

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

11. TOGETHER FOR EVER

1 Corinthians 15:1-58

Paul’s letter is reaching its climax. He has spent the last fourteen chapters responding to the situation in this young church, full of new Christians in the teeming seaport of Corinth, a city full of arrogant Greek intellectuals, transitory travellers from around the Roman Empire and sex-fixated devotees of the goddess Aphrodite. The church, made up of converts drawn from these groups, has been experiencing problems as it has tried to work out on the hoof, as it were, just what a Christian community should look like and behave like. Paul has had to deal with issues of selfishness, arrogance, immorality, chaotic worship and internal divisions. Some of those things he has heard about via representatives from the house groups in Corinth; some of them have been set out in letters he’s received. But as he writes from across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus, he now gets to the heart of what he sees as the gospel message.

If you look at most of Paul’s other letters which we have preserved in the New Testament, you’ll find that he starts off setting out his doctrine, then applies that to the particular situation faced by his readers. Here it’s the other way round. He has answered their questions and spoken into their specific situation and now, in chapter 15, he starts to “*remind them of the gospel [he] preached to [them].*” He focuses in on what he believes to be the most important part of this – and their – message: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and its implications for believers. It’s a wonderful piece of writing, both in terms of the content and in terms of the rhetorical style he employs (something that cannot adequately be conveyed in translation).

This is the “*gospel by which you are saved*” (v2). This is what it’s all about. This is the very heart and soul of the message that marks off the Christian community from all other religious and non-religious communities. This is what takes the gospel of Jesus Christ way beyond anything the Corinthians have ever experienced either as Jews or as adherents to the Greek and Roman cults which proliferated in cities such as Corinth. Paul has passed this on to the Corinthians as being “*of first importance*”. Forget the local spats that have led to lawsuits. Forget the brouhaha over the use of spiritual gifts in worship. Forget the arguments over eating food that’s been offered to idols. Forget the changing customs about marriage and divorce. This is what it’s really all about. Paul succinctly sums it up in v3 – “*Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*” That’s it in a nutshell. That’s what you believe that marks you off from any other group. That’s what makes Christianity special.

It’s important that all three things are there, especially in the light of what Paul is going on to say later in the chapter. And it’s important, too, that this is validated and confirmed. **Jesus died.** There is no suggestion of any other explanation. He did not swoon. He was not taken down from the cross before he’d finally expired. He did not escape death in any miraculous way. Jesus died on the cross. **Jesus was buried.** Again, this is a confirmation that he was dead. There were plenty of eye-witnesses to it as the gospels make very clear. People saw Jesus die and they saw him taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb. His physical body was buried. **Jesus was raised on the third day.** This was a physical, bodily resurrection. That’s why the burial element is so important. Paul is going on in this chapter to explain that we shall experience bodily resurrection, so the way in which Jesus was raised is also vitally important.

And Paul offers some convincing proof for this. As far as his readers from a Jewish background were concerned, he stresses that this was “*in accordance with the Scriptures*”. At this stage this can only have been the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. For Paul, a great Jewish scholar and Pharisee, the death burial and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, had all been foretold and explained in the words of the Hebrew prophets. He doesn’t spend any time here expanding on that – he does that elsewhere – but assures the Corinthians that this was all to be expected. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament expectations. This is what God had planned all along.

But not only was it testified to by the Hebrew prophets, it was witnessed by contemporaries of the Corinthian Christians. In vv5-8, Paul writes of the people who saw Jesus alive after he had clearly been dead and buried. They saw him as a resurrected body, not as an apparition, not as some kind of emotion-induced mass hysteria. Paul tells them in v6 that most of them are still alive: any Corinthian who wanted to could check up on this could ask an eyewitness. Jesus even made an appearance (although we're not quite sure how) to Paul himself – no doubt a real and dramatic encounter because it totally changed Paul's life and gave him the basis for his entire ministry. As far as Paul is concerned, there is no doubt whatsoever that Jesus died and was resurrected.

Now, as I say, the bit about dying and being buried was pretty important in this context because the Greeks, under the influence of one of the greatest philosophers, Plato, did not believe in the possibility of a bodily resurrection. If anything at all happened after death, it was that human souls became released from the bodies in which they had been imprisoned for seventy years or whatever and roamed freely at last. Paul is adamant that Christians, following the example of Jesus himself, will experience bodily resurrection. That's what he's on about in vv35ff. There are still plenty of Christians who hold to this Platonic notion that we'll spend the afterlife flitting about like angels in a way very similar to this idea of disembodied souls, and we compound that view by talking about "saving souls" and the notion that has existed for centuries that the body is not really very good, it's the soul inside that is important.

Paul knocks all that on the head when he writes about Jesus being raised from the dead as "*the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (v20). Jesus blazed a trail through death and out the other side. He was seen as a body. He had physical presence. He was definitely there. As Paul says in v6, five hundred people can't all be wrong! But he was also changed in some way. He had a new body – recognisably his, but somehow different. And if he is the "*firstfruits*", then the same will be true of those who believe in him, who have accepted as true this gospel "*of first importance*". We shall, as he writes in v49, "*bear the likeness of the man from heaven.*" We shall all be changed (v51), but we shall still have a bodily resurrection.

Now there are all kinds of things that are not completely explained here, all kinds of loose ends left blowing around, but clearly the key to all this is that Jesus died, was buried and was raised to life again. Belief in that is, if you like, the bottom line of the Christian faith. No other religion, no other faith has the same core set of beliefs: it can be said of no other god or prophet. This is the doctrinal bedrock on which the Corinthians ethical distinctiveness is built. It is the non-negotiable heart of Christianity. And the implications of that are clearly set out here by Paul.

1. If it's not true, our faith is a waste of time and effort (vv14ff).

Paul acknowledges the centrality of this belief when he tells them that if Jesus Christ has not been raised from the dead, his preaching has been a load of hot air. He's no better than a snake-oil peddler, a purveyor of empty dreams, a charlatan. And what's more, they're a bunch of fools for believing him. They have no faith at all. It's all a complete waste of time and effort.

Although people may not always acknowledge it, our behaviour, our attitudes, our relationships with each other and with our world are based on some kind of belief, usually a belief that has been handed down to us by others. If you have no belief in an afterlife, then either you try and make the best of what you've got here and now or you don't worry too much about what you do here and now because it will have no consequences. If you believe there's a god of some sort that will affect what you do and think. If you're a complete atheist, that will influence your outlook on life. The belief of the Corinthian Christians – and, indeed, ours – should be based on this core principle that Jesus died and was buried and was raised again, and that is what affects our day to day lives. Take it away and we have no real rationale for the way we behave or think or worship or anything.

2. If it's not true, we have no real hope (v19).

Again, if we choose not to believe this gospel, then we don't have any hope for the eternal future. We might believe in Jesus as a good man, as a gifted prophet, as a wise teacher, as a radical revolutionary or

whatever, but if that's all he is – just a human being who died and that's that – then we don't have any hope for anything beyond this life. We may try to modify our behaviour or change our attitudes because of his example or his influence, but that's no going to make much difference in the long run; we'll just be a bit happier (maybe) here and now. But if Jesus was raised from the dead and has blazed that trail for us into the life beyond, then we have a real hope, a certain hope, for the future. We can follow him anywhere knowing that he will protect us and preserve us for eternity. Which takes us on to the third point.

3. If it's not true, there's no point suffering for it (vv30-32)

If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, if we don't have this certain hope for the future, says Paul, then what a waste of time and effort it's been for him. He's been arrested, whipped, threatened with death and goodness knows what else (look at *2 Corinthians 11:23ff*) because of his belief in this. If it wasn't true then he might just as well adopt the slogan he quotes in v32. Part of the proof for the truth of Christianity is the willingness of Christians to die for what they believe. Now I know that's not a totally convincing proof, because there are plenty of other people who have been prepared to die for other beliefs, but at least the overriding principle here is that Christians are prepared to die for what they believe rather than kill for what they believe. Why go through the difficulties and hazards of standing up for Jesus if there is no future to look forward to? In some parts of the world Christians are still called to die for their faith and are persecuted mercilessly for what they believe about Jesus. And even here, we find ourselves faced with very difficult ethical dilemmas due to our belief in Jesus' death and resurrection. Why bother if it's not real, if it's not true?

But if it is true – well, that should have a powerful effect on the way we live our lives, on the way we relate to each other, on the way we worship. We have an assured future with God as resurrected beings – that's what this is all about. We don't live just for the moment, squeezing every last drop of selfish pleasure out of each day because we have no idea what lies ahead of us. That was the way of the Greek and Roman cults – Epicureans, Stoics and so on. That's the way of our contemporary nihilistic and hopeless culture. Why bother? Why think about anything after death? Just do it! And do it now.

You and I are Christians, followers of Jesus the Christ. We believe that he died and was buried and was raised to life again for us, raised to life as the trailblazer for all who believe in him. That should have a tremendous impact on all we do and say here and now. We are people of the future. We are people of faith. We are people of victory – victory over sin and death and the consequences of both. This is what all that Paul has written to the Christians in Corinth is based on – it's what all he writes in all his letters is based on. And that's why he concludes this section with the words of v58.

This has always been a verse that I've looked to for encouragement and for sustenance as a Christian. After this amazing chapter on the resurrection of Christ and all that it promises for us, Paul begins this verse "*Therefore ...*". Because of all these truths, you can "*stand firm*". Jesus is alive and so will you be, so stick to what you believe.

"Let nothing move you." Jesus is alive and so will you be, so don't allow yourself to be seduced off by other beliefs, other faiths, other philosophies, other lifestyles.

"Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord." Jesus is alive and so will you be, so you can really put all you've got into living for him here and now, in this setting where evil is still on the prowl, because you know that Jesus has overcome it and there will be a time when you can live with him for ever. He's won the victory over all this. There is no doubt about that. Look at vv56,57. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof of that. Death and sin are defeated by the cross and the empty tomb.

"You know your labour in the Lord is not in vain." Sometimes it seems like it, doesn't it? It seems like you're banging your head against a brick wall. Why bother trying to do good? Why bother trying to encourage other Christians? Why bother telling other people about the life-changing, world transforming gospel of Christ? Because Jesus is alive and so will you be. Because it's true. Because he has promised

us so much and we know we can rely on him. When you start to feel that you're wasting your time, when you start to feel discouraged, when you wonder why on earth you're putting so much time and effort into this Christianity thing, pause and reflect on the fact that Jesus died for you and that he was brought back to life to show you that there is hope, that there is a future, that it's not in vain.

Do we believe it? We sing about it. We read about it. We talk about it. We pray about it. We wear badges and car stickers and so on about it. If we truly believe it, let's get on and live like it!

Discussion notes on the next page.

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If it's not true then we might just as well adopt the slogan Paul quotes in v32. Part of the proof for the truth of Christianity is the willingness of Christians to die for what they believe. Why bother if it's not real, if it's not true?

After this amazing chapter on the resurrection of Christ and all that it promises for us, Paul begins v58 "*Therefore ...*". Because of all these truths, you can "*stand firm*". Jesus is alive and so will you be, so stick to what you believe.

Questions for discussion

1. Why is what Paul writes in vv3-8 "*of first importance*"?
2. How would you reply to someone who tried to convince you that Jesus did not die and return to life?
3. Paul says that we shall be raised with a new body: we shall be changed (v51). What do you think that means?
4. What is the "*victory*" of which Paul writes in v57?
5. What effect should this belief have on our lives day by day?
6. Is there anything you find particularly encouraging or challenging in this chapter?