

The Resurrection's First Importance

Controversial Questions from Corinth, 1 Corinthians, part 4 (9)

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

By: Pastor Enoch Liao

1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, **2** and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. **9** For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. **10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. **11** Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (ESV)

Our gracious Father, we give you thanks for the privilege to worship. We give you thanks whether we're in town on vacation, to look at schools, to check out a job, to just get away, for a wedding, etc. We ask that, as we are here this morning, you make this time profitable. You say in your Word that all your teaching and all your scripture is breathed out by You and your spirit and is profitable for us, so that we might learn and grow in holiness, righteousness, and grace. Teach us this morning through your spirit as we consider the resurrection and what that means for us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

One of the things you might notice about our worship service is that we try to understand that there are people in the room who are not necessarily Christians or even seekers. There might be people who are only at service because their parents forced them, because they want the air conditioning or heating, because they like the music or the interesting messages, because their spouses attend service, or because they get free childcare. We talk about this idea a lot – you heard it in our prayers, Calvin talked about it last week in his sermon, etc. Part of the idea is to make the Word of God and the teachings of the Church intelligible. There are a lot of things in the Bible that sound strange to our modern ears.

I was just at a church in California preaching. We talked about Genesis and the fall of humanity, when Adam and Eve sinned against God and fell into temptation and ate the fruit. They were

tempted by a talking snake. I spent a few minutes talking about how I know it sounds so weird. In the church context, you might think, “What’s so weird about a talking snake?” However, in that crowd, there were a few students and adults who realized, “He really thinks along the same lines as me? Talking snakes? What is this? Parcel tongue? Do they really understand talking snakes?” I believe that the Bible says that it really was a real, talking serpent, not some personified version of evil or anything like that.

What about when people sing “worthy is the lamb” or say things like “washed in the blood of the lamb”? You might be thinking, “What are you talking about? You threw away a golden calf so you can worship a sheep? Washed in the blood? Have you ever pictured that phrase? That’s disgusting.” However, it is here in the Bible.

Here we’re going to look at something that is very, very strange. Later, Paul even says this himself. That is this: people come back from the dead. Now in church world, that is normal. We read about it, sing about it, etc. Let’s, however, take things out of the church world for a second. People come back from the dead? Seriously? What year are we? What country are we in? How many scientific and technological advances have we had? We’ve advanced a lot in our understanding of the technical, biological, chemical, medical fields, and as we advance in all those notions, we must realize that we cannot bring people back from the dead.

Here we are talking about a core teaching of the Christian faith. If you’re a Christian, it is vital that you understand this; Paul spends a whole chapter talking about this topic. If you’re not a Christian, you are blessed by God to be here to consider one of the most important teachings of the church – one of the most antiquated and strange teachings: people die and then they come back from the dead.

We’re going to be spending three Sundays, Lord willing, studying 1 Corinthians 15. This morning, in verses 1-11, we will see four points:

1. The priority of the Resurrection – why is the Resurrection important?
2. The principle of the Resurrection – what is the Resurrection?
3. The proof of the Resurrection – why should we believe in the Resurrection?
4. The power of the Resurrection – what difference does the Resurrection make in my life today?

1. The priority of the Resurrection – why is the Resurrection important?

We begin here because Paul is in the latter part of 1 Corinthians and we’re in a subpart of 1 Corinthians that we’re calling “Controversial Questions from Corinth”. We aren’t going to actually get to the controversial questions part today, but in the church of Corinth, there were people who were really questioning the Resurrection. In a real Christian church founded by the

Apostles, you can have people who claim to be Christians, yet wonder if they really believe that Christ rose from the dead.

15 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, **2** and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

The priority of the Resurrection is: you must decide if you believe in the Resurrection of the dead. Every single one of us here, no matter how young or old we are, no matter how educated we are, no matter how rich or poor we are, we each need to decide. Paul says that it is a first importance, one of the crucial starting points of Christianity. It is a basic starting point; it is how you really test whether or not someone is in the faith.

When I was at UCLA as an undergraduate, one of my anthropology professors was a brilliant, kind African man. He declared in the second week of class, in response to someone's question, that he was a Christian. For the next few weeks, I thought, "Wow, it's awesome that there is a Christian professor at UCLA, particularly one in the anthropology department." As I listened to him lecture the following weeks, I began to realize that he was teaching things that didn't really align with Jesus' teachings. He believes that you don't have to believe in Jesus to go to heaven and you don't need to repent and trust in the Lord for forgiveness of sins. I asked him the next day, "Professor, I know you said you were Christian, but according to how you've been teaching, it almost sounds like you're Buddhist." He replied, "Well I am. I am Christian and Buddhist." I began to think, "I don't think you can be both according to Christianity." He responded, "Who are we to say who can be a Christian?" To that, I would point to Jesus Christ and Paul.

This is a first importance. There are so many things the Bible teaches that are crucial and importance. However, the heart of Christianity is that Jesus Christ, a man and God, who came to walk this Earth, was crucified, died, buried, and rose from the dead. This passage and many other passages in the Bible tell us that if you don't believe those things, then you cannot be a Christian.

My brother-in-law is a doctor and I love to know insider things. We talked about drugs, showing the hospital, and psychosomatic illnesses, cases in which patients are faking their illnesses. He told me, "You know there is a way to test whether or not someone is unconscious or sleeping? This is what we do: when we're trying to test if someone is actually unconscious, we lift the person's arm, put the person's arm above his or her face, and let go. If the person's arm falls to the side rather than directly over the face, we know the person is faking unconsciousness. People who are really unconscious slap themselves in the face and stay unconscious or asleep." There is a test.

There is a test that Paul says: if you believe in love and forgiveness but not in the Resurrection, you cannot claim to follow Jesus Christ. If you claim to believe in social justice and serving the

poor like Jesus did, but you don't not believe that he bodily died, was buried in a tomb, and then rose from the dead, you cannot be a Christian. You can call yourself a Christian but you cannot truly be a Christian. A Christian is a learner, follower, disciple of Jesus Christ. This is a first importance; this is an absolute priority. We have warrant and justification, not to offend each other, but to say, "Look, you can tell yourself you may not be a Christian if you believe all these things about teaching and morals but you don't believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as according to Paul and the other apostles who followed Jesus around and knew him personally."

The priority is: you and I just decide where we stand, what we believe, when it comes to the Resurrection. This is not a simple or quick decision. Let's take a look here beginning at verse 2:

if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Now, what is he saying here? He is saying that the Gospel is what you believe in, what you stand in, and it is what is saving you, unless you believe in vain. This translation is probably not as helpful. However, think of it this way: unless you really made a hasty decision back when you decided to become a Christian, this Gospel has the power to see your forgiveness of sin and seal your eternity in Heaven despite all the mistakes you have made. This applies only if you truly accepted Christ – not because of your parents, your spouse, your girlfriend or boyfriend. It has to be your own, it has to be genuine, and it has to be thoughtful. Simply saying that you believe in the Resurrection doesn't mean anything. You cannot even begin to talk about the Gospel of Jesus Christ if you reject the very reason why he came to this Earth – that is, to live, die, be buried, and rise again.

Friends, have you thought about that lately? Maybe you're a Christian and you haven't really realized that this is a crucial place that your faith rests on – more than loving and serving the poor; more than the teachings of forgiveness, holiness, and righteousness. Do you believe in the Resurrection? You cannot be a Christian unless you believe that. It's not a quiz; it's a matter of: you cannot believe in the God that saves you from the dead if you don't believe that he, himself, came back from the dead.

You might be thinking, "People coming back from the dead? That is utterly ridiculous. That is just fanciful. That is just a myth. You're ruining the Bible, Pastor Enoch. Just go along with other theologians that claim that the Resurrection is actually more of a spiritual resurrection than it is a physical, bodily one. It is a new life; it is a new purpose in life." Oh no, I don't think they're saving the Bible by saying those things. In fact, I think they're really taking away the heart, the power, and the hope of the Bible. I'm not going to tell the ancient Israelites, who were oppressed in Egypt, that they didn't believe the spiritual freedom from Pharaoh. No, we're talking about this idea of new life. This can be applied to us now, here, today. Your life, my life, can be very hard. This is not a spiritual new thing. This is a real return from the dead. Which moves us to the next point: what exactly are we talking about here?

2. The principle of the Resurrection – what is the Resurrection?

What exactly is the Resurrection? What is the essence of when Jesus says that he was resurrected from the dead. We'll see that there are three essential movements of this: you have to have Jesus die, you have to have Jesus buried, and lastly, you have to have Jesus rise from the dead. Let's pick it up from verse 3:

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

Let's take apart all these things because they're actually really important. Paul is essentially blocking off all the heresies and false teachings throughout all of the church history. What are some of the wrong beliefs that Paul mentions?

Well firstly, Paul would say that Jesus really died, which means he really had to have human flesh. However, there are branches of Christian teachers in the past and even present who believe that Jesus didn't really die or that he didn't really take on human flesh; he just appeared as a human. The basic idea is: flesh is often seen as bad and so people don't believe that Jesus would come in a fleshly vessel.

This idea was very common, particularly in ancient Greek views. They believed the eternal soul was a good thing and the physical stuff was bad. You still sense that in certain fundamentalists versions of highly conservative Christianity. This notion lives on even today – sex is bad because it is physical, so only do it to make babies and gluttony is bad so only eat basic foods. Other than that, the flesh is not good. A lot of us struggle with that because it's so easy to blame the flesh. In the New Testament flesh is portrayed in a negative way, but what Jesus did was he actually came in the flesh. That's where we get the phrase "in the flesh". Jesus really came and he was buried. Why is that important?

Historically, there was a tomb where they put Jesus' body. A couple days later, Jesus was no longer there. It is important to understand that this tomb was a hole carved out of a mountain with a heavy rock covering the entrance of the tomb. Some people think that Jesus didn't really die on the cross; they believe that he swooned, fainted, or faked the death. Think about it: if you're a leader around that time and you kill Jesus and later see him walking around, one of the best excuses is to say, "Wow, we didn't shoot him in the chest to make sure he was dead. He was probably injured, but his disciples nursed him back to health and here he is."

There is an ancient Jewish belief that after three days, the body becomes totally decomposed and unclean. The fact that Jesus died and then rose again three days later is saying: look, he really died and he really rose from the dead. He did not come back as a spirit and zoom back into the body. He was not a projection of a physical body. Jesus ate. He had wounds and scars. He warmed himself by the fire. He could be touched by other people. He really came back from the dead. This is different from, say, reincarnation.

Some people say that they like the idea of reincarnation better, perhaps because it sounds more pleasant or fun. It is the idea that if you die, you get another chance and have the opportunity to move up the reincarnational ladder. The irony is that all religions that believe in reincarnation actually hate the idea of reincarnation. The reason why they are in reincarnation is because they are stuck inside this physical suffering; the whole point of certain Hindu and Buddhist incarnation beliefs is to stop this terrible cycle because if you are good enough, you might get to move on into enlightenment and never have to go into reincarnation again. Reincarnation is simply another chance; it is not resurrection. Resurrection is new life. You don't need reincarnation because you're just going to get another chance and, if you're like me, you're just going to fail again.

Your marriages don't need another chance because you would just fail. We need new life. Your family does not need another chance; don't rewind the clock because rewinding the clock would just help you rewind and suffer again. You need new life. My shameful deeds and past, mistakes I've made that I don't even want to think about, I don't need another chance; I need new life. Reincarnation tells you that you can have a new chance and you can start over. Great, another life where I can struggle and sin again. The resurrection says: no you're not going to get another chance; you get new life. That is what the resurrection is – the power of a new life as the same person. You are still you, but you are completely new.

That sounds pretty amazing, but why should we believe it? Why do we believe it? Why should we believe that Jesus came back from the dead and Christians, if they put their faith in Christ, can also come back from the dead? We're going to talk about when that happens perhaps later down the road. Why should we believe it?

3. The proof of the Resurrection – why should we believe in the Resurrection?

Now Paul moves into the proof. Now, honestly, by our modern ears, we might think, "Pfft, this is not proof. Paul just lists a bunch of names of people – biased, uneducated, ancient people." Let's read what Paul says first. Paul, in order to cite the proof and support of the Resurrection, talks about the power of witness.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me

In the Greek version, there is a key word that starts the clauses in the other verses, but is not present in verse 8. He keeps this pattern when he talks about Cephas, the twelve, five hundred brothers, James, and the apostles but then he changes the grammar when he gets to himself.

Here we have a list of people, but who are these people? Cephas was the apostle Peter. The twelve was referring to the group of men who were the first disciples and apostles.

Additionally, although the five hundred brothers may not sound like a lot to you, back in that day, that was a lot of witnesses. In the Old Testament, to condemn someone to death for a capital crime, you only need two or three witnesses. We even have that same concept in society today. You don't need five or six witnesses to take the stand; you only need one or two solid witnesses to have testimonies that don't contradict each other. Not only are there five hundred brothers, but Paul says that they are still alive, which means you can go ask them about what they witnessed. Paul is calling in the most powerful proof you can have: testimony.

The reason why some of us might struggle with that is because we don't feel that testimony is very strong proof; we would rather have a mathematical proof or equation or a scientific experiment we can duplicate.

I was MIT once, speaking for a conference, when this young woman came up to talk to me. I was sharing about the Gospel and she asked me, "How can you believe in the Resurrection and the Bible? It's just full of myths." I, in turn, asked her this, "Who is the first president of the country?" She replied, "George Washington." I then asked her, "Do you believe that Abraham Lincoln was a president. Why do you believe that?" She said, "Yes I do. Because I learned it in school." I challenged her, asking, "Well, where did your teachers learn it? So, you are saying that if they taught Christianity in school – that makes it true?" She said, "No, of course not! School is textbooks." I replied, "So if you read something in a textbook then it is true?" "No of course not. The textbooks are written by authorities and are reliable."

Finally, I said, "So, you believe in these figures in history because you have reliable sources. Why would you think those people are reliable? Did they see George Washington themselves? You're telling me the reason why you believe in these figures is because you have reliable source texts which have been transmitted throughout history accurately and reliably and you can test these facts down to the original eyewitnesses of the events?" She confirmed, "Yes." And I asked, "Then, why don't you believe in the Bible? According to your criteria, it is a reliable, historical document that has been transmitted accurately through the centuries. We have manuscripts to show the accuracy of the scribes. There were no photocopiers. Men dedicated their lives to copy each character perfectly. If they messed up, they would burn that manuscript. There were also eyewitnesses. How would you know if the eyewitnesses were telling the truth?"

"Well here's why: what did the apostles do the night Jesus was betrayed? They ran away. What did Peter do the night that he followed Jesus around? He denied and rejected Jesus, saying that he didn't know Jesus. They were scared, rightfully so, because these powerful Roman and Jewish authorities were against this new movement. Why would a bunch of cowardly, uneducated, politically non-powerful people, in a matter of days, rise up to be a part of the one of the most impressive, forceful social and theological movements in the entire Roman empire? Because they really, truly believed. They were witness." Paul said in this passage, "There are people still alive today; you can go ahead and ask them."

If you're going to make up a religion, wait a couple hundred years until memories fade, and then put everything down in writing. It's stupid to make up a religion while people are still alive. Wait until time and history have altered people's recollection of events. To be foolish and stupid enough to write down that five hundred people, many of who are still living, saw Jesus alive is the most forceful historical argument you could make. You can run an experiment on a certain scientific theory, but you cannot run an experiment on history. You cannot prove what you were doing yesterday. You must rely on trustworthy, reliable eyewitness.

The proof for the Resurrection is the proof for all other historical information you have. Whoever you believe in history, who you did not meet, you believe because of witness. If you do the research, the witness of Jesus Christ is the most potent witness in all of human history. It is documented. It is real. However, that is not the extent of the proof. There is another testimony to the power of the Resurrection.

4. The power of the Resurrection – what difference does the Resurrection make in my life today?

The power of the Resurrection shows the priority, the principle, and the proof of the Resurrection. Let's take a look at the passage beginning in verse 8:

⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

What is the power of the Resurrection? It is the new life that you see in true followers of Jesus Christ. It is the new transformed lives of genuine souls who have fallen before the Lord and received His genuine forgiveness and the power of His Holy Spirit. The power of the Resurrection is that Paul, the apostle who said, "I was the worst of these guys." Paul probably tortured and imprisoned people. If you think about physical fights or abuse situations, those situations are things people usually regret.

Do you know what makes someone a menacing source of torture and persecution? It is when, like Paul, a person believes that the torture and abuse he or she is causing is justified in the name of God. The selfish dictator that oppresses people is scary; however, the scariest dictator is the dictator that believes he or she has been giving the divine right to rule and to pronounce judgment. That is scary because it is not about evil or wickedness. He or she really believes he or she has the moral right to judge and oppress people. That was Paul.

Paul's life was dedicated to eradicating the false teaching that Jesus was the son of God. He dedicated years of his life on this mission. He felt morally justified to grab, torture, drag, beat, and kill Christians to try to get names of other Christ followers. Paul says, "I was the least of the

apostles and I was not worthy to be called an apostle, but now look at me – I am writing to you about the grace of God that is true in my life.”

Friends, I wish I could say that the reason why people may not believe in the Gospel is because of doctrine or reasonable arguments. I wish it was about errors in the Bible because we can deal with that. However, the greatest argument non-Christians have against Christians is that some people say they are Christians and then do things that Jesus wouldn't want us to do. That is the most killer blow to Christianity. There are men, women, and children who claim to be Christian, yet live in a way that does not honor Jesus Christ. The opposite is true: at the end of the day, after talk about the coherence and viability of the Gospel, here is the thing we know: that lady was helping me when no one else would help me. She is a Christian and I'm going to go to her church to see what it is all about. That is what people remember and notice. That family down the street – the kids actually look like they like their parents. The couple really looks like they are happily married. They really are, somehow, different.

The power of the Resurrection is to bring new life to a person. However, notice how that life comes about. It is so interesting – pay attention to this tension, beginning in verse 10:

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

The power of the Resurrection is a gift from God that works mightily in us and is reflected in our lives. You cannot say, “I believe in the grace of God, so I can be a neglectful parent.” That is not how grace works. The grace of God is what convicts us, empowers us, and guides us to do the things Christ has called us to do in this world. That is the power of the Resurrection. That is why it says: “the Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead is going to do greater things in you. The same Spirit that resurrected Christ from the grave is the same one that is going to restore wholeness to your life, to your family, to your relationships, and to our world.” That power needs to be on display in this room, in this church, and in our lives.

There are people in room who have been in prison before, but you would never know because the grace of God has transformed their lives. There are people in this room who are not in their first marriage, but you would never know because they look so happily married; it is the grace of God at work in their lives. There are people in this room who were full of bitterness and hatred from this world, but you wouldn't know unless you got to know them because the grace of God is at work in their lives. Just ask people who have been around. The grace of God is powerful and mighty.

Friends, this is what we are called to do: the priority of the Resurrection says, “Do you thoughtfully consider, believe, and defend the Resurrection? Do you understand what the Resurrection is?” If we understand that the Resurrection is the same person coming back and receiving new life. We're not talking about coming back as a zombie; that's not resurrection. The Resurrection is wholeness, restored, robust, refreshed, and renewed.

At the same time, you have to acknowledge the proof of the Resurrection, the witness of the Bible. Most importantly, you have to deal with the fact that God has transformed people's lives every day.

Friends, if you're a Christian, are you working hard with the grace God has given you to experience the power of the Resurrection? If you're working apart from the grace, apart from the Resurrection, it's not going to fly. Whether we have a building for a church is secondary. Chinatown, Boston, this world needs to see the power of the Resurrection in the church. It doesn't matter where the building, but the more important thing is that people are full of the power of the Resurrection. I believe people die and rise from the dead – and it changes everything. How about you?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we consider your truth, your message of Resurrection, help us to examine our hearts. How important is this doctrine? Do we really believe all that we say we believe? We pray Father that you would show us and teach us exactly the power of the Resurrection in our lives. If we're struggling, right now, to see it in our lives, would you encourage us, strengthen us, and help us believe that You are truly alive today.

So, Heavenly Father, as we reflect on that and potentially sing songs and take Communion, reveal to us the power and glory of this amazing truth. We talked about, today at church, how people can back from the dead because Jesus did and how he promises that to all who trust in Him. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.