

## **175 and Counting: In Defense of the Resurrection**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-26**

By **[Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)**

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. We're going to read verses 1 to 26 today. I was thinking as we sang the first hymn this morning that, that hymn was a sermon in itself. The first two songs sung to us are sermons in themselves. This Scripture reading is a sermon in itself so the Lord is blessing us with His Word richly today.

Today, as we read this passage, I want you to be on the lookout for two things because this is what we're going to do in the message this morning. I want you to see how Paul defends the resurrection in this passage. You will see it especially in verses 1 to 11. Then, I also want you to see why Paul says that the resurrection is so important. And there are two things in particular that he has on his mind in showing us that the resurrection is so important. That's what I want us to do today because you perhaps have encountered people who do not believe in the resurrection. You may have even encountered Christians who say, "I'm a Christian; I'm still a Christian, but I don't believe in the resurrection." What would be Paul's attitude towards that? Well, you find out in this section. You don't have to guess because interestingly enough, even in Jesus' ministry He encountered Jewish teachers that did not believe in the resurrection. That happened, you remember, for instance, in Matthew 22 when He spoke to the Sadducees who were making fun of the doctrine of the resurrection and Jesus defended the resurrection in that passage. Well Paul is having to do that here because there are people in Corinth who doubt the future resurrection of the dead. Perhaps they're under the influence of the typical Greco-Roman thought in Athens, in Corinth, in other parts of the Greek world. Perhaps there's some other influence that's on them, but they doubt the resurrection. Paul here articulates a defense of the resurrection and then he tells us why it is so important and I want us to give attention to that this morning.

Before we read God's Word, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. Your Word, by the Spirit, can make the blind see and the deaf hear and the dead live. Do that, we pray, today, even in the reading of Your Word and in our hearing of it by the help of Your grace and the Holy Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is the Word of God beginning in 1 Corinthians 15 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 five hundred 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 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. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Doubts about the resurrection, however contemporary and current they are, are not new. You know, about this time every year some major magazine, some

major media outlet, some television channel, does some sort of special debunking some aspect of the historic Christian faith. And a frequent target is the resurrection of Christ. But you understand that contemporary criticisms of, denials of, doubts about the resurrection, are not in fact new. They existed in Jesus' time. The Sadducees were a sect of Jewish religious leaders who did not believe in the resurrection. In fact, they mocked Jesus about the resurrection. And here, Paul is speaking to the Corinthians and apparently there are people in Corinth who are having doubts about the resurrection. And in response to that Paul does two things. He gives an argument, a sustained, detailed argument for the resurrection and then he tells you why the resurrection is so important. And notice what Paul does in this passage. The doubts that are being raised are doubts about the future resurrection, the general resurrection that will occur in the last day when all are called to account to God in the great Judgment Day after Jesus has returned. The doubts are about that resurrection. Paul gets at the issue of that resurrection by talking about Jesus' resurrection. And he says if that resurrection is not true then Jesus' resurrection is not true. But we know that Jesus' resurrection is true and therefore we know that that resurrection is true. That's the phrasing of the argument in the passage that we're going to study. But I want to look with you very briefly, especially at verses 1 to 11, where Paul lays out an argument for the resurrection. And then I want you to see how he applies that particular truth.

## **A DEFENSE OF THE RESURRECTION**

The first thing I want you to see is in verses 1 and 2. Paul gives a series of arguments. You can number them differently — four or five arguments in verses 1 to 11. He gives four or five arguments about why the resurrection ought to be believed. And the first thing he says is this — that the resurrection is a part of the Gospel that he preached and that the Corinthians had received. Look at what he says in verses 1 and 2. “Now I make known to you, brethren, the Gospel, which I preached to you, which also you received, in which you also stand, and by which you are saved.” And then in verses 3 and 4 he recounts that Gospel and he concludes in verse 4 by saying that part of that Gospel is that he was raised on the third day. So the first thing that Paul says is that the resurrection is a part of the Gospel. It is part of the Gospel message. There are many people who think that the resurrection is extraneous to the Gospel — you can be a Christian without believing in the resurrection. The apostle Paul says no because the resurrection is a part of the Gospel that he proclaimed. So he said, “This is the Gospel I preached, this is the Gospel you received — Christ died, was buried, and was raised again on the third day according to the Scriptures. So the resurrection is not extraneous, but it is intrinsic to the Gospel. You can't have the Gospel and deny the resurrection and you can't deny the resurrection and still have the Gospel. The resurrection is part and parcel. It is warp and woof of the Gospel message”. That's Paul's first argument.

But his second argument is connected with it. But his second argument is connected with it. Notice what he says again in verses 1 to 4. "Now I make known to you, brethren, the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you received." And then look at what he says in verse 3. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." Now let's stop right there because that's Paul's second argument. Notice what he said. In verse 1 he said, "I preached, you received," and then he said, "What I delivered to you in my preaching I had received." What is Paul saying? Paul is saying, "I did not make the doctrine of the resurrection up. This doctrine predated me. Before I was a Christian, Christians already believed this doctrine because Jesus had both taught and demonstrated this doctrine to those Christians before I was even a Christian. So I received this truth, I received the testimony of the reality of the resurrection, from those who came before me. I'm not the first generation of Christians," Paul is saying, "who believe in the resurrection. I received this."

So this is very interesting. Paul is making it clear that he is not the originator of this teaching. You know some liberal, critical scholars will accuse Paul of inventing Christianity. They will say, "Paul was the first Christian. He was the inventor of the Christian religion." Well here's the one that the liberal critics claim is the inventor of Christianity saying, "I did not invent the doctrine of the resurrection; I received it. It pre-existed me. It was taught by Jesus; it was demonstrated by Jesus. The early Christians believed it before I was a Christian and when I became a Christian I received it. It was a doctrine already given to me."

But third, notice what else he says in this passage. Look at verses 3 and 4 again. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." The times in this passage Paul will emphasize that the teaching of the resurrection is grounded in the Scripture. Isn't it fascinating? Paul, while he was a persecutor of early Christians, had seen the risen Christ face to face on the road to Damascus. Wouldn't you expect him first to argue that you ought to believe the resurrection because of his experience? "Hey, I experienced meeting the risen Jesus face to face, therefore you ought to believe it!" But that's not what Paul does. Paul says, "The Bible teaches the resurrection, Corinthians, therefore you ought to believe in the resurrection." Now this is huge because it is exactly what Jesus did. It's exactly what Jesus did and Jesus did this both before and after the resurrection.

Turn with me to Matthew 22. In Matthew 22 the Sadducees are making fun of the doctrine of the resurrection. You'll see in Matthew 22 verse 23 that Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection and so they asked Jesus a question that they thought would mock the doctrine of the resurrection. He said that there were seven brothers and the first one of them married and he died and so he left his wife to one of his remaining brothers and so on and so on and so on and so this woman ends up being married to all seven of the brothers because all of them

die. It's a reference to the levirate marriage laws from the Old Testament. And the Sadducees thought, "Well this is really cute. You're in a conundrum. If you believe in heaven then this woman has seven husbands. So Jesus, who's she married to in heaven? Ha, ha, ha, ha!" And Jesus says, "You know what your problem is? You don't understand your Bible." And then He says this. "Here's the big way you don't understand your Bible. You don't understand that your Bible teaches the resurrection. The Bible says, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' God says that in the Bible. He doesn't say, 'I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' It says, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Don't you people understand that God is not the God of the dead, He's the God of the living? And that means Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive."

Now you understand that Jesus' teaching has a profound effect on the disciples and early Christians, and so, turn with me to Luke 24. And this is the passage that Dr. Baird is going to preach from tonight. I'm not going to steal any of his thunder but look with me at Luke chapter 24. I want you to just look at one verse. In Luke 24 Jesus is walking along the road to Emmaus with two disciples whose world has just come crashing down around their ears because Jesus has died and they've lost all hope. And so they are slowly, with slumped shoulders, walking back to the little village of Emmaus seven miles from Jerusalem, and who shows up but Jesus. Now does Jesus say to those disciples on the road to Emmaus — by the way, look at Luke 24 verse 25. Does He say to them, "Hey guys! It's Me!" Was that His first line of argument for the resurrection? "I'm here! I've been raised from the dead!" No, that's not what He says. What does He say to them? He says, "Oh foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Don't you understand that your Bible teaches that the Messiah is both going to suffer and die and be glorified? He's going to be crucified, dead, and buried, and He's going to be raised again from the dead! The Bible teaches that!" Isn't it fascinating? Jesus is with them and He says, "You know what your problem is? You don't believe the Bible."

And Paul is arguing just like that here in 1 Corinthians 15. He's saying, "Corinthians, we believe the resurrection because the Bible teaches the resurrection. I mean, take a look at the last verse of Isaiah 53. After telling about the suffering and death of the suffering servant, what does the very last verse of that section say but that God is going to reward His servant with an inheritance. How can that happen if He's dead? The passage says He died for the sins of His people. How is God going to reward Him without the resurrection?" You know the Psalm I quoted this morning, Psalm 118? Early Christians went to that psalm and they said, "This psalm is about the resurrection." That's why I quote it every Easter Sunday. It says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes!" It's a picture of the rejection of Christ by His own people, and yet what does it go on to say? "This is the day the Lord has made." And what did early Christians believe? That that refers first and foremost to the resurrection because God made Him to rise again from the dead. "But the rejected stone becomes the chief cornerstone

which is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes, and therefore this is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

And early Christians went all over the Old Testament seeing where God had testified to the resurrection because Jesus taught them that. And Paul's doing the same thing right here in 1 Corinthians. He could have said, "Hey guys! I've seen Jesus! I know He's raised from the dead." But he begins by saying, "We believe in the resurrection by the Book. We believe that Jesus was crucified by the Book, dead by the Book, raised again on the third day by the Book. The reason we believe the resurrection is because the Book says so." "The Bible tells me so," we sing from the time we are on our mother's knee. The Bible tells me so.

Then, then look at verses 5 to 10. Paul makes his fourth argument. So first, resurrection is part of the Gospel. Second, Paul didn't invent the doctrine of resurrection, he received it. Third, we believe in the resurrection because the Bible teaches the resurrection. Fourth, Paul said, "Folks, let me just tell you, there are eye-witnesses." And he says, "Let me just start with Cephas, Peter." He says, "Just in case you think this is a Peter versus Paul thing, this is not. Peter and I are lock-step on this. Peter preaches this just like I do." And by the way just go take a look at 1 and 2 Peter. They do. They're in lock-step on this. And then he says, "And He appeared to five hundred people, some of whom are still alive. And He appeared to James." Now think of this. Many, many of the fathers of the church think that James, who was the half-brother of our Lord and who became the pastor of the Christians in Jerusalem, they think that James may well have been converted when Jesus displayed Himself to him. Why? Because we are told in the gospels that James and Jesus' other half-brothers did not believe in Him during His earthy life and ministry. They thought He was crazy. And so the church fathers go to this passage and say, "Could it have been that when Jesus revealed Himself to His half-brother James after the resurrection that that is what converted James?"

By the way, this is important because in this passage two people, James and Paul, one a skeptic of Jesus, one an enemy of Jesus and the early Christians, both testify to what? That they believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is huge because many people will try and tell you that the resurrection is a myth made up by followers of Christ. How do you explain that a man, James, who thought Jesus was crazy during His life, believed in the resurrection? How do you explain a man who made his career killing Christians believes in the resurrection? That's Paul. These are testimonies. Paul is saying there are people who have seen the risen Christ. You can go talk to them.

And then one last thing that he says. Look at verse 11. He says, "Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed." In other words, when he says, "So we preached," who's he talking about? He's talking about him and the other apostles. In other words, he's saying, "The Gospel that we preach is not different. It's the same Gospel. We all preach the Gospel that Christ died, and was buried,

and was raised again on the third day according to the Scriptures. All of us. We preach that. It is testified to by all of the apostles.” And so Paul makes this argument for the resurrection of Jesus.

And then he says, “Now, if you deny the resurrection of the dead in the future, you have to deny Jesus’ resurrection.” He just made an argument for Jesus’ resurrection that proves it to be true but he says this. “If you deny Jesus’ resurrection, you’ve got two problems. Your life is empty and your sins are not forgiven. Without the resurrection of Jesus,” look at what he says in this passage. “If there is no resurrection of Jesus, if Christ has not been raised,” - look at verse 14 - “your faith is in vain.” And he comes back and very frankly he says it more strongly. “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

You will meet people today who say, “Why do we have to take this more than anything other than a story of hope? You know, this is Jesus resurrected in the hearts of His people. And you know, why can’t we just say Christianity is about serving others and loving others? Why do we have to get caught up in this doctrine of the resurrection?” If you had said that to Paul, Paul would say, “Well look, let me just say, if I believed that I would quit Christianity today.” Paul is saying, “If I am only going to serve as a Christian for this life only, I am miserably diluted. My life is empty and I would rather eat and drink because tomorrow I die.” Christianity isn’t just interested in your best life now. Paul isn’t just concerned about your next thirty years; he’s concerned about your next three trillion years. And so the apostle Paul says, “I am not a Christian simply because of hope in this life. My hope is in the age to come. I live for Christ now and then, for here and hereafter. My hope is not just now; my hope is then. And if you don’t have that hope, quit Christianity,” Paul says.

## **WHY THE RESURRECTION IS IMPORTANT**

But the second thing he says is just as profound. He says, “If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then you are still in your sins.” Look at verse 17. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” Why? Well, what does Paul say in Romans 6? “The wages of sin is death.” And what does Jesus defeat in His resurrection? Death. Look at the last verse that we read. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” And how do you destroy death? You have to destroy sin first. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, death has not been conquered, sin has not been conquered, and therefore you and I are still sinners under the just condemnation of a righteous God. How important is the resurrection? Paul says your life is empty and hopeless without it and you are still unforgiven in your sins. But for all those who trust in Christ, we are, Paul says in Romans 6, united with Him in His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection.

And Peter tells us and Paul tells us that the power of the resurrection is in us in

our new birth. In other words, they're saying we wouldn't even be Christians if Christ hadn't been raised from the dead because the power that raised us to new life is the power that raised Jesus from the dead. So the resurrection lives on in the very fact that you have been brought out of darkness and into a marvelous light. That's why we celebrate today. But this celebration is for those who have been united to Christ by faith. And they believe the Gospel. And the Gospel says Christ died for our sins, by the Book, and He was buried and raised again, by the Book. Believe in Him, friends. Believe it, brothers and sisters.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, by Your Spirit, impress this truth upon our hearts. Grant that we would receive it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now let's take our hymnals and turn to number 267 and we'll sing a hymn about the resurrection written in the 8th century.

Receive God's blessing. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus the Christ, amen.

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