

Why I am a Christian

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn tonight to the second of those passages that we read together, 1 Corinthians chapter 15, reading again at the beginning of the chapter, page 1156.

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, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and 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, and so on.

What we've just read in those words takes us to the very heart of the Christian faith. And what I mean by that is that amidst whatever arguments there may be between one Christian and another, and one denomination and another, you cannot argue with this as a central element in the Christian faith.

It reminds me of the four central elements, which central in the way that they are foundational and they are inexplicable. First of all, that God, being one God, is three persons at the same time.

[1 : 3 9] How inexplicable is that? There's nobody here tonight that can understand that, and yet that's the way that God reveals himself to us. And whatever kind of person you are tonight, you cannot call yourself a Christian unless you believe in God being one and God being three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.

The second of those elements is that God himself came down in the person of Jesus Christ. God who created the universe in all its greatness and its vastness, he came into this world, into his mother's womb, and was born by her.

How inexplicable is that? Anybody here tonight can understand how it can be that God would choose God being the eternal God without beginning and without end?

We can't even understand that. There's nothing about God that we can understand. His wisdom is beyond our capacity to grasp.

And yet here is the next inexplicable element of the gospel that this God came into this world to become one of us, to take flesh and bones, and to become one of us in his mother's arms in Bethlehem and growing up, becoming one of us in that he walked and he talked and he lived and he ate and he drank and he got tired and he slept, and all the elements of a human being, he experienced them all.

[3 : 0 5] But that same Lord Jesus Christ gave himself into the hands of men, into the hateful hands of men, and he died on the cross. How can God die?

Let me ask you that. Who can explain that? How inexplicable is that? That God should die. And yet, that is what happened. I'm not saying he went out of existence. And yet, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, laid down his life at Calvary.

That's exactly what happened. It's one thing to say that Jesus died at the cross. There's another thing altogether to try and grasp what that means. Jesus was God.

How can it be that Jesus, being God, could die? God is the ever-living one. God is the one who's given us our lives. How can it be that he should lay down his life in the person?

And yet, that's what happened. They put to death the Lord of glory. But then, fourthly and lastly, that same Lord Jesus rose from the dead, who was that same person, Jesus of Nazareth, who truly died and was buried in a tomb.

[4 : 11] And the stone rolled against the mouth of the tomb. Three days later, when his disciples came to anoint his body, they found that the tomb was empty. And furthermore, they met with him alive on several different occasions.

How inexplicable is that? Can anybody here explain how a person who is dead can come to life again? Again, it's impossible. Everyone knows that. You don't have to be in the 21st century to know it's impossible.

You don't have to be a doctor to know that it's impossible. It's just impossible. It's impossible to anyone. You don't have to be educated to know that it is completely impossible for anyone to come to life once again.

These are these four elements. Of course, I don't have time to go into his ascension into heaven, but four of the elements that form the foundation of it.

In other words, whatever kind of life you live, however upright and polite and respectful you are in the community, you simply cannot call yourself a Christian if you don't believe in the foundations of the Christian faith, that Jesus is God and Jesus died and rose again.

[5 : 22] And, of course, it's the last of these four elements. And, of course, what I've just said is not a comprehensive foundation at all. It's just all that we've got time for here today.

But it's the place where the apostles, where the disciples of Jesus and the early church, that's where they started by explaining. This is the substance of their preaching.

That's what I'd like us to talk about this evening. I'd like us to talk about what Paul talks about here as being the substance of the gospel. Here it is in these words.

Verse 3. I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received, that, here we go, Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

Now, let's read that very carefully. He's not just saying Christ died for our sins, full stop. He's saying Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. In other words, if you want to know, if you want to go beyond the historical fact of the death of Jesus and find out its meaning and its significance, why Jesus died, you have to tag on the last bit of that sentence, in accordance with the scriptures, which is key to our understanding.

[6 : 35] In other words, if you don't understand what in accordance with the scriptures mean, you won't understand the death of Jesus. And so we're going to try and understand it tonight. But then he goes on to say, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day again.

Look, in accordance with the scriptures. Now, that's the substance of the gospel. That's the message which you would find the early church preaching and believing and living for in the streets of Jerusalem and Corinth and Asia Minor and all the places where the church went.

That is what they would have preached, which is the same as what we preach tonight. I hope is exactly the same as what we share with you tonight. That Christ died according to the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised according to the scriptures.

But the second thing that Paul, and I know I'm taking the second thing first, but Paul also goes on to describe how the people in Corinth believe the gospel.

And he says that in verse 1. I would remind you, verse 1, the beginning of the chapter, of the gospel I preached to you. Now listen, which you received. That's the first element.

[7 : 44] In which you stand. That's the second element. By which you are being saved. That's the third element. And I want us to go into that in a few moments of time. But I want to take them in reverse.

I want us to talk about the substance of the gospel first. And then I want us to see how these verses help us to understand how a person can become a Christian.

Let's look first of all then at the verse 3 to verse 5 as being the substance of the gospel. Let's look at what he says.

He says, he begins by saying that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. Now let's look, before we do anything else this evening, let's look at the bare facts.

Because if you don't start with the bare facts, you're not going to get any for it. If you don't believe the bare facts, then we might as well stop, go home and forget everything. Because if the bare facts didn't happen, then the Christian faith is of no value whatsoever.

[8 : 43] It's no use people saying, ah, well, I like some things in the Bible, but I don't like other things. It's no use people saying, well, there are things in the Bible that I think are really important and really valuable.

And I think what we need to do is extract these from the Bible. Let's leave the mythological things. That's what they call mythological things. Let's leave all the unacceptable things like heaven and hell and like the walking on the water and changing water into wine and all the rest of these things that we know that are just down to mythological understanding.

But if you don't take one part of it, then how can you take the other part of it? If you don't believe one part, how can you believe another? How can you believe in the Sermon on the Mount if you're not prepared to believe that Jesus is the Son of God?

What authority has the Sermon on the Mount got? Why should it be so influential? Why should I listen to the Sermon on the Mount? Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. People say, oh, that's what we should believe in the Bible.

Not really the bit about Jesus rising from the dead. Well, why should I believe the Sermon on the Mount if I don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Why? But if I do believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then I can't pick and choose.

[9 : 47] You can't have half measures. C.S. Lewis said this. Christianity, he said, if false is of no importance.

If true, it is of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.

He's absolutely right. It's all or nothing. It's the whole package or nothing. And I can't understand why somebody feels that they're in a position to judge and to extract what they want out of the Bible and to leave the rest as if you were the judge of what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false.

Now, here's the bare bones of what Paul was saying here. That first of all, that Christ died. Let's look at that. Christ died. What this means is that the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth actually historically was literally put to death on a Roman cross.

Nobody disputes that. And as the proof of that, he says that he was buried. A body is buried as proof that the person died.

[11 : 04] Now, here's what he goes on to say. But that he was raised on the third day. In accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared.

The historical fact is that he was raised. That that Jesus, the body of Jesus that was placed in the tomb because he had truly died actually came physically, historically, scientifically.

God is the God of science. He knows all about science. And he knows what's possible and what's not. He's able to overcome and overrule his own rules, his own systems. And God brought Jesus, this dead Jesus, to life once again.

That is a historic. Now, say, well, you know, one is, you can't say that one is a fact and not the other. This is what I would like to say to people who say, well, I like the idea of the resurrection. Well, why do you like the idea of the resurrection if it didn't happen?

Ah, yeah, because it reminds us of the time of year that, you know, it's a new life. Sun is shining for the first time in months and the lambs are out in the fields and everything is new. It's symbolic, isn't it? It's not symbolic if it didn't happen.

[12 : 10] It's a piece of nonsense if it didn't happen. It's not worth giving a second to if it didn't happen. You see, the apostle Paul was absolutely certain about what he was saying. He was saying, as sure as Jesus died as a historical fact, which nobody disputes, so he is absolutely certain that Jesus rose again as a real, literal, historical fact.

And he has proof. I said before that the proof of a person's death is the burial of the body. What's the proof of a person's resurrection of the dead? That he is seen.

And that's what Paul says. He says that he was seen. He appeared to Cephas. You know who Cephas was. That's Peter, one of the disciples. And then to the 12, each one of them.

He appeared to his 12 disciples. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers during the 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension. He appeared to more than 500 of these brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive.

Paul knew the difference between myth and reality. He knew the difference. But he could point to people who actually could remember and who could say, I know because I was there and I know what took place at the resurrection.

[13 : 29] Now, why am I going on so much about historical reality? Because we live in a world where the Christian faith is being challenged aggressively, ruthlessly, by a determined number of people and a growing number of people who want to tell us that we belong to the last century and that this century has no place, a modern world has no place, for people who believe in the Bible or who really believe in the Bible.

And we need to be prepared for this and we need to understand and we need to be aware of the kind of arguments that are used. A lot of arguments are completely irrational and unreasonable.

But we should expect that because unbelief is irrational and it is unreasonable. I put that to you. I know it's outrageous. If you're not a believer tonight, if you're an atheist tonight, you will say to me, I don't know what I'm talking about, but I challenge you tonight to ask yourself, where is the rationale?

Be very careful. Be very careful when you insist that the modern world has no place for God. Be very careful about the kind of society that you're going to create if you take God out of that society.

Do you know what the society is going to be? It's going to be a world where if you take God out of the equation, out of the equation, the only reason for me not to kill my neighbor in order to get his BMW is the fear of getting caught.

[14 : 59] That's the only reason. You take God out of the equation, then what other reason is that? Why should I bother about my neighbor's life? What matters to me is what he has and if I can kill him to get what he has, then who cares?

If you cheapen life, if you take God out of the equation, you're cheapening human life. You're making out that life is all about a matter of time and chance and evolution and we're here not for any purpose or any value whatsoever.

It doesn't matter if my neighbor's alive or dead. What matters is that I get on in the world. Survival of the fittest. It's true, isn't it? Be very, very careful if you belong to that group tonight because there are consequences to your message and to your religious belief, i.e. that there is no God.

very, very careful of what you're creating, the monster that you're creating in this world. But the other thing I wanted to say was this, that there are good reasons for me to be a Christian tonight.

People say to me, well, you're only a Christian because your parents come from Lewis or because your father was a minister. That's true. My father was a minister and that is how I got to know about the Christian faith.

[16 : 05] But there are many times when I've stopped with the apostle. You know just what the apostle says here is very interesting. He says this, the gospel by which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word I preach to you and ends this dash unless you believed in vain.

Why does he say that? Why does he add that in? Is the apostle seriously doubting the gospel that he's come to believe and that he has come to put his faith in?

Is it not sinful to say a thing like that because he appears to be casting doubt? No. What he's doing is he's saying, think about what you believe and think about the reason why you believe and make sure the reason that you're a Christian is not simply because you were emotionally drawn to some preacher somewhere.

Make sure that it's not because of one night of weakness when you decided to make a decision for Christ and ever else you've been. No, there are real reasons why you should be a Christian.

Solid, actual, factual, reasonable, rational reasons. Why? Unless you believed in vain. And it's as if the apostle is saying to the Corinthian church, think about, think about what you believe and ask yourself, why is it that I believe?

[17 : 28] And there are many times when I've gone through this, I've wrestled with it as you have and we wrestle with why is it that I do believe these outrageous things that I've just outlined, that God became man, that God is one and God is three, things that I cannot possibly understand.

Why is it that I believe such ridiculous truths tonight? The apostle calls it foolishness and it is foolishness from one level. The gospel is complete foolishness. Why is it that we believe in them?

And I want to appeal to the young people tonight to have an answer for the hope that lies within you. That's what the Bible says, to make sure you have an answer. Why are you a Christian?

Let me tell you why I'm a Christian. It's nothing to do with my father being a minister. It's nothing to do with the fact that I was brought up in a Christian home. That's how I became a Christian. But I've thought the matter through.

A, B, C, and so should you. Why am I a Christian tonight? Let's begin. The starting point is this. I believe with all my heart from the evidence that is presented to me in the Bible that this Jesus of Nazareth, three days after he was historically put to death on a cross and after his body was buried in the tomb, he rose from the dead.

[18 : 44] That's the starting point. That's my number one foundation. In other words, if you take away, if I find out tonight, I've said this before, if I found out tonight that that didn't happen, I would never come up to this pulpit again.

I would never visit this church again. I would throw out my Bible. I would scrap the Christian faith. Seriously. I really mean that.

That is the consequences of me finding out that this didn't happen, that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. Because there's nothing good about the Bible if it's not true.

It is all a lie if it's not true. Now, if it is true, then that makes a massive difference.

That means if it is true that Jesus rose from the dead, his resurrection authenticates who he was and everything that he said in this world.

[19 : 46] And it means that everything that he did and said is true. Absolutely 100% true. And it means that of all the voices in the world that clamor for your attention tonight, then Jesus Christ deserves the first place.

Because he rose from the dead. It also means not only that everything he said is true, it means that his death on the cross was necessary in the plan of God for my salvation because he says it was for my salvation.

It also means that when he says I am the way and the truth and the life, he really means it. And it's true that he is the way and the truth and the life.

It means that he is the only way to God. I am so thankful tonight. That there is only one way to God through Jesus Christ. Not by me climbing up a mountain to get to God but by God because God has come all the way down into this world to save me.

I don't have the energy and the inclination to climb up any mountain to get to God. I don't want to. But I know God tonight because he has come down into this world and he's rescued me from the depths of depravity and sin and shame and darkness.

[21 : 14] That's what the gospel is all about. And it's the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that tells me that, that authenticates that. Because if he rose from the dead then it was God by the power of God that he rose from the dead.

A dead person cannot rise themselves. They don't have any consciousness at all. It has to be by an external outside force if that person has any hope whatsoever of rising from the dead.

And we have to believe that Jesus rose from the dead by the power of the Father and by doing so he authenticated you stamped his approval on his death and his life and everything that he did and said in this world.

You see there are real logical reasons why you should believe in Jesus Christ. It's not just some kind of fairy story.

It's not just one religion amongst a whole plethora of religions. Jesus stands alone. There is something absolutely unique about this man Jesus Christ.

[22 : 24] But the third thing is this. Not only does it authenticate everything that Jesus said not only does it authenticate his death on the cross as the payment for my sin but it also brings it draws me to believe that there is life after my death because if he rose from the dead then it means it's possible for a human being to rise from the dead.

It's even more possible when he says to me I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me though he were dead yet shall he live.

now I know tonight whenever God decides to whenever God has appointed that day I'm going to die maybe sooner maybe later same with you but I know tonight by the promise of Jesus I am the resurrection of the life that I will rise again.

it might be a thousand years two thousand years ten thousand years after I die I don't know how God's going to do it I don't know the scientific process by which God reconstitutes or puts together a body again from bare atoms I don't know how he's going to do it but he can do it because with God all things are possible and because Jesus rose from the dead I believe with all my heart that is exactly what is going to happen.

So it gives me not only a hope for the future it gives me a promise for the future. Let's look just and again I want to again I want to express this for the sake of younger people how do you how do you go about discussing the resurrection with people who come to you and there will be people coming to you asking you why you are a Christian because in our world it's becoming more and more and more strange to be a Christian more and more weird it's not normal to be a Christian so you have to be ready with a real answer and you start here start here at the resurrection this man Jesus of Nazareth he rose again from the dead historically well how do you know that he rose again well let's look at the historical records written by men who were around at the time and who were eyewitnesses that's how you discover what history is that's how all history is made up by men and women who were there at the time and who wrote down what they saw so that's what we're doing we're coming to the Bible we're coming to the Gospels and we're following the steps of the disciples and the women who went to the tomb fully expecting to find the body of Jesus on the first day of the week and they discovered to their astonishment that the grave was empty the tomb was empty and not only so they met with two men dressed in white who said to them he is not here because he has risen come and see the place where they lay they went in

[25 : 31] John and Peter particularly went into the grave they went into not the grave but the tomb and they saw and John it says specifically in John chapter 20 John saw and believed what did he believe what did he see he saw the grave clothes the wrappings the linen that was wrapped around Jesus' body and it was lying by itself like a deflated balloon if you like because the body around which that linen had been wrapped it had risen and it had come out of the grave clothes and the grave clothes had kind of collapsed in a heap by themselves there was no other explanation nobody unwrapped his body his body was now a glorified risen Lord Jesus and he simply phased himself through the clothes and the clothes simply fell by themselves and there was a napkin around his head of course which was in another place by itself when John saw that he believed let me just go through once again the arguments again many of the older ones have heard this so often

I don't want to I don't want to go over it but it's important for every generation that we go through the facts as they are given to us if Jesus didn't rise from the dead what happened to his body some people try to make out that Jesus never died in the first place let's take that option did he die at all well number one he died because he was inspected his body was inspected and these people knew what was a dead body the same as our people do secondly he had been on a Roman cross for hours where all his bones had come out of joint thirdly a great spear had been driven through his side and after all the scourgings and mockings and after it was quite clear that he had died already his body was taken off the cross and it was inspected then it was wrapped in the linen and the spices were put into the linen it was physically impossible for anyone to survive all of these things there is no way that Jesus could have revived somehow had he not been dead and how even if that is true there was a great stone rolled over the mouth of the cave where his body was laying how could a person who had gone through all that suffering possibly roll the stone away when there are soldiers guarding the tomb outside do you think that they wouldn't notice that the stone was being rolled away it's impossible to believe that Jesus hadn't died in the first place so that's that one the second option is that the disciples stole his body that while the soldiers were somehow off guard or when they were asleep the disciples somehow sometime during the night they came and they rolled this great stone away and they stole his body how likely is that to succeed these soldiers had been given orders on your life and I mean on your life do not let anyone break into this tomb and here was the first night maybe after a month they might have been more inclined to be off their guard but this was the third rather the third the third day and they were still guarding this tomb with their life how easy is it even in the middle of the night for people to roll a massive stone without making a noise without waking even if they were asleep impossible and even if they had where did they put the body of Jesus how easy would it have been for them to and why is it that all of them all of them to a man went away and preached with the same confidence that

Jesus had risen from the dead surely with all the persecution that they had to suffer in the days to come that they would have that one of them would have buckled and would have said well I'm sorry you're right we did steal the body and we'll show you where it is it's impossible the other possibility is that the soldiers or rather the Romans stole the body now I ask you what possible reason would they have to do the very thing that they were afraid of what possible motive would there have been for the soldiers to steal the body of Jesus that doesn't make any sense whatsoever even more so when it comes to the disciples and they start preaching that Jesus has risen from the dead any one of them could have come up to them and said excuse me you're wrong Jesus did not rise from the dead and you come with me and I'm going to show you the body of Jesus they could have done that if they had stolen the body but they didn't because they couldn't because he was risen from the dead now most of you will have heard all of this before it's important for us to give a reason for the faith that we have in

Jesus Christ we are not believing something irrationally we are going on the evidence that the Bible gives us but the evidence that the apostle Paul gives us is that Jesus was seen first of all by Peter then the twelve then five hundred brothers at one time most of whom were still alive now that is pretty convincing evidence even if it happened two thousand years ago now what that says to me is that Jesus is the son of God he did what he said he would he came into the world to to save us from our sin by dying on the cross and he rose again to prove once and for all that he is the way and the truth and the life that is why Christians can lay hold upon this tonight and that is why I am asking you tonight if you are not a Christian to come and to see for yourself what Peter and John saw in the empty tomb and by seeing believe in the

Lord Jesus Christ and the Bible tells us you will you will be saved just a minute just going back because I have kind of wandered off tonight I haven't really stuck to what I was going to say tonight maybe there is a reason for that but I want us to just very quickly read together those opening words because I do believe they give us light on how a person becomes a Christian and what it means to be a Christian first of all here's the three things that the Apostle Paul tells us as to what it means to be a Christian I preach to you which you received listen look at that word you received the gospel that's what it means to become a Christian becoming a Christian is when you receive the gift of everlasting life offered to you tonight by God and then he tells us in which you stand and by which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word I preach to you now you notice that in these three descriptions of what it means to be a Christian not one of them involves your effort or your work and I say that because our almost instinctive reaction to reading the Bible is what must I do what good thing must I do in order to earn

[33 : 33] God's goodness Paul says it's not about what we can do we can't do anything we've already broken God's law we are bankrupt unable to do anything that pleases God but when a person is saved when a person is a Christian he has received something now I say this because so many times again to conversations with people and it's hard for them to understand when the Bible talks about believing it's not just believing that there is a God or that there is Jesus Christ when the Bible talks about believing what it means is receiving when a person receives what Jesus has done on the cross for our sins and it means that that person is standing day by day within that life that God has given to that person the new life and it means that we are being saved from day to day in order for us one day to be presented before God on the day of judgment clean and without guilt our guilt has been taken away and our

Christian life consists in a daily walk with Jesus Christ as he leads us to the end of the world when that day will come when we will go into the new heaven and the new earth and be with Jesus forever God tonight is offering you a gift we're talking about this at the Caber Fay the other night God is offering you the most precious wonderful gift that anyone could ever give you it's not like any gift that you've ever received before and you'll never ever find it anywhere else and that gift is life everlasting life and there is only one question that the Lord is asking you tonight will you take that gift will you open the gift will you discover what's inside the box some people will say

I'm afraid to open it because I fear that I will misuse it in some way but God when he gives you that gift he doesn't disappear doesn't just give it to you and disappear when God gives you that gift and you take that gift he stays there to help you open it he sits down with you and he unwraps you and he unwraps the gift and he shows you what is inside he shows you describing the life that he gives and that he offers to you and he makes sure that he gives you all the way there are times when you will go wrong every Christian goes wrong and if you think tonight if you're refusing God's gift for fear that you will go wrong then that's not a good reason to refuse the gift because the gift includes his forgiveness not just now but his forgiveness of sins past present and future life and the

Lord works in you and gives you the ability and the grace to change and to become more and more receptive and more more wondrous of that gift that he has given you in the Lord Jesus Christ so the only question is this tonight will you take it you can only take it as a child of God you can't keep your own life you can't keep the old life that's what repentance is all about repentance is about just simply turning your back on the life that you've always lived and accepting the new life that the risen Lord Jesus gives you and I can tell you tonight that I wouldn't go back to my old life for anything nor would anyone here tonight who's a Christian I love my new life I love my life more than anything else I have in this world I love my new life here on this earth because my eyes have been opened to the goodness of

God and I see everything I enjoy in this life as a gift from God I reckon I enjoy and the same is true for every Christian here we enjoy life more than you do if you're not Christian because we are given to see the significance of every good thing and we can enjoy our lives in this world with peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ we have that peace do you have that peace if you don't have that peace you don't have anything the risen Lord Jesus rose to give you that peace the peace of God that passes all understanding and that peace we can enjoy tonight because our sins are forgiven in the Lord Jesus Christ do you have tonight the forgiveness of sins God can cleanse you he can wash you he can bring you to himself and he can reveal himself to you in ways that you have never seen before let's pray