

*** The Heights Baptist Church * Sermon Series: Doctrine ***

*** Topic: Death & the Resurrection * 1 Corinthians 15 * 7/26/26 ***

MAIN POINT

The resurrection of Christ guarantees the future resurrection of all believers and motivates us to live for Christ in the present.

INTRODUCTION

What is the best magic or illusion that you have ever seen? How could you tell that it was an illusion rather than real magic?

How does having something really positive to look forward to encourage you in the present?

Illusions may be very entertaining, but they are, nonetheless, only illusions. Not so Jesus' resurrection. It is a real, historical event that has real consequences for all. It is essential for us that Jesus rose from the dead; it is the central truth of the gospel, demonstrating that Jesus is God and capable of saving us all. As believers, we have a clear and certain hope that one day our bodies will be raised and renewed. As Christians, we can know that we, like Jesus, will be resurrected, and this sure should give us great hope.

Note to study leader: Today's sermon topic in our doctrine series is titled, "What is Death and Resurrection". Today's Lifegroup lesson will supplement the sermon topic by looking at 1 Corinthians 15. The apostle Paul was addressing questions presented by the Corinthian church, and this chapter apparently was responding to a disagreement amongst the Corinthian believers as to whether or not there would be a resurrection after we die. This issue may have been based on the view of the Greeks at the time that a bodily resurrection was impossible and could not happen.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

In verses 3 and 4 Paul gives the content of the gospel? What elements of the gospel message are included in these verses?

Why do you think Paul says these things are "of first importance"?

Why is the phrase "in accordance with the Scriptures" so important?

For centuries, Scriptures pointed to Christ coming and dying a substitutionary death. Understanding that everything Christ did was a part of God's long-term plan strengthens our faith and encourages our hope in Him. He has always and will always hold the future.

Why is it significant that Jesus was seen by 500 people at once after his resurrection, and that most of these witnesses were still alive at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians?

According to church history, eleven of the twelve apostles (assuming Paul or Matthias had replaced Judas) were martyred for their faith in Christ. How does this point to the reality of the resurrection?

There were many eyewitnesses to the risen Christ at the time the church got started. It would have been a very easy thing to check out. Also, people are generally not willing to die for something they know to be false. If the disciples had concocted the story of Jesus' resurrection, it would have obviously clashed with the testimonies of the rest of the people. Also, that fact that none of the apostles recanted their faith in the resurrection when threatened with execution provides solid evidence of that reality.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-19

If the resurrection of the dead is not true, what impact would that have on our faith and our future?

Paul made clear that if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, then we will not rise from the dead. The resurrection makes the gospel "good news" since the death of Christ paid for our sins, and the resurrection of Christ overcame the consequences of our sin. Jesus conquered sin and death which gives us eternal hope.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-34 AND EXODUS 23:19

Paul wrote that Christ was the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. What are first fruits and how do they help us understand this passage?

In Israel, the first fruits were the initial yield of crops for the year. This barley crop was ready in the spring. Part of this crop was offered to God during the festival of first fruits; and this preceded the main harvest which was ready in the fall. As Christ was raised, so will all believers. Everyone can look forward to their own resurrection and being in the presence of Christ forever because Christ has been raised from the dead.

Without the resurrection, there is no gospel to proclaim. Living the Christian life and taking a risk to advance the faith would be utterly pointless if the gospel were not true. Life would be meaningless.

What point did Paul make in the analogy of the farmer and the seeds?

In farming, an apparently dead thing (a seed) gives life to a new, much more glorious thing (a plant). Similarly, God will give new life to perishable bodies. Likewise, God has created many different forms of matter: humans, plants, animals, birds, planets and stars, etc. Each of these is different.

Our current mortal sinful bodies cannot withstand the glory and presence of God. Our bodies are suited for earth, but not heaven. There are necessary changes that have to occur to make our bodies new when we are raised from the dead. To illustrate this Paul, compared the first man to the ultimate man.

What sacrifices did Paul and the other apostles make on behalf of the gospel? Would they have done this if they didn't believe in the resurrection?

How does the warning Paul gives in verse 33 relate to the discussion about the resurrection, and how can we apply this warning to our lives?

Paul warns these people that the problem they were having with the resurrection was caused by the fact they had bought in to the world's philosophy. We need to be salt and light in this world, while making sure we are receiving our primary input from other Christians who are walking with Christ, and not from the world.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-50

What two questions did Paul address in these verses (verse 35)? What was his tone?

Paul was not happy with these questions. It's not that the questions themselves were bad, but the attitude of those who asked these questions was not good. They were using these questions to try to show the impossibility of a bodily resurrection.

What analogies did Paul use to make his point?

In farming, an apparently dead thing (a seed) gives life to a new glorious living thing (a plant). Similarly, God will give new life to our dead bodies. Likewise, God has created many different forms of matter: which shows us he is able to transform our lowly bodies into glorious bodies.

What changes will take place when our moral bodies become immortal?

Our current bodies cannot withstand the glory and presence of God. Our bodies are suited for earth, though they are destined for heaven. There are necessary changes that have to occur to make our bodies new when we are raised from the dead. To illustrate this Paul, compared the first man to the ultimate man.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-58

What is the mystery Paul is referring to in verse 51? What happens to Christians who have already died at the return of Christ? What happens to living Christians at the resurrection?

How has Christ robbed death of its victory and sting? Do you anticipate the day He returns and renews our bodies?

The word translated “moment” or “flash” in verse 52 referred to the briefest amount of time possible, and is only used in this verse. It is where we get the English word for “atom;” it literally means something so small it can’t be divided any further. This is combined with the word for blink, or twinkle. Combining these two terms emphasizes the instantaneousness of our transition from frail mortality to glorious immortality. When Christ returns, all believers will be made like Him in an instant.

In verse 56, Paul said “the sting of death is sin.” You would think it would be said the other way, that the sting of sin is death, since sin brought death to creation (Romans 5:12). What is the point Paul makes by phrasing it this way?

For sinners, death is our ultimate separation from God: for the believer, death unites us with God. (2 Cor. 5:8 and Phil. 1:21) Through Christ’s death and resurrection, death’s sting has been removed.

APPLICATION

Look again at verse 58. What should your response be to the resurrection?

Do you ever feel as though your labor is in vain? How can you look to these verses for comfort?

How might remembering that Christ’s death and resurrection have secured our eternal hope give us confidence to live for Christ in the present?

***Note to study leader:** The following question incorporates the “LIFE” acronym (from our “Starting Point” classes) into the lesson. A summary of this acronym is included in the first portion of the Commentary section of this lesson and probably on a poster in your classroom. Include a brief description of “LIFE” as part of this application. Today’s application is based on the “E” in the “LIFE” acronym.*

Loving our neighbor: I am motivated to show God’s love and compassion to others where I live, work, and play.

What can we do this week to extend Christ’s love to our families, co-workers, neighbors, and friends?

PRAYER

Praise God for sending Christ into the world, to reveal God to us, to die for our sins, and to rise again from the dead to show His power over death and give us hope in our own resurrection. Pray that our sure hope in the resurrection would motivate us to live faithful lives on this earth as salt and light to lost people.

COMMENTARY

The LIFE Acronym

This acronym is part of our “Starting Point” training programs. The letters in LIFE stand for the following:

Loving our neighbor: I am motivated to show God’s love and compassion to others where I live, work, and play.

Intentional friend: I am purposefully cultivating relationships within my church family.

Faithful follower: I am sensitive to the moving of the Holy Spirit in regular times of prayer, worship, and Bible study.

Engaged disciple-maker: I am regularly looking to invest in others to help them take their next step in following Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15

15:1. Paul appealed once again to the Corinthians as brothers as he began to talk about the resurrection. By this affectionate term Paul affirmed the Corinthians in their basic commitments to Christ’s resurrection, wanting to remind them of the elements of the gospel, not to challenge their acceptance of it.

The gospel, or good news, is the message of God’s saving work in Christ. Up to this point, Paul had oriented the gospel message around Christ’s death, but here he preached the gospel by emphasizing the resurrection. He also affirmed his belief that the Corinthian Christians had received this gospel message and had taken their stand on it. In Paul’s day being a Christian was more than intellectual assent to a group of doctrines. The social price that followers of Christ paid forced them to take a stand in a hostile world.

15:2. Anticipating the importance of what he would say about the resurrection, Paul made it clear that anyone who did not hold to the gospel he had preached could not be saved. Only by this gospel could they be saved from God’s judgment. Salvation comes through belief in the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Yet, Paul added an important qualification. They are saved, if they hold firmly to the word. As he indicated throughout this epistle, Paul believed that saving faith would set itself apart from insincerity through time. True believers persevere in their commitments to Christ. Paul did not mean that truly regenerate people could lose their salvation, nor that truly regenerate people were without sin and failure. He understood, as the entire Bible teaches, that saving faith proves itself over a lifetime. We may backslide as Christians, but to completely abandon your faith was evidence that you never were truly saved. A great cross-reference on this is Hebrews 10:39 (which is the verse that introduces the great faith chapter; Hebrews 11). It shows us the thing that separates those who shrink back and are destroyed and those who are saved is faith.

Paul warned that if the Corinthians had once trusted the gospel of Christ but did not hold fast to that gospel, then they believed in vain. In other words, their temporary commitments to Christ would not benefit them as they had hoped. Anyone who turns away from belief in the resurrection of Christ puts himself in a precarious position. He or she stands in line for God’s judgment, not for his eternal salvation.

15:3-4. Paul explained why it was important for the Corinthians to believe his teaching about the resurrection. He justified his insistence that they hold fast to the gospel, insisting that the resurrection was central to the gospel message. Why was this so important? Why was the resurrection a necessary element of the gospel?

First, Paul received and passed on this gospel. In rabbinic Judaism this terminology described the transmission of authoritative religious teachings. Paul told the Corinthians to maintain the gospel as he had given it to them because it was a sacred tradition, not a human tradition. Second, he delivered this gospel teaching as a matter of first importance. In other words, nothing was more central or more important in Paul’s conception of gospel than these teachings.

Paul summed up his gospel as having two main concerns: the death and the resurrection of Christ. Both of these took place according to the Scriptures. Paul repeated this phrase to emphasize the importance of the scriptural witness and to demonstrate that the resurrection's importance paralleled the centrality of Christ's death. He spoke first of Christ's death, declaring, Christ died for our sins. Christ's substitutionary death on behalf of believers brought salvation to those who would otherwise have been lost. When Paul said that Christ's death was according to the Scriptures, he probably had in mind Isaiah's prediction that the son of David would suffer on behalf of the people of God (see Isa. 53:1-12).

Second, Paul referred to the resurrection. Christ was buried, but He was raised on the third day. Paul never said that Christ raised Himself. Instead, the apostle taught that God the Father raised Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 1:4; Gal. 1:1). The resurrection was also according to the Scriptures. Paul probably had in mind Isaiah 53:10-12. The prophet explained that the Son of David would come back from the grave to bring great blessings to God's people. Paul also may have thought of Psalm 16:10, a passage in which David recorded that God would not allow His Holy One to see decay. Jesus defended the idea of resurrection in the Old Testament by asserting that God was the God of the living (see Matt. 22:31-32). By including both Christ's death and resurrection as essential elements of the gospel, Paul precluded those who denied the resurrection from claiming salvation in Christ.

15:5-8. Paul continued by adding a third element that expanded the second. Christ was not simply raised from the dead. He also appeared; people saw and heard Him. Paul did not repeat the refrain "according to the Scriptures" here because no particular prophecy focused on appearances of the resurrected Son of David. But Paul did note that several people saw the resurrected Christ. These included Peter, the Twelve, more than five hundred of the brothers ...most of whom were still living, James, all the apostles, and Paul himself. Although Paul's main idea was that all of these people bore witness to the resurrection of Christ, his list had at least three major concerns. Christ appeared to: (1) figures of central authority in the church (Peter, the Twelve, James, all the apostles); (2) large numbers of people (Twelve, five hundred, all the apostles); and (3) to Paul himself.

Paul declared that Christ had appeared to him on the road to Damascus last of all, as to one untimely born. The expression "last of all" probably indicates that Paul was the last person to see the resurrected Christ. Viewing the resurrected Savior was a requirement for apostleship (see Acts 1:21-22). Yet, Paul admitted that his own situation had been extraordinary because Christ came to him in a miraculous manner after the ascension. Thus, Paul saw himself as having been abnormally born. This expression is difficult to translate because it occurs only here in the New Testament. In an effort to express his humility, Paul compared himself to an untimely born child, indicating some degree of inferiority to those who had lived with Jesus during His earthly ministry.

15:9. In explaining why he spoke of himself in this way, Paul admitted to being the least of the apostles, not even deserving the title because he persecuted the church of God. This probably resonated strongly with his detractors. They most likely thought, "Obviously he is the least, that is why we favor Apollos and Cephas."

15:10. But Paul went on to defend his apostolic authority by pointing to God's choice of him. As Paul considered his background, he had no doubts that he had been called as a Christian and as Christ's apostle (I am what I am) only by the grace of God. In the book of Galatians, Paul taught that the Christian life begins by grace and continues through God's grace received by dependent faith. Not only had Paul initially believed as a result of God's grace, but every good thing in his Christian life also came from the grace of God. At this point, Paul concerned himself with one particular aspect of God's grace in his life. Divine mercy had great effect, or result, on his service to the body of Christ. This is the same type of argument he used in 9:1-27 to defend his apostleship. The one who had once persecuted the church worked harder than all the other apostles. Paul assessed the situation honestly, not speaking proudly as if he had accomplished anything on his own. He reiterated that he did nothing in his own power. He performed only by the grace of God that was with him. Paul knew himself too well to take credit for the good he had done in Christ's service. He knew that the only source that could produce these good works through him was the grace of God. Because he relied so strongly on God's grace, he became one of the most effective apostles.

15:11. Paul closed this section by bringing his readers back to the main idea. The Corinthians must believe that Christ had been resurrected. On this all the apostles agreed—Christ’s resurrection was central to the gospel. All of the apostles continued to preach this message, and the Corinthians at one time had believed it as well. Paul hoped they would reaffirm their commitment to Christ’s resurrection.

15:12. Though it is uncertain what caused some Corinthian believers to deny the resurrection of the dead, Greeks viewed bodily death as final, with some saying the spirit survived disembodied. This view likely influenced the church at Corinth.

15:13-15. If Christ were not raised, then apostolic preaching of the resurrection was without foundation, the Corinthians’ faith was void, and the apostles were false witnesses. “Faith” here refers to the content of the gospel message, and is synonymous with “system of beliefs.”

15:16. A restatement, in reverse order, of the implications of the Corinthian skepticism regarding resurrection.

15:17-19. Christians should be pitied more than anyone if there is no resurrection, for in that case we have placed all our hopes in a falsehood. Christianity is fundamentally a resurrection faith.

15:20. Christ’s genuine, well-attested resurrection is the guarantee of our future resurrection. “First-fruits” refers to the guarantee that Christ’s resurrection is the first-of-a-kind resurrection that promises others will follow in the end time. In this instance, the phrase “those who have fallen asleep” refers specifically to those who have died in Christ.

15:21-22. Paul presents a parallel of necessary effects. Through one man, Adam, death came to humanity. If this is ever to be reversed, it must be done so through like kind: a man. God has appointed just such a man: Jesus Christ, who is fully divine and fully human. Through His resurrection, the promise of resurrection comes to a new humanity “in Christ.” The second occurrence of the word all refers to all those who are joined to Christ through faith.

15:23. Jesus’ resurrection precedes and makes certain the resurrection of those who belong to Christ at His coming.

15:24-28. The Son, as the resurrected Messiah, will conquer and subdue everything, including the last enemy— death. By saying “He must reign,” Paul touches on the set-in-stone divine plan that assures us that history will end in just this way: with God triumphant over all evil and God’s people reigning with Christ forever.

15:29. “Being baptized for the dead” probably refers to the practice, apparently practiced by some in the Corinthian church, of someone undergoing baptism on behalf of another person who had died without undergoing baptism. Paul was not condoning this practice, and certainly Scripture nowhere directs us to conduct such baptisms.

Paul is using their practice to show that those at Corinth who do this are inadvertently acknowledging their belief in the resurrection.

15:30-32. “Wild animals” is almost certainly metaphorical for struggles Paul faced from human opponents of the gospel.

15:35-39. Paul compares human resurrection to the life-death-life cycle from agriculture. The seed body that dies gives rise to a totally different plant body, and yet there is retention of identity. So it is with our present bodies and our future resurrection bodies.

15:40-44. Having reviewed differentiations within the created order (vv. 35-41), Paul turns to differentiations of the resurrected body. It was sown in corruption and will be raised in incorruption. The body changes from a perishable body (a natural body) to an imperishable body (a spiritual body), though one that has physical characteristics (e.g., Luke 24:39). It is sown in dishonor and weakness, and it will be raised a glorious, imperishable body.

15:45. The first man Adam received the breath of life, a life that would become corruptible and perishable. In contrast, the last Adam (Jesus) will impart life, granting believers an incorruptible, imperishable, eternal body. Jesus will make believers alive through His life-giving Spirit, a power God alone wields.

15:46. Grammatically, the words the spiritual and the natural are in the neuter gender. They refer to two kinds of bodies (see v. 44) and not to Adam or Christ. “Spiritual” here refers to a body brought to life by the last Adam, Christ.

15:47-49. Paul contrasts the first man Adam and those who have borne his image with the second man and those who will bear his image. The first man was made of earth. This language emphasizes the transitory nature of those who are related to the first Adam, with bodies that return to dust. The “second man” from heaven refers to Jesus in His glorified humanity, as God-man and Messiah, who is coming from heaven to impart imperishable eternal bodies to those who have borne the image of the man made of dust.

15:50. Our earthly condition is such (flesh and blood and corruption, references to our perishable physical nature) that our Adamic bodies cannot inherit the kingdom, implying that they somehow must be changed.

15:51. Paul supports the above implication (v. 50) with an apostolic revelation that though not everyone will die before Christ’s coming, those who are alive when He comes will all be changed. No one is transported to the eternal state unchanged.

15:52. “In a moment” signifies the smallest possible division of something, in this case time. “Twinkling of an eye” similarly implies rapidity. Such will be the swiftness of the transformation of the living when the last trumpet sounds at Christ’s return.

15:53. The body that bears the image of the man of dust (the first Adam) must inevitably be changed into the incorruptibility and immortality of the body that bears the image of the man from heaven (the second Adam).

15:54-55. Paul conflates Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14 in this citation. The exchange of corruptible for incorruptibility comes only when death and corruption are swallowed up by Jesus Christ. This passage does not teach the doctrine of “soul sleep”—a suspended state for believers between physical death and the change into glorified bodies. Believers are with the Lord immediately after death (see Luke 23:43; Acts 7:55-59; 2 Cor. 5:1-8).

15:56-57. This verse represents a theological aside that Paul developed further in a letter he wrote some months after this present one (see Rom. 7).

15:58. Most anything we do in this life is vanity (Ecc. 1:2-3), but labor in the Lord has eternal value.