

The resurrection and Christian confidence

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[0 : 00] Page 1065, Luke's Gospel, chapter 23, and starting at verse 50. Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea.

He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action, and he was looking for the kingdom of God.

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid.

It was the day of preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid.

Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath day they rested, according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared, and they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

[1 : 17] But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.

And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.

And they remembered his words. And returning from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb. Stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves, and he went home marveling at what had happened.

The second reading is 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 1 to 11, and can be found on page 1156 of the Church Bibles.

[2 : 48] 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, beginning to read at verse 1. 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.

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 that he appeared to Cephas, 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.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain.

[4 : 28] On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed.

Ed, thanks very much indeed for reading for us. Please do keep 1 Corinthians chapter 15 open, to page 1157. We're starting a new series of talks this morning, in this chapter, picking up from where we left off last summer, those who were around last summer.

It is a chapter about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the facts of Jesus' resurrection, the consequences of Jesus' resurrection, and the enormous implications of the resurrection, of Jesus for our lives.

Because it really answers the question, is it worth following Jesus? Is it worth being a Christian? I guess it's a question James is going to have to face, isn't it, as he grows up? And it's a question which all of us have to face at some time or another, whether we are followers of Jesus Christ or not. Just have a look, will you, at how the chapter begins, chapter 15, verses 1 and 2.

[5 : 45] The Apostle Paul writes, Notice, verse 2, if you hold fast, unless you believed in vain.

And exactly the same words occur at the end of the chapter, if you flick over to verse 58. 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.

It seems that there were at least some in the church in Corinth who were beginning to think that actually serving Jesus Christ is in vain. And as a result, they are not really holding fast.

Those who were around when we looked at 1 Corinthians last year, you'll remember that the harder the problem, it seems, in the church in Corinth is that it was a worldly church. In other words, a church which took all the values, all the things, all the values of the culture, all the things that people thought were important, and dressed them up in spiritual clothes, and called the result Christianity. A church which accepted the values of the world uncritically, the attitudes and behavior of the world around them uncritically. It's why the Apostle Paul begins the letter as he does, just turn to the very beginning of the letter, page 1146.

[7 : 30] I think it's very striking how Paul begins the letter. 1 Corinthians 1, verse 2. to the church of God that is in Corinth.

They are in Corinth, this major trading city in the Roman Empire. Big, loud, brash, impressive, wealthy.

So similar in many ways to London today. But Paul continues, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

They live in Corinth, but notice they have been sanctified, the word being set apart, sanctified to serve Jesus, rather than simply to fit in with and serve the surrounding culture.

To serve Jesus, who notice is Lord, because he is Lord in first century Corinth, just as he is Lord today in 21st century London.

[8 : 34] And therefore, throughout the letter we've seen, haven't we, whether it's in relation to the gospel message they proclaim, or the kind of Christian ministers they look for, the kind of Christian ministry they're after, whether it's they're thinking about marriage and sexuality, or personal freedom and decision making, or how they relate to outsiders, or the way they approach church, and what they're seeking to do as they meet together for their church services.

Paul says, with all of those things, a whole range of things. Paul says, don't be worldly. Don't simply fit in and assume the cultural norms of everyone around you. Instead, remember that you've been saved and forgiven by Jesus, not to serve yourself, but to serve him as Lord.

But it begs this question, is it worth it? Back to chapter 15. And the answer is no. Or at least it's no if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead.

Verse 17. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. But if Christ has been raised, and this really is the whole point of the chapter, if Christ has been raised, then it changes everything.

And that is exactly what we're going to be seeing over these next four weeks. And for today, there are just two simple headings, which you'll find on the outline on the back of the service sheet.

[9 : 55] First of all, Christ died and was buried. Secondly, Christ was raised and appeared. And for each, the Apostle Paul gives us evidence, evidence from the Old Testament, from the first part of the Bible, and then evidence from the events themselves.

So first of all, Christ died and was buried. Verse 3. For I deliver 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. First of all, then, the Old Testament evidence, the first piece of evidence for the death of Jesus, is verse 3, that it was according to the Scriptures, the Old Testament. We live, don't we, in a very now generation.

We live in an age of the instant, where everything has to be now and immediate. I think one of the consequences of that is that we've completely cut ourselves off from any sense of history.

And when it comes to the Bible, from any sense that God acts all the way through history, according to his purposes, making promises, and then fulfilling those promises. But you see, Jesus Christ did not simply land on the stage of world history without any warning, as if from nowhere.

[11 : 11] For hundreds of years beforehand, God had been telling his people that he would send his king, that he would send Jesus, so that when it did happen, when he did come, there was no mistake as to what was taking place.

Now, there are lots of places we could go in the Old Testament, but turn back, if you will, to page 742, to Isaiah chapter 52. Isaiah chapter 52, verse 13.

Here, the prophet Isaiah speaks of God's servants. Page 742, Isaiah 52, verse 13. Behold, my servant shall act wisely.

He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. We then read that this servant will die for sins, taking the punishment for our rejection of God, for our rebellion against God, for living in God's world without reference to God.

Chapter 53, verse 5. But he was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

[12 : 27] And with his stripes, in other words, with his wounds, we are healed. Again, verse 8. By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

And again, verse 12. He poured out his soul to death. And was numbered with the transgressors. It is remarkable, isn't it? You see, here we are 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

God said he is going to send someone who is going to die as a substitute in the place of others to take the penalty for sin. Hence the theme of our service this morning.

And the songs we've been singing this morning that Jesus died in our place. Now keep a finger in Isaiah. We're going to come back to it later. But come back to where we were in 1 Corinthians first of all.

It's why that the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 3, I deliver to you what is of first importance that Christ died for our sins.

[13 : 34] I take it as we read through the Old Testament, as we see all the promises in the Old Testament about the coming of Jesus, it's rather like watching the highlights of the day's sports on a Saturday evening.

You know how the commentators, they tell you in advance, don't they, what we as the viewer is meant to be watching and then see how the action unfolds.

Now I was going to use an illustration from the rugby, but I decided that might be a sensitive issue, probably for most people in this room in fact, assuming there are a number of us from the Six Nations in total.

So I'm not going to talk about the rugby. But imagine he said horse racing and it's the highlights of the day's racing. And you know how they circle, don't they, the winner, where they sort of superimpose a big white circle on the winning horse.

So you know, that's Danny Boy. And at the moment, Danny Boy is right at the back, you know, in 14th place or something like that. But the BBC, they've superimposed the white circle on Danny Boy. And so what you have to do is you have to, as the viewer, you watch Danny Boy as he races further and further.

[14 : 36] And eventually he gets to first place and he goes on to win the race. And in a sense, you see, that is what Isaiah has been doing as we look at Isaiah chapter 52 and 53.

It's as if he's putting a big white ring around this servant, around the one who is going to die for the sins of God's people, for the forgiveness of sins. He's saying, watch for this man in history.

And 700 years later, he is born Jesus Christ. So that's the evidence from history. Christ died for the forgiveness of sins so we can be right with God.

But then as well, the other evidence is the historical evidence because notice back in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 4, that Jesus was buried. Each of the gospel accounts refers to the burial of Jesus.

The facts of his burial would have been easily proven, of course, to the skeptic. In that first reading we had this morning from Luke's gospel, Jesus' body was buried in the tomb of an eminent man, Joseph of Arimathea.

[15 : 39] He was a member of the Jewish ruling council. What's more, we're told, he was buried in an identifiable place. So in other words, not a sort of random hole in the ground, which you could go to and then just completely forget where it was.

But he was buried in a verifiable place. The place of burial was identifiable, as were the witnesses. We're told that the witnesses, both of Jesus' burial and of his resurrection, were Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Joanna, who herself was the wife of a high-ranking official. And of course, the wonderful thing is that all these things, that all these details, they are all readily verifiable. You could go and ask, presumably, you could have gone and asked those who were involved.

In other words, this is not the stuff of myth or legend, where, you know, the details are all a bit hazy and people kind of struggle to put together exactly what happened and who did what, when, and all that kind of stuff.

No, this is fact of history. Christ died. He was buried. And therefore, it follows, of course, that the resurrection of Jesus was a literal, physical, bodily resurrection.

[16 : 55] It was not simply that Jesus resuscitated. That idea was popular 200 years ago. A guy called Carl Venturini suggested that Roman soldiers didn't quite kill Jesus properly, that he was buried, that he recovered in the cool of the tomb.

But 36 hours later, he had recovered enough strength to push away the big, solid stone which had been put in front of the grave and recovered enough, likewise, to convince his closest disciples, his closest followers, that actually he was the Lord of life.

It is, of course, a ludicrous idea and doesn't match with the facts. of history. The fact they didn't have email and mobile phones 2,000 years ago does not mean that Roman soldiers did not know how to crucify people properly.

It doesn't mean the eyewitnesses couldn't spot a dead body when they saw one. It certainly doesn't mean they couldn't remember where someone had been buried. So then, that is the first claim. Christ died and was buried. The second claim is that Christ was raised and appeared. Have a look at verse 4.

[18 : 07] That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas then to the twelve. Now, for the Jews, the day began at sunset.

So Jesus died and was buried on day one, the Friday. Day two, which was the Sabbath, began that Friday evening and went all the way through to the Saturday evening and that's when day three began on the Saturday evening and it's sometime that night, that Saturday night, that Jesus then rose from the dead.

So that when the women came to the tomb on the Sunday morning, the third day, the tomb was empty. So, first of all, Old Testament evidence. Paul says it's according to the scriptures.

So turn back then to, hopefully your finger is still there, to Isaiah chapter 53 and see how God speaks of this servant who will die in the place of others, how there will be life for him beyond the grave.

Page 743, Isaiah 53, verse 10. He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days, the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

[19 : 26] He's going to have offspring. God's work will be achieved by him. And then verse 12, therefore I'll divide him a portion among the many and he'll divide the spoil with the strong.

How is he described? A victor, a conqueror, a conqueror, dividing the spoils. after he has died, after he has died, he will live.

In other words, you see, it's not simply that Jesus' body disappeared from the tomb and the disciples were left kind of scratching their heads, trying to work out what had happened and trying to desperately find an explanation.

though God himself had said hundreds of years beforehand that he would die and rise again. Just what God had planned and promised.

What do you say? What about the other historical evidence? Well, it's the appearances, isn't it, of the risen Jesus that the apostle Paul mentions in different circumstances over a period of time.

[20 : 31] Have a look at verse 5. And that he appeared to Cephas, 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. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Jesus appeared to Peter, the leader of the apostles, then to the others. He then appeared, we're told, to more than 500 people at one time, which of course totally rules out any suggestion that this was simply sort of mass hallucination, because hallucinations don't happen on this kind of scale. Jesus was then seen by James, verse 7, Jesus' own half-brother, and then by all the disciples together. You see, Paul stakes his credentials for the resurrection on the large number of eyewitness appearances.

And so he's reinforcing, isn't he, the reality and objectivity of the resurrection. Paul isn't simply describing some sort of vague spiritual experience, or saying that the apostles had some general sense that Jesus was with them in some general spiritual way.

[21 : 53] No, Jesus physically appears. indeed, the word that the apostle Paul uses here, the word resurrection was a technical term in the first century, meaning to go through death and out the other side.

If Paul had meant something else, he'd have used a different word. That sometimes suggested that Jesus' body was stolen, stolen perhaps by the religious establishments, stolen perhaps by the Roman authorities or by grave robbers.

But how then do we account for these multiple resurrection appearances, different people, different places, different numbers of people? Or perhaps Jesus' disciples stole the body so they could point to an empty tomb and claim that Jesus had actually risen from the dead.

But that is simply not credible. Some of us may have heard of Chuck Colson. He was President Nixon's hatchet man in the early 1970s, deeply embroiled in the Watergate scandal, which led Nixon to become the only U.S. president to have to resign while in office.

Colson was described as the evil genius that lay behind an evil administration, and he would serve seven months in prison for his role in the Watergate scandal.

[23 : 18] But wonderfully, he later became a Christian, a convinced Christian, having put his trust in Jesus. And it was the eyewitness testimony, the kind of thing which we are seeing here in 1 Corinthians 15, it was the eyewitness testimony which convinced him and persuaded him that Jesus had risen from the dead.

this is what he said several years later. Those of us involved in Watergate passionately believed in the present. We had at our fingertips every imaginable power and privilege, yet even at the prospect of jeopardizing the present, even in the face of all the privileges of the most powerful office in the world, the threat of embarrassment, perhaps jail, was so overpowering, and the instinct for self-preservation so overwhelming that one by one, those involved deserted their leader to save their own skin.

He goes on, Watergate demonstrates human nature. No one can ever make me believe that 11 ordinary human beings would for 40 years endure persecution, beatings, prison, and death without ever announcing that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead.

The evidence is overwhelming. Those men held that testimony because they had seen Christ raised from the dead.

What is so compelling, of course, about 1 Corinthians 15 is that this was written probably around 25 years after the events themselves, 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus.

[25 : 01] There are plenty of people around who would have said, Hang on a moment, it didn't happen like that, if it didn't happen like that. Plenty of people around who you could have gone to ask. I take it it's why people are named here.

So you could ask them, I take it it's why we're told some of them then we're still alive. Again, go and ask them. Why even the apostle Paul, who had been one of Jesus' greatest enemies, claimed to have seen the risen Jesus and came to worship him as Lord and Savior.

Jesus died according to the scriptures, he rose again according to the scriptures. Strikingly, it's just what Jesus himself said would happen.

I put on the outline the final words of the risen Jesus from the end of Luke's gospel. They'll be familiar to some of us but I think they are very striking indeed. Let me read them for us.

This is after Jesus had been raised, just before his return to heaven. Then he said to his disciples, these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.

[26 : 08] That everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them, thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem.

Christ died and was buried. Christ was raised and appeared. Well, two implications for us this morning. First of all, you and I are to have confidence in the resurrection of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

This is not mere assertion. This is not mere wishful thinking or subjective feelings. It is one of the best attested facts of history.

That it happened 2,000 years ago makes it no less true. Unlike many of the world's religions that are based on philosophical speculation, Christianity is based on the events of history.

They can be investigated. They can be demonstrated. Without the facts, of course, being a Christian following Jesus Christ would indeed be a massive gamble.

[27 : 37] It would indeed be a blind leap of faith. Worse than a waste of time. But wonderfully, Christian faith, Christian belief, comes by examining the facts.

And with that comes the joy and confidence of discovering that Jesus Christ really is alive. I take it that if we've never really done that, if we've never really examined the facts for ourselves, then we owe it to ourselves to do that, to ask the question, does the evidence really stack up?

We are to have confidence in the resurrection. Second implication, we are to hold fast to the resurrection.

Have a look again at how this chapter begins, verses 1 to 3 of 1 Corinthians 15. 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.

For I deliver to you, as of first importance, what I also received. This is the message, says the Apostle Paul, that saves people for eternity if we hold on to it, otherwise we have believed in vain.

[29 : 02] In other words, what goes without saying needs to be said. What goes without saying needs to be said. Because I think it would be quite possible, perhaps, for some of us to leave church this morning, thinking to ourselves, do you know what?

It was nice to meet up with people, nice to meet with friends, nice to meet with the church family, but actually, I didn't really learn anything new today. And in a sense, to feel a bit kind of flat about that.

But Paul says, doesn't he, it's vitally important to be reminded of the things that are of first importance. To hear again what, in a sense, we know already, but to be reminded of them.

Why else do Christians drift away from Jesus? I take it, it's pretty rare that someone goes to bed at night fully committed to following Jesus, but they wake up the next morning and they decide that actually they're not following Jesus.

I take it, that's a pretty rare thing. Now, why is it that that happens? Well, people simply gradually drift away. They gradually drift away from the things the Apostle Paul says are of first importance.

[30 : 12] Like I said, some of us will know people who have done that and it's a great sadness when that happens. Or why do churches move away and drift away from genuine, authentic Christianity?

Well, because they forget, you see, that what goes without saying needs to be said. We need to keep reminding ourselves of what is of first importance. It's the danger for the church in Corinth that they go off the rails, that their priorities will just gradually shift.

They'll gradually lose sight of what is of first importance. Sadly, I guess some of us will know churches where that has happened over a period of time.

So let's have confidence in the resurrection, but let's make sure as well that we hold fast to the resurrection. Because marvelously, Christian confidence is rooted not in feelings or wishful thinking, but in the facts of history.

And what we're going to see over these next three weeks as we look at 1 Corinthians 15 and the run up to Easter is the fact of Jesus' resurrection opens a door. It opens a door to eternity.

[31 : 28] and over the next three weeks we'll be able to look together at the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for us. Let's pray together.

for I deliver 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.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for the accurate record we have of these things of first importance. We praise you that the message of Jesus is based on the facts of history, the death, burial, resurrection, the eyewitness appearances, all rooted in your promises hundreds of years beforehand in the Old Testament.

We rejoice in the great confidence we can have and we pray each one of us and as a local church that we would hold on to this confidence, that we would hold on to these things that are indeed of first importance and we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen.