

IF JESUS NEVER ROSE...
1 Cor. 15:12-19

Someone has said, 'It's only possible to live happily-ever-after on a day-to-day basis.' – That's what Ecclesiastes is all about – daily living 'the good life' in a fallen world! –

Tonight we look at more aspects of the 'good life', at what Scripture says about nostalgia & living in the past, about wealth & wisdom, and about God's sovereignty in our trials. –

Plus, we come to the Lord's Table tonight, to commune with Christ Himself – that alone is reason to attend!

Turn back to 1 Cor. 15 as we continue our study of the great 'Resurrection Chapter'...

(a) Archbishop Desmond Tutu has publicly stated, 'You know that when Jesus ascended...you already in your mind, if you are a thinking Christian, you realise this was figurative language. And when we speak about the resurrection of Jesus, it is NOT a revivification (resuscitating) of a corpse, it is speaking about a tremendous reality....'

Tutu denies that Jesus' body ever rose from the grave.

(b) In 2005, TUKS theological student Ferdie Mulder was dismissed from the NGK because of confronting their professors who denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus. – In the final disciplinary hearing, the judge concluded that NGK ministers need not interpret or confess the resurrection of Jesus literally any longer.

(c) In 2010, on the TUKS campus in Pretoria, 1200 people attended a debate over this one question: 'Did Jesus physically rise from the dead or not?' – The two speakers who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus were Prof. Sakkie Spanenburg of UNISA, and Prof. Hansie Wolmarans of UJ. – Wolmarans is also an ordained Presbyterian minister up the road here in Parkview; yet he believes Jesus' body never rose from the tomb, but that it was all a big myth & just a nice story.

(d) Earlier this year here in SA, Bart Ehrman's book was on Exclusive Books Top 10 List, entitled, *Did Jesus Exist?* – Ehrman is an outspoken enemy of the Christian faith. – He argues that Jesus did exist historically, but definitely did not rise from the dead.

These are but FOUR examples of the thousands of ways that Satan never stops attacking the Christian belief in Jesus' Resurrection. – WHY? –

Because Satan knows what many in the Church have forgotten: That the literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus is central to our faith. – If it didn't happen, then our gospel is built on a lie, it is a false gospel, plain & simple.

YET we have every reason to believe that Jesus did rise, as Paul has just defended in vv. 1-11. – The bodily resurrection of Jesus is one of the most well-attested facts in history. – Jewish law required 2-3 witnesses. – Modern law can convict a criminal based on one credible witness. – But Jesus had over 500 witnesses (v.6) of His actual, physical, resurrected body!

Shortly after this, the Christian faith exploded across the Roman world! – Jesus' enemies never could produce the body and stop the blazing spread of this new movmt. –

The disciples were transformed from fearful cowards to bold witnesses who died for the message they proclaimed.

→And every true believer confesses that this risen Lord has freed us from our sins & made us new!...

Thus Paul concluded that first section:

v. 11 – “We” = all the apostles. – We’re not boasting in our diversity of opinion or our many perspectives on the Gospel. – We speak with one voice, as witnesses to one Christ, crucified & risen – the only message that saves!

We’ve come now in v. 12 to Paul’s main point. – It’s the question, to which all of chp. 15 is the answer. – Read v. 12...

HOW could they say such a ridiculous thing?! – Talk about a double standard & a gross contradiction – to say that God could raise Jesus, but not our bodies one day?!

What would bring them to such a ridiculous view?!...

Answer: *worldliness*, the same problem that has been plaguing the Corinthian church all along, for the past 15 chps. as we’ve seen. – Rom. 12:2, they were “conforming to the spirit of the age”, instead of being transformed by the renewing of their minds with God’s truth.

What was the worldly mindset of their day, the spirit of the age?:

Already in the NT there are hints of those who objected to the idea of a bodily resurrection:

In the Gospels, e.g., Mark 12, we meet the Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection” (Mk 12:18).

Then, in Acts 17 in Athens at Mars Hill, what kind of reaction did Paul get when he preached about Jesus’ bodily resurrection? – “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer....” (v. 32). –

Earlier, Luke had already noted that the Epicureans & Stoics were calling Paul an “idle babbler” and a “proclaimer of strange deities”, “because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection” (v. 18).

Remember: Thanks to Plato & co., Greeks for a long time had held to dualism = that everything spiritual & non-physical was good, while everything material & physical was bad.

So they believed the body was just the prison of the soul. – That the soul was immortal, not the body; because the body was the source of man’s weakness & sin. –

Death = liberation from the prison of the body! – What prisoner would ever want to go back to his prison?!... Does a snake shed its skin and then go back and wear it again?

+ Roman tombstone, so common that it was abbreviated, like ‘R.I.P.’ today: ‘I was not. I was. I am not. I am free....’

By Paul's day, some also held that death extinguished life totally. – Or that death only led to some shadowy, ghostly existence in the underworld.

But to speak of a bodily, physical existence in the world to come was a belief not fit for polite company! – To speak of rotten, decaying corpses that get resuscitated? –

This was the stuff of folk legends, along with tales of zombies, magic spells, and haunted houses. – You dare not speak of the resurrection of the dead in educated, sophisticated company.

SO THIS was what Corinthian society would've believed.

~ As one scholar has said: *Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was [assumed] to be false – [i.e, resurrection is impossible]. Many believed the dead were non-existent; outside Judaism, nobody believed in resurrection. In the Roman world, everybody knew dead people didn't and couldn't come back to bodily life.* (qtd in C&R)

Like liberal theologians today, some in the church at Corinth started thinking:

'Maybe we've misunderstood the teaching of Jesus & the Bible. Let's rethink this whole myth of bodily resurrection. Let's take a more spiritual approach. Perhaps it just means that the resurrected body will be an improved spiritual status, a greater liberty and power, like we never knew on earth.'

'Surely it means that, at death, our spirit 'flies to the upper realms, released from the prison of this body, never again to be hampered by this flesh & bones'. After we die, we soar up the 'realm of the gods', becoming 'pure, fleshless, and undefiled'.'

What did the Apostle Paul think of such a view?...

Stand, Read vv. 12-19 & Pray:

v. 12a – The resurrection was everything for Paul & the apostles. – No empty tomb, no gospel message, no Christianity, no Church.

+ Some of popular Christian books & tracts today feature a gospel that doesn't even mention the Resurrection. – It's all about Jesus bringing purpose & meaning to your life if you'll let Him into your heart. –

BUT the core message of Christianity, what Paul says here in 1 Cor. 15 is of "first importance", are these historical facts: that Christ died, was buried, rose on the 3rd day, and appeared to many witnesses.

HOW central was Jesus' resurrection in the early church? – Just look at the preaching in ACTS (Acts 2, 3, 4, 10, 17, and all Paul's trials, Acts 23, 24, 26). – Time after time they declare:

'You killed Jesus, but God raised Him. – You put to death the prince of Life, but God raised him. – The cornerstone you rejected, God has made the chief cornerstone! – God will judge the world one day, and the proof is that He raises Jesus from the dead, and Jesus will return and be that judge one day!'...

On & on we could go. – Same song in Paul’s epistles (Rom. 1:3-4; 4:25; 6:4; 8:34; 2 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 1:19ff; Col. 3:1ff; 2 Tim. 2:8-9, etc.) – Same thing from the pen of Peter, John, and the other NT writers (e.g., Heb. 13:20-21a; 1 Pet. 1:3; Rev. 1:17-18).

+ YET listen to these recent words of N.T. Wright, the very influential Bishop of Durham & prolific author. – He has even written books defending Jesus’ bodily resurrection. – Yet Wright recently stated, "I have friends who I am quite sure are Christians who do not believe in the bodily resurrection."

Could you ever imagine the Apostle Paul saying such a thing? Never!

Repeat: vv. 3-4, 11...

NB, Paul begins 1 Cor. 15 with a front-door approach to the gospel, telling us what the Bible says IS true. –

But then Paul’s runs around to the back door. – From vv. 12-19, he’s going to give us the gospel in REVERSE.

Give title...

See, if we only use a front-door approach, sometimes we don’t realise the implications & the logical outcome of one wrong belief. – One theological error, if left unaddressed, can eventually lead to disaster.

+ Remember the old analogy of two parallel lines – if one is skewed even by 1%, it will eventually veer off in a completely different directions. –

HOW MUCH MORE the case with wrong beliefs that effect the gospel itself, the core message of Christianity.

Some in the Corinthian church thought, ‘Well, I can just question the doctrine of the bodily resurrection, and it’s no big deal. It doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t rise, or that our faith isn’t true. I just have, well, a...different interpretation about the resurrection of the body.’

But Paul says, ‘No. It doesn’t work that way. There is a knock-on effect. If you deny that doctrine, then you’ll end up denying this, and this, and this. You MUST think through the many drastic consequences of one theological error.’

So here’s where we’re going in the time that remains:

***SEVEN DOMINOES that all fall if Christ never rose:** (Seven brutal implications for us if they ever find Jesus’ body in that tomb.)

→If you found out tomorrow that they found Jesus’ body in the grave, how would it affect you? – Would it alter your life & shatter your world, or would it still pretty much be business as usual?...

1. vv. 12-13, (and vv. 15-16) If Christ never rose, our bodies won’t rise.

vv. 13, 15b-16 – By v. 16, 4x Paul has referred to the Christian hope of the “resurrection of the dead”. – 4x Paul has shown the inseparable link between Jesus’ rising & us rising one day!

Next week DV, from vv. 20ff, Paul will show exactly what the LINK is between *Jesus' bodily resurrection & our bodily resurrection*. – He will explain why these two doctrines are Siamese twins, inseparable. – You pull away one, you've killed them both.

→HOWEVER, SINCE Jesus *did rise*, so shall we! – Rom. 8:11, “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” (cf. Php. 3:20-21, etc.)

📖 John Paton, the Scottish pioneer missionary to the New Hebrides islands in the South Seas in the 1800s. – Before Paton departed, he was approached by an older Christian who said to him, 'Johnny boy, don't you know, if you go to those savage islands, you'll be eaten by Cannibals!'. –

To this, John Paton gave this immortal reply: *Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.”!*

~ As we sing with Wesley:

*Made like Him like Him we rise
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.*

2. v. 14a, If Christ never rose, **our preaching is pointless.**

v. 14a – all bogus, worthless, hot air! – Doesn't matter how my sermons make you feel, if they aren't based on fact. – Doesn't matter if preaching comforts or helps you, if it's built on a lie. – Face it: Preaching that is not rooted in real history has NO spiritual value.

~ A. M. Ramsey, once the Archbishop of Canterbury, said this with reference to the early Christians: “For them, the gospel without the resurrection was not merely a gospel without its final chapter, it was not a gospel at all.”

As Paul already explained in 1 Cor. 1-2, if Jesus never rose, the world is right: The “word of the cross IS foolishness”, our ministry is absurd, our message is ridiculous, we really do have egg on our face and truly have been wasting our time.

~ MacArthur: *Without the resurrection the good news would be bad news, and there would be nothing worth preaching. Without the resurrection the gospel would be an empty, hopeless message of meaningless nonsense. Unless our Lord conquered sin & death, making a way for men to follow in that victory, there is no gospel to proclaim.*

→BUT SINCE Jesus *did rise*, *our preaching is crucial!* – Cf. 1 Cor. 1, preaching Christ is the very “power of God” to those who are being saved. – “God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to SAVE those who believe.” –

Beloved, we are sowing the mightiest seed in the universe, that can yield an eternal harvest and rescue everlasting souls!...

3. vv. 14b & v. 17a, If Christ never rose, our faith is fantasy.

v. 14b – “vain” = void of any content, meaningless, just a mirage. – Christianity is just a pile of nice ideas, a figment of your imagination. There is nothing credible about the gospel.

+ As one preacher notes: If Christ never rose, the hall of the faithful in Heb. 11 is actually the hall of the foolish. – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, David, the prophets, etc. – they were all faithful for nothing. They were mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, beaten, killed – all in vain. – All Christians who’ve ever been persecuted actually lived for nothing and died for nothing. (MacArthur)

~ William Lane Craig: *Without the historical resurrection, Jesus would’ve been at best just another prophet who met the same unfortunate fate as others before Him, and faith in Him as Messiah, Lord, or Son of God would have been stupid. It would be no use trying to save the situation by interpreting the resurrection as a symbol. The cold, hard facts would remain: Jesus was dead, and that’s it.*

Jump down to v. 17 where Paul circles back to this same point:

v. 17ab – “worthless” = useless/worthless, futile, unable to achieve our salvation.

I.e., Because there is no object to your faith, you’re grasping for air. If Jesus is still in the grave, He does NOT deserve your trust, and He cannot bring you to God. – A dead Saviour cannot save.

~ A follower of Buddha writes, “When Buddha died it was with that utter passing away in which nothing whatever remains.”

+ Mohammed died at Medina on 8 June, 632, at age of 61, and his tomb there is visited yearly by tens of thousands of Muslims. – But they are there to mourn his death, not celebrate his resurrection.

→ Yet for Christians, every Easter, and every Lord’s Day, and at every baptism, we proclaim a risen Lord!...

Our faith is real, because Christ is real and the gospel is true. Our lives have never been the same since the day we believed this message: 1 Cor. 15:1-2...

4. v. 15, If Christ never rose, we’ve been duped.

v. 15 – Know what is the only thing worse than a lie? – A lie carried out in God’s name. – Religious lies are the most destructive of all, because religious beliefs are the most influential.

It’s one thing to be mistaken. – It’s another thing to be wilfully, deliberately mistaken. – That’s called lying. – It’s called “perjury” in a court of law. – It’s called violating the 9th commandment, “You shall not bear false witness”. – And thus deserving of punishment (Deut. 19:15-20).

→Crazy that liberal theologians say, 'Take out the miracles of the NT, but leave the rest, the nice moral stories, inspiring lessons, etc.' No, if the apostles were liars, then toss out the whole NT, and stop playing religious games!...

NB, vv. 15d-16, what is Paul implying? – That the real false witnesses are not the apostles, but those at Corinth who are saying there is no bodily resurrection for believers. – Ouch, that's a rebuke, and a warning.

→Praise God, our faith is NOT built on a lie. – Jesus' resurrection is one of the most well-attested facts in history. – It was passed down to us by men who gave their lives for their message. – Men don't die for a lie they themselves made up! – Listen to one of them, 1 John 1:1-3: [read...]

5. v. 17b, If Christ never rose, we pay for our own sins.

v. 17c – SIX of the most horrible words I could imagine, knowing what I do of my own guilty record before God and the eternal Hell I deserve: v. 17c...

But if Christ never rose, Paul is right: A dead Saviour cannot die in your place. – A dead Saviour cannot pay the price for your sins, cannot remove God's wrath that you deserve, cannot be the Mediator between God and man. –

A dead Saviour means we still bear our sins, still carry around our 'guilty sentence', are still condemned on death row, awaiting our deserved execution.

→FIVE of the sweetest, most hope-filled words in all of 1 Cor. are in 6:11, "such were some of you", speaking of all the filthy, vile people at Corinth whom God's grace had rescued & transformed! –

But if Christ never rose, we cannot say, "such were some of you". – All we can say is "such ARE some of you", b/c we'd STILL be in bondage, STILL captive to the world, the flesh, and the devil, STILL "dead in our sins".

→But praise God that we are NOT still in our sins! – 2 Cor. 5:17...

ALL because Christ HAS risen, we can be forgiven, and there IS "NO condemnation" for all who are in Christ. – In Romans, Paul spells this out very clearly:

Rom. 4:25, Christ was "delivered over because of our transgression, and was raised because of our justification."

Rom. 8:34, "Who is the one who condemns [us]? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us."

→Beloved, catch Paul's logic here. – Jesus' resurrection was no OPTIONAL aspect of God's salvation plan! – Think about it: HOW do we know that Jesus payment for our sin was adequate? – What if He only paid for 80% or 90% of our sin, but you have to pay for the rest yourself?! – HOW do we know it was 'paid in full'?...

Because God raised Him and welcomed Him home to Heaven, body & soul!

~ 'The resurrection was God's 'AMEN' from heaven to Jesus' cry on the cross, 'It is finished!'

The cross shows us redemption *accomplished* by Christ. – The resurrection shows us redemption *accepted* by the Father. (S. Lewis Johnson)

→ This is why Paul can also say, in Rom. 6, that if Christ has risen, we too can “walk in newness of life”. – Like Christ, we too are no longer under that old realm of sin & death with which Jesus identified as our representative. – We are not “dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11)!

6. v. 18, If Christ never rose, *death has the last word*.

v. 18 – A dead Saviour means our lost loved ones who believed are not in Heaven. – Jesus did not go to prepare a place for them. – To be absent from the body is to be present in the ground. – ‘To live is Christ’, they thought, but to die was just pain, no gain. –

Death was no homecoming or Celestial City for them; all they did is ‘kick the bucket’, have some ‘good innings’ perhaps, and now are fertilising someone’s garden. –

If Christ never rose, then all we’re doing is storing up a few nice memories for this brief life, not storing up eternal treasures in Heaven. (it’s just imaginary, pipe dreams)

1 Thess. 4, that hope of the Lord descending with a shout, the voice of the archangel shouting, and the trumpet sounding? – Well, if Christ hasn’t risen, then the dead in Christ will not rise first, or last, or ever. – So we should grieve just like those who have no hope, because we are no different.

Repeat: v. 18...

→ BUT as we’ll see in the rest of this chapter, from v. 20 onwards, death *does not* have the last word. – ‘O Death, where is your victory? O grave, where is your sting?!’, says the Christian!

7. v. 19, If Christ never rose, *we are the most pitiable of all people*.

Unbelievers only live for this life, the present is all they care about. So telling them that Jesus & the life to come are a lie is no tragedy, no loss for them. – All they’ve lived for is the here-and-now anyway.

But for Christians, if the future God promises is a lie, then we are shattered. – The apostles had given up everything to follow Christ all across the Roman world, even their very lives. – If Christ had not risen, they gambled everything on Him...and lost the gamble! – No words could describe such a colossal disappointment, such horrific regret.

v. 19 – No more miserable, more gullible, more pathetic people on this planet than us. – All the present joys of life in Christ, all the love & peace & meaning in our Christian lives, has no connection with the life to come; it’s all been a big delusion.

I.e., ‘We thought the sufferings of this life were not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that the best is yet to come (Rom. 8:18, etc.). *But actually*, there is no glory to come, we cannot view now in light of eternity; we can only view now in light of now.

Live for the present, seize the day, because this life is all there is. As Paul will say in v. 32b....'

'Stop kidding yourself, give it up, this child's game of make-believe. Get your head out of the clouds', if Jesus is still in that tomb.

'The sooner you face up to it, the better. All we've been doing is whistling in the dark. Christianity has been the cruellest trick ever played on mankind, and the most successful lie in history,' IF Jesus never rose.

Repeat: v. 19...

~ Bertrand Russel, 'The life to come is just a chance arrangement of atoms destined to disappear beneath the rubble of a universe in ruins.' – Everything is meaningless, passing, hollow, empty.

+ Have you heard of Pascal's Wager (from the French Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal)? – That if we die & find out Christianity was a lie, we still had the best life, and are better off than if the pagan dies and finds out we were right and he has to suffer in Hell eternally b/c he lost the bet.

You agree with Pascal's wager? – I don't. – Paul's very argument here contradicts it, as do many other NT texts. – Paul & Jesus tell us the Christian life is costly. – It's about denying self, taking up your cross, and dying for Jesus. – For many persecuted Christians, life didn't get easier after salvation, it got harder....

→But praise God, we know that the best is yet to come. – The Bible teaches 'your best life *later*', not now....

Repeat: v. 19...

→Pity us? – Pity a child of God, an heir of the King? – Pity those snatched from Satan's clutches, plucked from the broad road that leads to eternal destruction, put on the path to the Celestial City?! – Pity those whose sin is forgiven, whose guilt is removed, who are reconciled to God? –

Pity those who are adopted by the Lord, born again, redeemed by His blood, joined to His family, filled with His peace?! – Pity us, who have a supernatural joy that rises above our circumstances?! – Pity us who can say, 'To live is Christ, to die is GAIN?' – Pity us who are "more than conquerors through His great love"?!

Pity us who will receive new bodies one day, glorified like Christ's own risen body?!

Because our Lord HAS risen, "We are of all men" the LEAST "to be pitied"!

CONCL. - In closing, let's UN-reverse the gospel, let's turn it right-side up again and come around through the front door. – Instead of '7 Dominoes that Fall', these are: **'7 Pillars that Stand' and upon which we can build our lives and rest our hopes, now & for eternity!**

SINCE Christ did rise:

1. We *will* receive new bodies one day!
2. Our preaching *is* crucial!
3. Our faith is true!
4. The eyewitnesses were credible.
5. Ours sins are forgiven!
6. We have hope beyond the grave!
7. We are the most blessed and enviable of all people.

→This is why Paul will end as he does in v. 58...!

→Beloved, if you found out tomorrow morning (some big newsbreak, headlines of science, admission by Pope or Billy Graham, etc.) that they found Jesus' body in the grave, how would it affect you? – Would it change much?...

NB, there is *no middle ground* here for Paul? – EITHER it's all a lie, and we give it up – no preaching, no faith, no forgiveness, no life after death, no hope! OR, it's all true, and we believe it, preach it, live it, and die for it!

Paul leaves NO ROOM for nominalism, apathy, complacency, 'hedge your bets', play it safe, keep your options open'....

+ J. Edwards' death bed, at age 55, b/c of smallpox: *On his deathbed, he turned to his daughter, Lucy, and said, 'And as for my children, you are now to be left fatherless, which I hope will cause you all to seek a Father who will never fail you.'*

His Dr. wrote Mrs Edwards that her husband had faced death with a "calm, cheerful resignation and patient submission to the Divine will. For him, death had certainly lost its sting."

Although Edwards suffered terrible pain & swelling in the throat which prevented swallowing, he endured it with peace & joy. After sending messages of love to his family & friends, he looked around the room & said, 'Now where is Jesus of Nazareth, my true & never-failing friend.'

Christ has risen – He is alive!...

CLOSING HYMN – "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!"