

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress**

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

#### **Up From the Grave We Will Rise!**

(1 Corinthians 15:1-34)

Study #20

#### **Introduction: From “What” to “So what?” ...**

Among the delights of parenthood is getting to watch children move through increasingly complex stages of development.

The early years bring on the questioning stage. Parents hear a lot of “Why’s?”

“Why can’t I have another bowl of ice cream / watch another show / stay up late / watch that movie / play that game / use that app. The “Why?” stage lasts a very long time.

At some point, another stage of questioning sets in. It overlaps the “Why?” stage and is co-extensive with it. This stage often hits in early adolescence.

I call it “The Stage of Implication,” or the “So what?” stage.

- “Your room is messy” “So what?”
- “You haven’t run out of toothpaste in six months.” “So what?”
- “We have a dog, and you haven’t scooped the back yard for weeks.” “So what?”

And so it goes.

The “So what?” stage is not restricted to the early years of adolescence. In fact, the “So what?” stage lasts a lifetime.

And the issues about which we ask, “So what?” become more consequential as we mature.

- So what if I don’t give attention to the things that promote health?
- So what if I’m not pursuing relationships?
- So what if I’m not taking intentional next steps with Jesus?

Responding to life’s “So what’s?” enables us to identify what is trivial, what’s mildly important, and what’s crucial. Today, the Apostle Paul puts one “So what?” on the crucial list.

Through correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul had learned that they were wrestling with biggest “So what?” there is.

*The unique contribution of 1 Corinthians 15...*

As we have seen in our time in 1 Corinthians, Paul dealt with problems the church was facing. They had written to him earlier with questions. He gave them answers.

To this point, these problems have been linked to troublesome behaviors or to bad attitudes. Now, though, very nearly at the end, he addressed a different kind of problem.

This one has behavioral implications. But it is fundamentally a belief question.

The theme of the long chapter we’re exploring this morning is resurrection. Paul wrote to speak to the reality of and the importance of the life after this life is over.

Those in the church would have remembered that Paul had taught them about this. He told them life after death was as certain for them as it was certain that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

They had received that “good news” with joy.

But now there were some people telling them that there was no life after death, and that even if there was, it wasn’t such a big deal.

*“So what if there’s an afterlife? Just live for Jesus. If He arose, big deal. If He didn’t, so what? What counts is NOW!”*

Paul will answer the questions, *“Is there a resurrection of the dead?”* with a resounding *“Yes!”* And to the follow-up, *“So what?”* he assures us, *“There is nothing more important.”*

We need to know that this life is just the tip of the iceberg of our existence. In fact, this life is preparatory for the one to come.

Paul wrote the “good news” message about resurrection to motivate us who believe in Jesus to live for Jesus, to serve Jesus, even to suffer and die for Jesus.

But in the opening section he didn’t focus on our resurrection. He focused on the resurrection of Jesus.

### **Affirming the Resurrection of Jesus (15:1-11)**

#### **Good News! (15:1-2)**

*The good news Paul highlights (v. 1)*

***[1] Now I make known to you, brothers and sisters, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand.***

This first verse is the prelude to what Paul will go on to say in the next two verses is the good news / gospel that he preached when he was in Corinth.

The Corinthians gladly received it for the good news it was. They were standing in this truth. They believed it.

This good news is a saving message.

*Holding on to this good news brings spiritual health (v. 2)*

***[2] by which you also are saved, if you hold firmly to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.***

I want us to notice three things here. First, what Paul is saying here about being *“saved.”*

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, he told them ***[2:8] by grace you have been saved through faith.***

By those words he was assuring them of their justification before God. Every detail of that phrase, right down to the tense of the verb - ***“have been saved”***<sup>1</sup> - spoke of a finished act. Done. Complete.

Paul’s comment here in 1 Corinthians is different. He used the same verb but in a different tense because he was saying something different.<sup>2</sup>

The *“good news”* message he is writing here is, presently, saving them. A fine translation would be, ***“by which you are being saved.”***

It doesn’t describe the finished work of justification, but the ongoing process of sanctification.

Paul’s message here speaks of a deliverance into spiritual health and vitality.<sup>3</sup>

Second, you’ll notice that it will only give that deliverance (*“save”*) if the believer in Jesus ***“holds firmly”*** to it. It will only move a believer further on the path to maturity in Jesus if he or she clings to it.

And third, even then, this message will only ***“save”*** you if you didn’t believe ***“in vain.”***

<sup>1</sup> It is in the form of a perfect passive participle. Completed action.

<sup>2</sup> Here, the verb (Greek *σωζω*) is in the present passive form indicating ongoing action, a process.

<sup>3</sup> The word that we translate ***“saved”*** (Greek verb *σωζω*) is not a technical term for receiving the free gift of eternal life. It is used in this way in Ephesians 2:8, but the New Testament authors most often used this word to describe a deliverance from some earthly danger or from disease. (See Matthew 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 7:50, 8:48, 17:19, 18:42; James 5:15)

Let me be as clear as I possibly can be here. Paul was not warning you that you may have thought you believed, but that you didn't REALLY believe. Your faith was "*vain*" faith.

No! Remember that the whole thrust of this chapter is resurrection. The only way that the Corinthians' faith would be "*in vain*" would be if the object of their faith - Jesus - was not both crucified AND resurrected.

Your Christian faith - and mine - is "*in vain*" IF Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead.

So, here is the content of the "good news" message that delivers us into a life of spiritual health IF we hold fast to it and IF Jesus was actually resurrected.

*The good news of Jesus' death and resurrection (vv. 3-4)*

***[3] For I handed down to you as of first importance<sup>4</sup> what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, [4] and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.***

The two crucial items here are (1) Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and (2) Jesus' rising from the dead on the third day. The marker that tells us they are crucial is the phrase, "***according to the Scriptures.***"<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' death and resurrection are the key realities.

Those two historical events are the only grounds upon which Jesus can offer eternal life to the one who believes.

If Jesus had not died as a perfect sacrifice and had not proven Himself the Sovereign Lord by defeating death, He would not be able to offer eternal life to the one who believes in Him.

And if it were not for the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus would not be able to deliver the one who stands on those two realities into spiritual vitality and maturity.

So, the all-important question is, "*Did Jesus actually rise from the dead?*" The list of witnesses says, "*He sure did!*"

### **Witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection (15:5-11)**

*First appearances of the resurrected Christ (vv. 5-7)*

***[5] and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. [6] After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; [7] then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.***

We look to the Gospels and find that "Cephas" (Simon Peter) saw the empty tomb - NOT Jesus! - on Easter Sunday morning. (Luke 24; John 20)

But then he did see Jesus twice in the Upper Room (John 20), and once at the Sea of Galilee. (John 21).

Jesus appeared to all the apostles (except Thomas) in that same Upper Room and then a few days later including Thomas.

There is no other mention in the Bible that Jesus appeared to a crowd of more than five hundred Christians at one time. But that appearance was evidently well-enough known that Paul could mention it as part of his evidence to Jesus' resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is there any biblical record of Jesus appearing to His half-brother, James. But Paul wrote about it here, so we believe it.

And then, of course, Jesus appeared to Paul.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 23:6; 24:21; 26:6-8. Paul, on trial for his life before the Jewish leaders, summed up the charge against him as his hope for "***the resurrection of the dead.***"

<sup>5</sup> It is true that He was buried. But that is irrelevant to the "***good news.***"

<sup>6</sup> The writing of 1 Corinthians was so soon after the events of Jesus' life and resurrection that if all of this had not happened, people who were alive at the time would have jumped up and said, "***That didn't happen!***"

*The appearance of the resurrected Christ to Paul (vv. 8-10)*

***[8] and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit 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 did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.***

Paul was a witness to the truth of Jesus' resurrection. But his was a unique apostle story. He as much as says here, "I am the runt of the apostolic litter!"

He didn't have the experience of walking with Jesus for three years like the other apostles did. And his testimony included his pre-conversion practice of arresting, imprisoning, and murdering Christians.

But Jesus' appearance, which took place just outside the city gates of Damascus (See Acts 9), so thoroughly convinced Paul of the truth of Jesus that he did a complete 180 and spent the rest of his life serving Jesus.

Again, what changed everything? The resurrection.

**Summary: So, Paul preached. So, we believe. (v. 11)**

***[11] Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.***

The apostolic message is that the crucified Christ was also the resurrected Christ. That was what started Paul on his journey with Jesus. Holding firm to that truth kept him on his journey until he took his last breath.

You have believed in the promise of this Jesus who died and rose again to give you the gift of eternal life.

Hold fast to that good news message and you are perfectly positioned for growth in Jesus. That's the point of what Paul is writing to this point. And we get it.

But there was a problem in Corinth. People there were teaching that this whole idea of resurrection was a myth. Life after death was a fairy tale.

Paul took them on and gave an extremely powerful and personal answer to the "So what?" of resurrection.

**Resurrection - So What? (15:12-28)**

**If Christ is Not Raised... (part 1) (15:12-19)**

Intro: *Some say there is no resurrection (v. 12)*

***[12] Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?***

Again, some of these Corinthians were teaching that this life is all there is. There is no afterlife. Our final breath...is our final breath.

Paul hears that idea and presses it to its logical consequence.

*If Christ was not raised...no Christianity (vv. 13-15)*

No resurrection? Jesus didn't rise (v.13)

***[13] But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.***

If people who die aren't raised and don't live eternally, then God and the uniqueness of humanity ("**male and female**" -Genesis 1) as image-bearers is removed from the equation.

And if there is no resurrection of the dead, Jesus is still in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. (Remember 1 Corinthians 15:2...)

No resurrection? Christianity is false (v. 14)

***[14] and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain.***

Resurrection, life after death, is so central to the faith that to deny it is to rip the heart out of the faith. It is to say that the object of our faith is a dead man.

A faith system built around a dead man is powerless. There's no meat to it, nothing to grab on to when the chips are down.

Resurrection isn't a "take it or leave it" part of Christianity. It's the centerpiece. It falls, and the faith falls.

No resurrection? The apostles are liars (v. 15)

**[15] Moreover, we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.**

If resurrection - Jesus' and ours - is not a real thing, then every Christian who has ever urged someone to believe in a resurrected Jesus is a bald-faced liar, including Paul.

*If Christ was not raised...forget Christian living (vv. 16-19)*

Then we who believe are still in our sins (vv. 16-18)

**[16] For if the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised; [17] and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. [18] Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.**

If Christ was not raised, then His promises of "eternal life" were a lie. Christians don't have eternal life.

Every flowery speech spoken over the graves of loved ones who have died believing in Jesus is just happy nonsense.

Without the resurrection there is no atonement. We remain alienated from God, un-justified, un-reconciled, un-redeemed.

And finally, there is this.

Then we who believe are most to be pitied (v. 19)

**[19] If we have hoped in Christ only in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied.<sup>7</sup>**

If Christ was NOT raised from the dead, then Christians come to an end with their final breath.

OK, here's a quick review. If there is no life after death, then:

- All apostolic preaching is in vain. (v. 14)
- The Corinthians' and all other Christian's faith is in vain. (v. 14)
- Paul and his companions are liars. (v. 15)
- All believers in Jesus are still guilty of sin. (v. 17)
- All who have died believing in Jesus are fools deserving pity. (v. 19)

All of that is the "So what?" to the question of resurrection.

But the good news is that Christ HAS been raised. And, with His resurrection, we, His people, rise, too.

This next section is "different" AND really helpful. Here, Paul takes time to explain that God's plan for "resurrection" is plural.

There are three separate resurrections, beginning with Christ's resurrection.

**Since Christ Has Been Raised... (15:20-28)**

*The promise of Jesus' resurrection to us who believe (vv. 20-22)*

**[20] But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. [21] For since by a man came death, by a Man also came the resurrection of the dead. [22] For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.**

<sup>7</sup> Paul never minimized the benefits the Christian has in this life in the way of peace within. Yet his point here is that if this world is all there is, anybody is better off than the Christians. Eternity makes all the difference.

The two men who had the greatest impact on human history were Adam and Jesus.

Adam's impact was tragic. His sin plunged the whole human race into sin and condemnation. His contribution was universal DEATH.

Jesus' contribution, by His death and His resurrection was LIFE.

All of humanity died because of Adam's sin. Every person who is in Christ will live.<sup>8</sup>

Paul described the first resurrection as "**first-fruits.**"

That is an Old Testament term that pictured the first sheaf of wheat harvested. That first sheaf was taken to the temple and offered to God as a sacrifice.

The offering of the "**first fruits**" consecrated the whole harvest and foreshadowed a greater harvest to come. (Ex. 23:16, 19)

Jesus' resurrection functioned as a "**first-fruit,**" guaranteeing that there would be more resurrections to come.

The snowball that will eventually become the eternal, universal Kingdom of God started rolling and picked up steam on that first Easter Sunday morning.

Paul then tells us about the second and third resurrections.

*The order and outcome of the resurrections (vv. 23-28)*

The first, second, and third resurrections (vv. 23-26)

***[23] But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, [24] then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to our God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.***

<sup>8</sup> The "alls" here refer to different groups. There is no implication of a universal salvation for all mankind.

***[25] For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. [26] The last enemy that will be abolished is death.***

Again, first is Christ's resurrection (v. 23a). He was the first One to be permanently resurrected.

Second, there will be a resurrection of those who are alive when Jesus returns, an event we refer to as "The Second Coming."

And third, there will be a resurrection at the end of the Millennial reign of Christ when all the redeemed are ushered into God's eternal kingdom.

And that is not the end of all things. That will be the final beginning of all things.

The launch of the eternal kingdom STARTS when Jesus delivers up all of creation as a well-ordered kingdom to His Father, who will reign forever and ever.

The Father is Lord of all (vv. 27-28)

***[27] For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is clear that this excludes the Father who put all things in subjection to Him. [28] When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.***

And that, friends is a glimpse into the future. We are moving in that direction NOW.

The first resurrection has already taken place. The second one is imminent. And after the third resurrection, God's rule and reign will be complete and uninterrupted into eternity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> We can have certainty of the next two resurrections because we have already seen the promise of them in the "**first-fruits**" resurrection of Jesus.

I was tempted to bring the message to an end at this point. But I have decided to keep going a little bit longer. I figured you would think that this next is fascinating.

### **If Christ Has Not Been Raised... (part 2) (vv. 29-32)**

*If Christ is not raised, why get baptized for the dead? (v. 29)*<sup>10</sup>

**[29] For otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?**<sup>11</sup>

I think he is referring to something that Corinthians and others did in the first century or two after the Christian movement got started.

Living Christians would get baptized on behalf of dead Christians who had never gotten around to being baptized. It was sort of a baptism by proxy.<sup>12</sup>

But we really don't know. It's clear that the Corinthians were familiar with the practice of baptizing people for people who had died.

Paul was certainly not saying that he baptized others on behalf of the dead, that he was ever baptized for the dead, or that anyone should be baptized for the dead.

He simply brings it up to say that it would be pointless to be baptized for the dead if the dead had no existence. The practice at least affirmed the belief that the dead exist in some conscious state.

It's tough to exactly figure out what he means by baptism for the dead. It is not tough to understand what he says next.

*If Christ is not raised, why suffer for Jesus? (vv. 30-32)*

**[30] Why are we also in danger every hour? [31] I affirm, brothers and sisters, by the boasting in you<sup>13</sup> which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, that I die daily. [32] If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what good is it to me? If the dead are not raised, LET'S EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.**<sup>14</sup>

Or "If this life is all there is, why in the world should I go through all the suffering that is sometimes (Often?!) involved in living for Jesus?"

To which we would say, "Good point."

Paul's claim, "***I die daily***" brings to mind a whole catalogue of his labors, imprisonments, beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, journeys, all kinds of dangers, sleepless nights, hungerings and thirstings, hardships, cold and exposure and the pressure of concern for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:23-33)<sup>15</sup>

He suffered all of that - and more! - for Jesus' sake.

The Epicurean philosophers of Paul's day, who believed that this life is all there is (no resurrection), said that the best way to live was to live in such a way as to maximize pleasure.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Paul sided with them.

<sup>10</sup> Interesting that even though the practice was weird and Paul obviously didn't agree with the practice, he didn't try to stop it. Evidently, Paul was willing to put up with a lot of diverse and ignorant behaviors as long as the fundamentals (in this case, a belief in resurrection) were in place.

<sup>11</sup> One of my commentaries (The Bible Knowledge Commentary) claims that upwards of two hundred explanations have been given for this one verse. That may be an exaggeration, but it is true that it is hard to get a handle on what exactly Paul means by his reference to "***those who are baptized for the dead.***"

<sup>12</sup> There is historical evidence of this being done in the second century, mostly by heretical groups.

<sup>13</sup> Interesting that although Paul obviously had a lot of problems with the Corinthians, yet they were his "***boast.***"

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Isaiah 22:13 and Ecclesiastes 2:24 for the same thought as 32b.

<sup>15</sup> His reference to fighting wild beasts at Ephesus was probably linked to his being targeted by a mob in a riot in Ephesus. (See Acts 19)

<sup>16</sup> Contrary to stereotype, the Epicureans were not usually wild-living libertines. They often concluded that the happiest life was the self-controlled life of moderation.

He believed that if resurrection is not a thing, then the suffering and hardship he endured as a servant of Jesus Christ made no sense.

Risking his life (if it was the only life he would ever have!) and tolerating hostility from others who opposed Jesus' way would be foolish if there was no resurrection to follow.

But Paul knew that there was more.

His life testified to his certainty that THIS life is preliminary and preparatory for THAT life just as life in the womb is preliminary to this life. (Or, as Todd Havekost said in a recent sermon, this life is "training time for reigning time.")

So, any suffering and any hardship we might endure for Jesus' sake, any energy we might expend in obedience to Him, any temptation we might resist in following Him is not only worth it. It is smart.

Investments we make HERE and NOW will pay rich dividends THEN and THERE.<sup>17</sup>

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Nurture an appetite for that future world.  
Live now with eternity in mind.

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<sup>17</sup> The spirit of Paul' words and thoughts fall right in line with Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount. (See especially Matthew 6.)