

1 Corinthians 15:1-50

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[0 : 00] So, please keep your finger in 1 Corinthians 15, as that is our text for today, you know, the long one, as we continue here toward the end of our series in 1 Corinthians.

But first, let me pray. Great God in heaven, purify my heart and cleanse my lips, that your voice may be heard. Give us your spirit that we may understand your word and love and do your will to your glory. Amen.

Amen. So, arriving at this chapter could not be more timely. I'm looking for David Ulrich. Is he even here? No? Alright.

Well, on the lighter side, some of us, I think 77 million people worldwide, have been thinking about Doctor Who's return yesterday. Which, if you don't know, is a television program whose premise wrestles with notions of death and life after death and even bodily life after death.

For others, locally, our hearts have been in a much darker place. Breaking and mourning over the loss of a colleague or friend.

[1 : 20] Personally, my 87-year-old grandmother was admitted to a hospital yesterday and is not likely to return to her home. Another good friend whose son is tormented by terrible psychological disorders, which result in frequent attempts at suicide, emailed this morning about how his son had spent a lot of this past week in the hospital.

Everywhere we look, the frailty of human life and the inevitable end at which we arrive, death, is apparent.

And whether merely in fiction or in the harsh reality of every passing day, we all confront, we must confront, we will confront, this reality of death and how it relates to the hope of resurrection.

And this is, I think, Paul's agenda in 1 Corinthians 15. Having concluded a lengthy argument on spiritual giftedness and spiritual maturity, he sprints this last leg of the letter to finish on a matter of what he calls in verse 3, first importance.

Now, having studied this chapter a lot this week, I want to say it's also an exemplary piece of deliberative rhetoric, meaning that Paul is trying to persuade or warn the Corinthians concerning something to come.

[2 : 59] And I think the passage works along these lines. Verses 1 to 11 demonstrate the centrality of belief in the resurrection. Centrality, a C word.

Verses 12 to 34, the consequences of belief, or not, in the resurrection. And verses 35 to 50, and yes, I know the program says 49, but I've become convinced that verse 50 goes with this bit.

So, yes, 35 through 50. Focus on the sort of corporeality of the resurrection. So, C words tonight.

Verses 1 to 11. In terms of the rhetoric, verses 1 to 11 are an exordium and narratio, which is a kind of introduction that doesn't necessarily include the main argument, but sort of contextualizes the main argument and prepares the reader to hear it.

And the narratio part of it is a sort of statement that explains the nature of the argument and establishes common ground. So, here Paul prepares his reader or listener for arguments about resurrection.

[4 : 13] The resurrection of the dead by showing its central place in the gospel. So, looking just at these first 11 verses, notice how the passage begins and ends on this notion of preaching.

Verses 1 and 2. Now, 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.

Look at the end. Verse 11. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed. The argument of the historicity of Christ's resurrection, based on eyewitness accounts, which are kind of masterfully argued here, does not appear simply to satisfy modern sensibilities about historical evidence, though I think it does do that.

Rather, Paul seems to be building confidence in the resurrection, because it's a sign that the gospel is true. Look at verses 3 and 4.

For I delivered to you as one of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

[5 : 38] So your faith in the scriptures, your belief in the testimony of Peter, and of the Twelve, and the Five Hundred, and of James, and the Apostles, and even of Paul, points to the significance of the resurrection as a true, necessary, and central part of the gospel message as it is proclaimed.

It is not separable from the rest of the gospel. It is essential. The resurrection is essential to the gospel.

Let me stop here for a minute and talk to anybody in the room who does not yet believe. The central idea of the Christian faith is that the gospel is summarized right here. Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

Whether you believe in the resurrection or not, that verse should hit home because we sin. We do evil. We think evil.

And Paul says right here that Christ gave up his life to atone for our evil, our sin. He sacrificed himself on our behalf.

[6 : 54] We are able to be viewed before God as sinless because of Christ's sacrificial death, which wipes away our sins.

And so the reality of this gospel requires something of us. Faith, repentance. But our faith is not blind.

We know that Jesus Christ did not simply die for no reason. Because if he had just died, we wouldn't know if it was effective. No, there was a sign that his death actually did what Paul is claiming.

He rose again. In defeating death, he defeated the grip and the consequence of sin, defeating sin once for all that we might live with him to eternity.

And so the argument then is this. Christ's resurrection and its implications for our resurrection, which is where Paul goes with the rest of this passage, matters. Because in rising again, he demonstrated the effectiveness, the efficacy of his death for defeating sin.

[8 : 02] The next bit, 12 to 34, the consequences of belief in resurrection. In terms of the rhetoric, verses 12 to 34 outline, I think, the major argument here, the positive and the negative implications of the main argument.

Paul states the main question in 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 the driving question here that Paul has to respond to.

In the context of first century sort of middle Platonist philosophy, a belief in the eternality of the soul, but the inferiority and perishability of the body was not terribly uncommon.

It was quite a popular idea. For Jews, however, resurrection has actually always been part of the faith. As we see in Daniel 12, 2 and 3, which, if you were in the morning service, we saw this morning, Paul argues for an actual bodily resurrection.

But before he turns to what I think is his main proposition in verse 20, he outlines six implications of not believing. Verses 13 and 16, If resurrection of the dead is not possible, then Christ was not resurrected, and the historicity of our faith is undermined.

[9 : 55] Verse 14, so this is number two, verse 14, If Christ was not resurrected, then everything Paul preached and everything you believed is in vain. We've wasted our time with Christianity.

If Paul's testimony of the risen Christ cannot be trusted. Number three, verse 15, If Paul's preaching is in vain, then God has actually been misrepresented.

Number four, verse 17, If Christ was not resurrected, then your faith is pointless, and you are still in your sins. That's a little bit terrifying, isn't it? If Christ was not resurrected, then our faith is pointless, and we are still in our sins.

Number five, verse 18, If resurrection is not possible, then death is all there is.

That's the end, and there is no hope for any who have died or will die. Number six, verse 19, If death wins, and there is no hope, then we are a pitiable lot for believing.

[11 : 03] We are absolutely crazy, pathetic people hoping in a fiction. After Paul confronts the Corinthians with these harsh realities of abandoning the gospel message of resurrection, he spins the coin.

The main proposition of the chapter appears in verse 20. Let me say that again.

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Just as sin and death entered the world through the fall, through the first disobedience of Adam, so resurrection from the dead and the defeat of death and sin come through Jesus Christ.

And because Christ is gone before, through all humanity, in defeating death, there are consequences for both the future and the present, which is where he turns next.

For the future, verses 23 to 28, having defeated death himself, Christ will come again in the last day and defeat death for all those who belong to Christ.

[12 : 20] On that day, he will deliver the kingdom of his people resurrected to his Father in heaven. For God has empowered him to do just this.

Christ will come back and deliver his people to his Father in heaven. There are present consequences of this resurrection. Verses 29 to 34, if there is more to it than just this life, we cannot afford to live as though this life, this body, and this time are all we have.

This is the conclusion to Paul's arguments back in chapters 8 to 10. Whether we live for ourselves or we live for the Christ who returns, it actually matters.

It matters a great deal who we live for. There are eternal consequences if there's a resurrection. Then he moves on, changes trajectory a little bit.

Verses 35 to 50. Given what he's just proclaimed, we as readers are likely stunned by the folly of a Christian life without real belief in the resurrection, compared with this sort of mind-blowing hope that Christ's resurrection signals for us as believers.

[13 : 52] And of course, whenever such an important theological or theoretical point is made, there is somebody in the back of the room usually who raises their hand and says, wait a second, Paul. How does that work exactly?

I don't say that lightly because I realize a lot of the people in this room are that person most days in class. Wait a second. How does that work exactly? Bodies are going to rise, but aren't the bodies decaying when they're dead?

Paul, can you explain this a little bit? And he does. Paul, how does this work exactly? Paul works through a series of logical arguments here in which he shows that God from the beginning has embedded in creation this notion of death giving way to life.

just as a seed dies apart from its plant, is buried in the ground, it grows to be a new plant.

So our bodies decay into the ground and yet will rise again. there's a principle here of sort of difference among similarities.

[15 : 04] Different kinds of flesh, different kinds of heavenly bodies even. Different kinds of stars have different kinds of glory. So it's not just that when your body dies and is buried in the ground and someday it will be raised, it will be raised.

No, actually there's a change. There's a fundamental change of kind. The cycle of death and life as we have inherited it from Adam actually ceases. We are raised to heavenly bodies, eternal bodies, Christ-like bodies that will never perish again.

Verses 47 to 49. The first man was from the earth, the man of dust. The second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust.

And as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

Paul says this is how it works. In this life, you are to be like Christ. You are to have the mind of Christ. It's 1 Corinthians 2.16. Be like me, Paul, as I am like Christ, which he's mentioned twice.

[16 : 22] Chapter 4, somewhere, and 11.1. In your mind, and in your faith, and in your behavior, because one day he will return, and you will be like him in body, be like him as much as you can now.

And this transformation of the body in resurrection is important. He concludes in verse 50. I tell you this, brothers, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

This resurrection body is the difference between inheriting the kingdom and eternal contempt by God. So having seen the centrality of the resurrection of Christ to the gospel message, the consequences of believing or not in the resurrection, and considering the corporeal nature of the resurrection, we have to ask the question, what would Paul have us think or do as a result?

For those who do not believe, please understand this. The reality of resurrection is part of the Christian faith. There's morality and ethics, obedience and worship, liturgy, community.

We have all of these things, but at the heart of it, at the heart of the gospel is the resurrection. You can't leave that behind. It distills down at its most fundamental level to the death of Christ for our sins and his resurrection that we may rise again and live with him forever.

[18 : 04] With him we die each day to our sin, and because he was raised so shall we be raised to life. with him in that great and terrible day. For the Christians, let's live like we believe this.

It's so easy to focus on death. I can't tell you how many times I've prayed in thankfulness for Christ's death and completely forgotten to mention anything about the resurrection.

resurrection. It's so easy to fall prey to the hopelessness of a functionally resurrectionless theology. Death resonates because it's what we actually see in this life.

We see the misery, we see the disease, we see the infirmity, we see the pain and suffering and the despair of corporeal life. We pay lip service to this notion of resurrection, but we do not draw the straight lines of death in this life to Christ's resurrection, to the resurrection of the dead that Paul seems to be drawing here.

If we really believe in the resurrection, it will have implications for how we live. Paul already made this point actually back in chapter 6 in relationship to sexual immorality.

[19 : 27] 6.14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Because our bodies are meant for the Lord and because they will be raised up and perfected for his use, we may want to actually be careful how we use these bodies here and now.

How we treat them, how we defile them. thank God for the death of his son that wipes away our sins. But even more than the implication of how we live is how we understand this resurrection.

Do we believe that Christ really rose again? Do we really believe that we will? Do we see how it matters?

Paul would have us understand that the stakes are quite high that the resurrection does matter. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, as we confront death and the constantly, consistently perishing nature of this world, encourage us with the hope of resurrection.

that as we believe and proclaim the resurrection of your son, guide us to live in light of the implications of his resurrection for our own resurrection to come.

[20 : 59] To your glory forever and ever. We pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.