



**7th April 2019**  
**Josh Probert**

## **1 Corinthians 15:1-19**

The International Flat Earth Society has roots going back to the 19th Century, has over 500 members, over 100,000 posts on their forums interacting with their ideas, and is based on philosophies that go back over 2,600 years!

But I'm not a member.

I'm not a member because I have a certain belief: a belief in what I consider to be a proven point of fact — I believe that the Earth is, in fact, round. If it only has 500 members worldwide then chances are — and I'm just hazarding a guess here — that none of you are members. I think it's safe to assume that most — if not all — of you share my belief that the Earth is round.

But I also suspect that for most of us, it wouldn't be that big a deal if we *didn't* believe in a round Earth. It would probably make very little difference in our lives either way. Whether the Earth is flat, or whether the Earth is round ... what are you going to do differently? You believe what you believe because you think it's a fact — sure, it's not arbitrary, you really do have a settled conviction that it's true ... but the importance of

that fact? ... well it hardly makes any difference to you at all, does it? So ultimately, it doesn't matter whether the fact is true or not.

The only people it matters to are the experts ... and they can argue about it all they like, but, to me, I'll believe what I think is true, and then carry on regardless.

Now, those of you who knew me when I was a physics teacher might think that I've gotten my sermon notes mixed up with my classroom notes ... but don't worry, we're going to turn to the Bible in a second. But to get an insight into why today's passage is important for us today, I think it's helpful to reflect on this relationship of *what* we believe, *why* we believe it, and whether it makes any difference.

Because in the same way you might *believe* in a round earth — and you really really do think it's true — and yet go about life living just as if you believed in a flat earth ... in the same way, you might be a Christian who *believes* that Jesus rose from the dead — and you really really do think that's true — and yet functionally live as if that's actually quite irrelevant to the important things in life.

And we need today's passage to warn us that if that's how it really is, then your faith is, "in vain" [v2], "useless" [v14], "futile" [v17].

So to equip us against a futile faith, verses 1 to 8 of 1 Corinthians 15 affirm that *you believe in a reliable resurrection*.

### **1. You believe in a reliable resurrection (vv1-8)**

1 Corinthians is a letter from the church leader, Paul, to a really mixed-up church in

the city of Corinth. If you were to glance through the letter up to here, or if you've been coming regularly for a few months, you'd have spotted that this letter covers loads of different practical issues about Christian living, from lawsuits, church discipline, the culture around food, taking communion, and the diversity of the church.

But when we come to chapter 15, Paul reminds his readers that this hasn't all been one big rant against all his bugbears of church life. For Paul, he's grounding what he's just said in truths that he knows they believe, and that are central to every Christian's faith.

Look down with me at verse 1: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you..."

Sometimes the way we teach the Bible is to teach what the passage says, what the truths are that we find in it, and then at the end apply it to our lives. Well Paul seems to be doing it the other way round here! We've just had loads of practical, deeply-applied stuff in chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 ... all the way to chapter 14 ... but here he's bringing the Corinthians back to the truths which underpin it all. It's the truths, verse 1 that, "I preached to you, which you received, and on which you take your stand." It's truths, verse 2, by which they are saved.

It's really important to see that, for Paul, these truths, that he calls "the gospel", are not a set of abstract ideas, nor are they academic beliefs — he sees the gospel as being supremely practical, and, as he says in verse 3, "of first importance."

There are four main things Paul outlines in verses 3 to 8, that constitute the gospel. Number one: "Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures". Every Christian (who really is a Christian) believes that Jesus Christ died on a cross, and the rest of the Bible (the Scriptures) help us understand that it was a death on our behalf, a punishment that *we* deserved for *our* wrongdoing.

Number two: "that he was buried", which, we can take it, is simply evidence that He really was dead: not asleep nor fainted, but dead. Stone-cold dead.

Number three: "that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures". The significance of Jesus' death to make us right before God is shown in the fact that He didn't remain dead. And His rising shows that God has power over death, and gives hope to all Christians of a future resurrection of all believers.

And number four: "and that he appeared..." And it's here that Paul's gospel outline departs from what most of us who are Christians would include. Paul seems at pains to demonstrate that not only did Jesus die, was buried and rose again — but also that *He appeared*. Why is that?

There are six sets of people He appears to: Cephas (which is Jesus' close friend, Peter), the Twelve (which are His disciples), five hundred followers, James (Jesus' brother), all the apostles, and Paul himself.

So why mention all the appearances, Paul? It seems that Paul's emphasis is on the fact that the gospel is a provable fact, and a physical reality.

It's provable because of what Paul adds in verse 6 — that most of those to whom Jesus appeared “are still living”. Meaning that if you don't believe me, you can go and ask them! Prove me wrong!

Just an aside: the fact that copies of this letter still exist today show that Paul wasn't a lunatic or a laughing-stock in his day; it doesn't look like anyone did manage to prove him wrong!

It's provable, and it's also physical. I grew up in a church where we sometimes used to sing this song: “He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today; He walks with me and He talks with me along life's narrow way...”

That chorus ends, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!”

It's a popular sentiment ... but it's simply not the Bible's teaching on the resurrection of Jesus!

Here is Topsy. Topsy was our family cat when I was about 9 or 10. I was very fond of Topsy. She was put down in about 1996, but do you know what? She still lives on ... she lives within my heart.

But Paul's point is that that's *not* how it works with the resurrection of Jesus! You ask me how I know He lives? Well I can show you at least 516 people who have actually seen Him in the flesh! That's how I know He lives!

You believe in a reliable resurrection! It's provable, and it's physical! And the fact it's physical is what makes it supremely applicable and relevant — the gospel of Jesus' physical death, burial and resurrection isn't a set of religious creeds, or wishful theories ... it's

a real-life concrete event that therefore has real-life concrete effects.

And one of those, Paul found out himself, as we see in verses 8-11 that *you believe a grace-filled gospel*.

## **2. You believe a grace-filled gospel (vv8-11)**

In last week's sermon, Maurice helpfully pointed out that people used to evaluate faith and belief by asking the question “is it true?” But a question asked much more nowadays is, “does it work?”

And here is where we see the genius of the Holy Spirit in getting Paul to write this chapter like he did, because Paul has just been heaping on the evidence that it's true, but in verses 8 to 11 he addresses the question of “does it work?”

I might *believe* that the resurrection of Jesus is true (just as I might *believe* that the Earth is round) — and I might have such confidence in it that I call it an irrefutable fact (just as I might say that about the Earth being round) — but does it make a difference?

Well, Paul gives us a little window into his own experience to show that because it's provable (and true) and physical, then it has real-world effects.

He refers to himself in verse 8 with the strange phrase “one abnormally born” — he's not talking medically here; he's contrasting himself with “all the apostles” in the previous verse — these would have been people who spent time with Jesus before and after His death and resurrection, devout followers, learning and following all of Jesus' teachings.

But while the other apostles were busy following Jesus, witnessing His life, death and resurrection, Paul was going about persecuting people just like them. He's not only *un*-qualified to be a witness and messenger of Jesus — he should be *dis*qualified from doing it!

And that's Paul's testimony in verses 8 to 9. And yet, the risen, physical Jesus entered the real world of Paul and it transformed him. He calls that in verse 10, "the grace of God" — and he's positive that it's "not without effect" and we can all see that in the transformed life of a persecutor.

Paul started this section saying, "I know you believe the gospel — but Jesus dying, rising and appearing isn't a fact I want you to agree with: the gospel is God's grace towards us, physically, materially, in the real world. You believe a grace-filled gospel. I want it to change you!"

And yet, three times in this whole passage, Paul says that you might believe in vain.

### **3. You might have a futile faith (vv12-19)**

Verse 12 shows us that there's an issue in the Corinthian church that some of them are saying that there's no resurrection of the dead: "how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

The issue isn't that they are denying *Jesus'* resurrection directly. It's that they're saying that, in God's plan for the end of all things, it doesn't involve God raising dead Christians to new life, new physical, lasting bodies, and eternal life with Jesus.

Notice that Paul's stress has so far been on the *physical* aspect of the gospel: Jesus' *phys-*

*ical* death, physical burial, *physical* resurrection, as proven by eyewitness sightings. And the issue in Corinth is that the gospel they're living out is restricted to being a purely *spiritual* belief.

What has Jesus accomplished for us? The Christians in Corinth would answer — and I'm sure most of us would answer — that Jesus has removed our sin (spiritual), made us right with God (spiritual), and gives us a spiritual, mystical, ethereal life in heaven somewhere out there...

If that's what you believe, then, Paul says, you might as well pack it all in right now!

Because if there isn't in a physical resurrection on the last day, if bodies and the physical world don't matter to God, if He doesn't raise the dead ... then everything falls in and collapses.

Have you ever tried to build a house of cards, or a tower of dominoes ... and sooner or later you know you'll just brush one domino accidentally and then ... disaster. Imagine building a pyramid of dominoes, and just at the wrong moment ... this happens!

(I was reading some comments on the website where this was posted and the consensus was that they would have solved all the problems if they'd have started from the top!)

From verses 13 to 18, Paul shows that if there is no resurrection, if God doesn't raise the dead — if your Christianity is purely spiritual, with no physical — then the dominoes start to topple.

Verse 13: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." (And, by the way, you know that that is of first importance).

So, verse 14: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless" ... the dominoes keep tumbling ... "and so is your faith".

Down into verse 17: "your faith is futile; you are still in your sins ... those who have fallen asleep (in other words, have died) are lost."

And when the dominoes collapse, there's nothing left but pity.

So it seems that we should say, "believe in the resurrection of the dead!" Well, that's great. But you might say, "I already believe it!" And here's where it's important that we thought earlier about what you believe as fact, and whether it makes a difference. Because if we take a glance back through 1 Corinthians, we'll see that it really does make a difference, and as we see that, it might actually reveal that we're not living like we believe it.

I want to give four examples:

First, come back with me to chapter 6, verse 1:

"If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgement instead of before the Lord's people?"

Why is it shocking that Christians would fall out and complain about it to non-Christians? Because of the resurrection!

Verse 2: "Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world! And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to

judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!"

In other words, whenever you want to complain about someone at church, fall out with someone at church, have a grievance with your Connect group leader, or disagree with a decision at a Members' Meeting, if you feel like you'll get a sympathetic verdict, or vindication from someone who isn't also a Christian — then you're ignoring the truth of the resurrection! You're content to start toppling the dominoes!

Second example, staying in chapter 6, look at verse 13: "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both. The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord and the Lord for the body."

The issue here is having sex, or lusting after someone you're not married to, so that it satisfies what you think of as a sexual "appetite". But if that's your pattern — sex satisfies your appetite — then you're ignoring the resurrection!

Verse 14: "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies [physical] are members of Christ himself?"

The physical you belongs to Christ, not to your appetites and desires! When you give it over to your appetites — it's only physical after all — then you're denying the resurrection and the dominoes start toppling!

Third example: In chapter 8 Paul encourages Christians to give up their preferences for the building up of others. In chapter 9, he

gives up not just his preferences, but his own right to be paid for his work. He goes even further: Verse 19: "Though I am free and belong to no-one, I have made myself a slave to everyone..." Becoming a slave to serve everyone else. Why?

Verse 25, "we do it to get a crown that will last forever."

If your preferences and your rights mean more to you than building up others, then you're ignoring the resurrection! You don't care about serving others with this gospel of grace and receiving a crown that will last forever.

Lastly, spiritual gifts. Chapters 12 and 14 say that you should use whatever gift you have not for yourself, but for the building up of others. Chapter 13 says that the key to that is to use it all in love. Love is greater than tongues. Love is greater than knowledge, miracles or charity. Why? Because of the resurrection!

Chapter 13 verse 8: "Love never fails" — or better, "Love never ends. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stifled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."

If you put your gifts to use without love, then you are ignoring the resurrection — the day when those gifts will end up being obsolete anyway! So pursue the one that will last! If you really do believe in the resurrection, pursue love!

Do you see now why this is of "first importance" to Paul? A physical gospel, with a physical resurrection, with 500 eyewitnesses means that the Christian life is lived out in

the physical body. And how we use our bodies is therefore significant.

What underpins the decisions of a Christian is not the question, "do I feel like it?" but "Did Christ rise from the dead? Am I raised to a new life with Christ? Does my body therefore belong to Christ?"

If this is "of first importance", then I want to say to you if you're not a Christian, that Jesus' resurrection is therefore of first importance if you have questions about Christianity. This part of the Bible says that any questions about Christianity become irrelevant if Jesus didn't rise from the dead. So if you have questions about the Bible's view on sexuality, or gender, if there are parts of the Bible you really don't understand or that you have a problem with ... well, I can say with Paul's authority, that if Jesus never rose from the dead, then it's all useless anyway. Because however good a job we might do of convincing you of the Bible's teaching on anything else, if you're not persuaded of the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead, then none of it will fit together anyway.

But I want to invite you to investigate the resurrection — the dead man, the buried man ... and the man seen by over 500 people, whose story is verified over and over again ... if it's true, it makes all the difference! And a glorious difference! Paul says that in discovering the real resurrected Jesus, the grace of God transformed him. I want you to know the physically-resurrected Jesus and to know His wonderful grace.

Well ... if the earth is flat, or if the earth is round ... I'm not too sure what difference it really would make. But I can tell you that

whether Jesus rose in a body, and whether you and I will rise in a body makes all the difference and underpins the whole of our Christian life while we live in a body. There *is* a reliable resurrection; there *is* a grace-filled gospel; so don't let your faith be futile.