verses on the cross and resurrection?* Like this: Get to work! Your work matters! Abound in the work of the Lord.

We must do all our work unto the Lord Jesus (Col 3:17). All of our work matters. In this passage, we see the work of evangelism highlighted.

Following the resurrection accounts in the gospel, we read of these commissions of Jesus. The followers of Jesus are told to do the work of making disciples among all nations. It seems a bit overwhelming. This message has been entrusted to us! But we must go. And we go with the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead!

**Effect #3: Harmony.** The gospel also leads to *unity*. In verse 11 he says, "whether then it was I or they, so *we* preached" (my emphasis). There should be a unity among Christians that centers on the gospel of Christ. Sadly, many Christians divide over issues that are not gospel issues. If we can make that which is of first importance primary, then we will see a lot more gospel friendships and partnerships happen. When Christians can't distinguish between first, second, and third tier matters, disunity is always the disastrous consequence.

**Effect #4: Hope.** The overwhelming tone of this chapter is hope. Look at verses 19-20 again:

**19** If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

**20** But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Because the tomb is empty and the throne is occupied, we have hope. Death will not have the final word!

This week we read of the tragic events globally and locally. We read of the events in Brussels. Many dead from a wicked terrorist attack. We read of a school teacher, the wife of a seminary student, dying in a car accident. Ladies and Gentlemen, if "in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." But Christ has been raised! And death does not have the last word. Peter says that we have a "living hope" – because we have a living Lord with whom we have been united (Eph 2). That's why Paul could say things like, "As sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor 6:10). We will have sorrow upon sorrow in this life; sometimes a sorrow that nearly immobilizes us; but deep down there's a joy that the world can't explain. We are always rejoicing because Christ, and us, are always living.

It's this hope that causes us to take risks for the gospel. When John G Paton wanted to be a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands of the South Pacific, he encountered much opposition. One older man protested, warning Paton that there were Cannibals there. I love Paton's response:

Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer. (p. 56)

Our bodies will rise. Let's give them to Christ's great cause now.

The gospel is what everyone needs, and it's what everyone needs to learn to communicate. The Spurge said:

Keep to the gospel, then, more and more. Give the people Christ and nothing but Christ. Sate them, even though some should say that you also nauseate them with the gospel.... By the roadside, in the little room, in the theatre, anywhere, everywhere, let us preach Christ. Write books if you like and do anything else within your power; but whatever else you cannot do, preach Christ." (Spurgeon, *An All-Around Ministry*, 117, 127)

What a privilege to know this Christ.

- Receive Him.
- Rest in Him.
- Rejoice in Him.
- Re-tell the story about Him.
- Repeat – until you rise like Him.