

IN LIGHT OF YOUR RESURRECTION**1 CORINTHIANS 15**

Some projects are worth a lot of extra time and attention. Take, for example, the recent renovation of the famous St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. It cost something like \$177 million and took nine years. More than 150 workers made 30,000 separate interventions - all planned and tracked with advanced software but executed by hand. The interior of the church was filled with scaffolding. Specialists climbed it to heal cracks in stained glass, fix shattered bits of steel, scour soot off blackened marble, rebuild eroded filigree, replace crumbling stones, re-plaster ribbed vaults, and restore wooden screens. The most impressive tasks aren't even visible like replacing the entire cooling and heating system and hooking it up to geothermal wells that have been sunk up to 2,200 feet below Manhattan's asphalt. The artistry, the expertise, and the craftsmanship are all top-notch. Was it worth all the effort? Apparently! But there's a far grander project I want you to think with me about today. Through His death and resurrection Jesus has started the greatest restoration of all time—the redemption of human beings and the restoration of the entire cosmos in and through Him. Today's message is about the supreme importance of Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection.

We've almost finished this message series on 1 Corinthians: "In Whatever You Do': Discovering What It Means to Glorify God." God gives us, as followers of Jesus, the opportunity and the ability to glorify Him in every task, every situation, every relationship, and every circumstance of life. That's our calling, our purpose, and our mission. It's expressed succinctly in 10:31 (NLT), "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." What does resurrection have to do with glorifying God? Well, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead and we don't receive transformed, resurrected, physical bodies sometime in the future, then trying to glorify God here and now is a big waste of time and effort. Here's the first of three tremendously important truths that come out of 1 Corinthians 15.

IF JESUS DIDN'T RISE, FOLLOWING HIM IS ABSURD.

Because of its length, I'm not going to read all of 1 Corinthians 15 today. But let's look at vv. 12-20 right now. There was a group within the Corinthian church that believed and taught Christians didn't need to be concerned about being physically resurrected from the dead. Back then, Greco-Roman cultural thinking insisted your outer physical body was unimportant. All that mattered was your inner spirit or soul. These Christians thought after they died they'd just stay spirit beings in Heaven kind of floating around for all eternity and never receiving a new, transformed, physical body. When Paul got news of this theology, he was aghast. "But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead?" (15:12 NLT) This failure to believe in resurrection was a very serious matter. It was like thrusting a dagger into the very heart of the Christian faith. It was disastrous. It made Jesus' actual, physical resurrection unnecessary and obsolete. And if Jesus' didn't rise from the dead, it made Christianity ridiculous and absurd.

For example, if Jesus didn't rise, my faith makes no sense. "For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either.... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins." (15:12, 17 NLT) Why? If Jesus' crucified body had stayed dead in the tomb, then our sins can't be forgiven. Jesus died on the cross to take the guilt and penalty of our sins upon Himself. But if He stayed dead, then it meant God the Father didn't accept His sacrifice for us on the cross as valid and effective. And if our sins can't be forgiven, then any kind of relationship with God is impossible. We're all doomed to Hell and eternal damnation.

Something else. If Jesus didn't rise, suffering for Jesus' sake makes no sense. Paul wrote here, "And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day.... If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained?" (15:20-22 NLT) We know Paul suffered greatly for sharing the good news of Jesus with lost people far from God. Now, he probably didn't literally take on lions in some arena, because you didn't survive those kind of encounters. Also, Paul was a Roman citizen; he couldn't be compelled to fight animals in that way. Paul meant he had some savage human enemies who were after him. They were as eager to kill him and tear him apart as any literal wild animal would have been.

Now, in our country it's still relatively safe to follow Jesus. Sure, that might change some day, but there's no way we can begin to compare our situation to what followers of Jesus face day in and day out in other places around the world. Can you name the top five countries in the world where it's most dangerous to follow Jesus? Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan. Number one? North Korea. If Easter is just a lovely, but non-factual myth, then all those followers of Jesus today in prison for their faith, or facing discrimination for their faith, or risking martyrdom for their faith are suffering for precisely nothing. Those who have died for their faith in Jesus are fools.

Paul would just not let it go. If Jesus didn't rise, living a life that glorifies God makes no sense. That's the theme of this letter – glorifying God in whatever you do - but it's worthless if Jesus didn't rise from the dead. Paul wrote, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" (15:32 NLT) Even if there is a right way and a wrong way, pursuing whatever pleases God doesn't matter. If there is a God, a relationship with Him is impossible. If there is a Heaven, no one can get there. Hell and damnation is our only future. I'm reminded of those old Schlitz beer TV commercials. "You only go around once in life. Go for all the gusto you can." Live it up. Seek personal pleasure and happiness above all. Look out for number one. Hold on to this life for as long as you can, because when it's over, it's over. If Jesus didn't rise, following Him is absurd. But here's a second truth and it's a wonderful one.

BECAUSE JESUS ROSE, I WILL RISE.

Jesus' resurrection was the key event in God's plan to rescue humanity. Because of Jesus' resurrection, the ultimate impact of both sin and death has been defeated.

Without Jesus' resurrection, you lose the Christian faith entirely. We'd still be living in a world where the full impact of sin and death is supreme and all powerful. Jesus' resurrection is proof He has already won the ultimate victory over sin and death even though we don't yet see the full result of His victory. It's coming, but it's not here yet! The Bible also teaches that your resurrection – and along with it the creation of the New Heaven and the New Earth – will be the fulfillment of God's plan. Your present body will either be resurrected or transformed into a new body at the Second Coming of Jesus: "But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed." (15:51-52 NLT)

I will have a new body like Jesus' new body. In other words, the risen Lord Jesus is both the means by which you will receive a future body as well as being the model for your future body. While Paul implied that truth in 1 Corinthians 15, he was more explicit in another letter he wrote, "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control." (Ph. 3:20-21 NLT)

If Jesus' resurrected body is a model for our future resurrected bodies, what can we say? Your resurrected body will be both an old and a new physical, human body. By old I mean it will be familiar to you. There will be some kind of fundamental continuity between my old, present body and my new, future body. When Jesus appeared to His incredulous disciples, He said: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." (Luke 24:39 NIV) The resurrected Jesus looked like a normal human being. His new body was suited for life on Earth. He could be touched and handled. He cooked and ate fish. He talked with two people on the road to Emmaus and they apparently didn't notice anything abnormal about His appearance. He didn't have a halo around His head. His feet didn't hover a few inches above the ground. You're not going to be a ghost in Heaven. You're not going to morph into an angel. I anticipate that you'll stay the same gender and race in Heaven that you are now. Jesus didn't stop being male or Jewish after His resurrection, did He? There's no evidence He suddenly become genderless or lost His ethnicity. Being male, female, Caucasian, African, Hispanic or Asian is a God-created aspect of being human. Heaven won't erase those distinctions. It will celebrate them! We can expect a fundamental continuity between the old and the new.

But there will also be significant discontinuity. We read in the Gospel accounts that Jesus' resurrected body was capable of suddenly appearing, disappearing, and then ascending to Heaven. Will we be given new physical abilities that we don't have now? Perhaps. It's safe to say you'll no longer be susceptible to illness, injury, age, or death. Paul wrote here, "For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies." (15:53 NLT) Our

present bodies are subject to disease, decay, and death right now. But not the new ones! You will never become sick or get hurt. You will not age or decline physically. If you're in a wheelchair today, God will raise you up and make you completely whole. Your mind will be transformed and perfectly restored. No dementia, no clinical depression, no mental illness. Your resurrected brain will no doubt be capable of doing things that the greatest genius on Earth right now would consider unimaginable.

So, yes, your resurrected body will be significantly unlike your present body, too. There are many analogies in nature. Here in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul used the seed and plant analogy. "When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn't grow into a plant unless it dies first. And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a bare seed of wheat or whatever you are planting. Then God gives it the new body he wants it to have. A different plant grows from each kind of seed." (15:36-38 NLT) There is fundamental continuity between an acorn and an oak tree, but there's a lot of significant discontinuity as well. The caterpillar turning into a butterfly is another picture of fundamental continuity and yet significant discontinuity. Joni Eareckson Tada, a Christian author and speaker, who has been paralyzed from the neck down since suffering a spinal cord injury as a teenager, wrote, "Somewhere in my broken, paralyzed body is the seed of what I shall become." That's true of all of us. God isn't going to abandon your present physical body, but He's not going to keep it the way it is right now either. Your body will be transformed - changed from its present weakness – into a perfect body free forever from anything having to do with death or dying.

I will still be me, but I will be transformed spiritually. The resurrected Jesus didn't become someone else. In Heaven, you will have a restored personal identity. Your individual personal identity is part of your personhood and it will endure beyond death. You should expect to be just as unique in Heaven as you are now. In fact, in eternity, you will be fully for the first time the person God created you to be. You will enjoy a restored relationship with God and other people. You will be transformed not only physically but spiritually. In Heaven, you will no longer have a sinful nature.

Speaking of Joni Eareckson Tada, here's an interesting perspective she shared in an interview about what she's looking forward to about Heaven and eternity. "You look at me in this wheelchair, paralyzed for 52 years, and most people would think, O, you're looking forward to your new body. And yeah, that's one of those fringe benefits. But I'm looking forward to the new heart; a heart free of manipulating others with precisely-timed phrases; a heart free of fudging the truth; a heart free from hogging the spotlight, believing my press releases ... a heart free of not believing the best of others; a heart free of caving into fear or anxiety about the future. I can't wait to have a heart free of sin." Heaven will be all about transformation. Now, here's a final truth that emerges from 1 Corinthians 15 that is so very precious and important to know right now.

BECAUSE JESUS ROSE, DEATH IS FOREVER CHANGED.

Let's read the last section of this great chapter: vv. 50-58. How has death been changed forever? Now, I no longer fear it, because its impact is no longer ultimate. Paul said here that death was defeated in the past by Jesus when He rose from the dead. "But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ." (15:57 NLT) But defeat doesn't mean final destruction. Because Jesus rose from the dead, the ultimate impact of death was defeated decisively, but that defeat is not yet fully complete. Obviously, death hasn't disappeared, because we all still die – even followers of Jesus. But death's ultimate impact has changed forever. No more eternal separation from God. No more Hell. No more forfeiting of all that's good, right, and beautiful. No more absence of life. That ultimate power and impact has been stripped away from death because Jesus rose again.

A boy and his father were driving down a country road on a beautiful spring afternoon, when a bumblebee flew in the car window. The little boy, who was allergic to bee stings, was petrified. The father quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand, and then released it. The boy grew frantic as it buzzed by him. Once again the father reached out his hand, but this time he pointed to his palm. There stuck in his skin was the stinger of the bee. "Do you see this?" he asked. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting for you." Jesus has taken the sting from death through His own death and resurrection. We no longer have to fear death.

How has death been changed forever? Now, I possess a powerful hope even though I still experience grief caused by death. In another place, Paul wrote these words, "And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope." (1 Th. 4:13 NLT) Christian grief is real and painful. Let's never minimize its impact. I've seen first-hand the devastating impact losing a loved one makes on the life and faith of even the most faithful follower of Jesus. The loss of that precious relationship and the pain of his or her absence in your life can be unbearable at times. Of course, you should cry long and hard. Of course, you will struggle with great sadness because of it. Just the same, you've been given a powerful hope to overcome it. Death no longer has the last word in your life or mine. God does. Yes, everyone will still die. But death is never the end for a follower of Jesus. Jesus has transformed death into a doorway into His eternal presence. That's why you can have hope today. Hope in God and what He has done in and through Jesus is a powerful spiritual force. You can still deeply grieve the absence of your loved ones today, but your grief can be very different than those who don't follow Jesus. You will see again every loved one who was and is a follower of Jesus. You'll spend eternity with them. We no longer have to fear death.

How has death been changed forever? Now, I rejoice in death's future and complete destruction. That's explicitly promised in v. 26 (NLT). "And the last enemy to be destroyed is death." Notice how Paul kind of taunted and mocked death. "Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O

death, where is your sting?” (15:54-55 NLT) It’s as if Paul said, “Who do you think you are, Death? Think you’re so high and mighty, huh? You’re done. You were defeated by Jesus when He rose from the dead. And one day sooner than you think, Death, Jesus will destroy you once and for all.” **ILLUS:** *Author and speaker, Philip Yancey, attended the funeral of a child in Chicago. The pastor shocked the mourners by glancing down at the coffin and interrupting his eulogy with a sudden exclamation, “Damn you, death!” Then, he quickly added, “Not God – it’s death I’m damning. And God, too, has promised to damn it.”* He’s exactly right. Death in any form will cease to exist. So, go ahead, hate Death. Ridicule Death. Despise Death. Remind Death who the real Boss is: Jesus, the risen One! We no longer have to fear death.

How has death been changed forever? Now, I serve Jesus enthusiastically, because those results – not death’s – last forever. That’s how Paul ended this great chapter. “So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.” (15:58 NLT) Nothing you do for yourself will last. But everything you do for Jesus will last forever. Every prayer you offer up for others: eternal value. Every person you try to share Jesus with even if they seem to care less about Him: eternal value. Every person you extend love and care to – a needy person who lacks food, clothes, or a bed, a lonely person who needs a visit, a discouraged person who needs hope: eternal value. Every adult Bible class, triad, or Re:gen meeting you participate in: eternal value. Every repair you do around our church: eternal value. Every song about Jesus you practice and present: eternal value. Every live streamed worship service you help to make happen: eternal value. Every missionary you support financially and prayerfully: eternal value. I could go on, but I think you get the idea!

Years ago, a man by the name of Jeff Collins had a trying week at his ministry office. At five o'clock on a Friday, he was looking forward to having a quiet dinner with friends. Then the phone rang. "Jeff! It's Jimmy!" Jimmy suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses. He was one of Jeff's regular clients. "I'm really sick, Jeff. I've got a fever. Please help me." Jeff was angry. After a 60-hour workweek, he didn't want to hear about Jimmy. But he promised to be right over. Still, during the drive, Jeff complained to God about the inconvenience. The moment he walked through Jimmy's door, Jeff could smell the vomit. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. Jeff wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. He was calm on the outside, but raging inside. Jimmy's friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too. As Jeff cleaned the carpet, he felt like he was ready to explode inside. Then Russ made an odd observation. "I understand! I understand!" "What, Russ?" Jimmy asked weakly. "I understand who Jesus is," Russ pointed at Jeff and said through his tears. "He's like Jeff!" Jeff hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ trusted Jesus as his personal Savior and Jeff had the satisfaction of knowing God had used him to show Jesus' love in spite of himself.

“Only one life ‘twill soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.” Because of Jesus’ resurrection and because you will live forever if you trust in Him and love Him, everything you do in His Name and for His sake matters for all eternity. “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”