

Death, Grace and Hard Work

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like you to turn to the Bible, please, to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. You'll find that on page 961 in the Blue Bibles. Now, we began to look at this tremendous chapter last week.

And this morning, we're going to be looking at the first section of that chapter, the first 11 verses. So let me read 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verses 1 to 11.

Paul reminding the Corinthian Christians of the message that he brought to them. I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

[1 : 2 8] Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them. Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me, whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed.

Well, this is the word of the Lord, and we will be studying it together later on. I'd like you to turn in your hymn books to number 699.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to stand in the gospel that he proclaimed to them, and here is a statement of the stand that we take in the gospel message.

Beneath the cross of Jesus, I gladly take my stand. Number 699. Well, please turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and as you're doing that, let me ask you this question.

[3 : 1 1] I wonder if you've ever paused and thought this sort of thing to yourself. Surely I must be missing something.

If I were a proper Christian, something about my life would look or feel a bit grander than I look or feel. I'm not expecting total transformation, Lord, but surely something would look a bit more substantial in my life than my life seems now.

I feel disappointed with my behavior. I feel disappointed with my experience of God. I wish the gospel message worked more powerfully in the world. Don't you wish that sometimes?

I wish my church had more impact. If only something I could see and touch were convincingly worth investing in, then I could keep giving myself to it.

I wonder if you've thought that kind of thought. If you have, and if you've worried about that, then this is a great morning to be here.

[4 : 29] For the passage we're in this morning leads us into precisely that sort of territory. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 1. Remember where we are. We're in the first century AD, probably about AD 54 or 55.

About 25 years after the death of Jesus. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, southern Greece, a big city, a church that began with his visit about five years before this.

He hasn't seen them for probably getting on for three years. And since he left, big problems have arisen. Now, this morning we're in one of these rather difficult letters, better known sections.

So much so that if you've been a Christian for a number of years, you may even have mentally yawned slightly as this passage was read out.

It's pretty familiar, really, to many of us. It's a section of the Bible often used in the defense of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And so, at first glance, this is a very familiar little passage.

[5 : 40] If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you're probably quite familiar with this. Now, I'm going to dive straight into this, and I want to say three things about this section today.

We are going to start with the familiar, but by the end, I can almost guarantee that we will be in unfamiliar territory that will be both sharply challenging and wonderfully reassuring.

Here's the first thing, and we begin with the very familiar. First point, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead really did happen.

Now, you can see why this passage is used in defense of the resurrection of Jesus, because it talks a lot about the resurrection of Jesus and how it really did happen. Just look at what is said about Jesus, verse 3.

He died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. Verse 4. He was buried. That's talking about something that happened to his body.

[6 : 41] Verse 4. That he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. That's also talking about something that happened to his body. And verse 5. That he appeared.

Four verbs. Died, was buried, was raised, appeared. Or perhaps more correctly, two things that happened the way the scriptures said they would.

Did you notice that phrase in accordance with the scriptures? Verse 3. He died for our sins according to the scriptures. And verse 4. He was raised according to the scriptures.

Two according to the scriptures things. And two things that happened as a result of those. So, he died and was buried. He wouldn't have been buried unless he died.

And he was raised and he appeared. He wouldn't have appeared unless he'd been raised. Died, buried, was raised, appeared. But you'll notice that all the emphasis is on the appearing.

[7 : 47] Look at the verbs again starting at verse 3. Verse 3. Died. Verse 4. Two verbs. Was buried, was raised. Verse 5. Appeared.

Verse 6. Appeared. Verse 7. Appeared. Verse 8. Appeared. Died, was buried, was raised, appeared, appeared, appeared, appeared.

The emphasis is on his appearing as a resurrected person. There's no doubt that there's a big emphasis here on the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

appearances to lots of different people at a number of different times. And these are mostly people who are still alive. There are two named people.

There's Cephas, that's the apostle Peter, and there's James, the great Jerusalem leaders. Those two. They're still alive. And most of the apostles are still alive by the time of the writing of this.

[8 : 44] And that great group of 500, most of them, says Paul, are still alive, though some have died. We're only a quarter of a century on from the events.

There are loads of people still alive who saw the risen Jesus. There's no question at all that in this passage, Paul is bigging up the fact that the bodily resurrection happened as a checkable thing.

You can go to people and say, yes, I saw it, who will say, yes, I saw him. multiple living witnesses. Now, while we're on this, let me observe that Christianity is unashamedly based on historical events.

Unashamedly. Things that happened and people who were there to see them, to witness them, so that other people who weren't there to see them can know that they happened.

And it's not just, whoa, a big resurrection thing has happened and there were people who saw it. No, it's much more sophisticated than that. You see, the big things that God does, he announces in advance.

[9 : 57] He says what's going to happen and why it's going to happen and then he makes it happen and he provides people to witness it happening. That's why Paul uses these words according to the scriptures.

Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. He was raised to life according to the scriptures. In advance of that great event, God recorded in scripture that somebody was going to come and die for sins and rise again.

In other words, God has put in place for us a huge confidence building package so that anyone in any age can be quite sure that God has done what's required to deliver us from our sins and their dreadful consequences.

He announced it in advance in the scriptures. He made it happen and he made sure there were people around to see it happen so that everyone could know that it's happened.

Now, let me just observe that that is a marvelously open and transparent way of doing things, don't you think? And it's a wonderfully inviting and encouraging way of doing things.

[11 : 16] This is not a God who wants people to be ignorant or confused about what he's done. He's not playing hard to get. He's not having a game of spiritual hide and seek.

If you search really hard, maybe you'll find me. He's not giving us little Da Vinci Code type puzzles to solve before we know what's really true and can have his forgiveness and escape the judgment to come.

No, God says what he's going to do and then he does it and he makes sure people are around to record the fact that it's happened. It's right out there for everyone to see. So let me say that if you're a person here this morning who's just beginning to check the Christian message out for yourself, it's great to have you here, let me encourage you to take heart.

It is a big thing you're looking into and it has big implications but God does not expect us to take big steps in life blindly or foolishly or without reason.

That is not the way he works. Isn't that a relief? And if you're in that position, there's no better place to look than the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. That is the big thing announced in advance.

[12 : 37] He did it and he's made sure people were around to see that it happened. This is a passage that talks a lot about the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

And so it's not a bit surprising that one of the ways this passage has been used is to defend the fact that Jesus did rise from the dead.

However, that is not why this passage was written originally. It's not why it's here. You see, the people Paul is writing to don't doubt that miracles happen and they don't doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead.

That's not their problem. What some of the Corinthians seem to have lost sight of is that Christians will be raised from the dead. That's what they have a problem with.

So why does Paul make a big deal of the resurrection of Jesus at the beginning of this chapter if that's not their problem? Well, the answer is that when we look at the rest of this chapter and you'll have to wait till next month for that, we'll discover the Apostle Paul arguing that because the resurrection of Jesus has happened, the resurrection of those who belong to him will inevitably also happen.

[13 : 50] And of course that is a massive encouragement, isn't it? You may be becoming increasingly aware of your own mortality.

Doesn't take long in life, does it, till gravity starts taking over. Perhaps you're dealing with an illness. Or perhaps you're getting to the age when people in your family are beginning to die.

Or perhaps you're getting to the age when your friends are beginning to die. And you feel your frailty much more than you once did. And you know increasingly just how fragile life and all that goes on in it really is.

Well, if that's you, take heart. Christ died for sins according to the scriptures and was raised according to the scriptures.

and that will in the end completely undo sin and death in the bodily life of everyone who belongs to Jesus.

[15 : 02] All that you are so beginning to dread will in the end be completely undone because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Isn't that not a wonderful thing?

The bodily resurrection of Jesus guarantees your bodily resurrection if you belong to him. Take heart and come back for the rest of the chapter in the weeks ahead.

First thing then, this chapter teaches us the resurrection of Jesus, it really happened. And it's very encouraging. However, I want to spend the rest of the time drawing your attention to something that hardly ever gets mentioned when this section is taught.

It's the words I and me. Look at verse 1. I want to remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you which you received in which you stand and by which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word I preached to you unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received. Let me jump over to verse 8. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me for I am the least of the apostles and worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God but by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace towards me was not in vain.

[16 : 32] On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them though not I but the grace of God in me with me whether then it was I or they so we preach and so you believed.

On a quick word count the words Christ and he are mentioned seven times and the words I and me fifteen times.

Now is that not a surprise? In a passage that's supposed to be all about the resurrection of Jesus there's more about Paul in this passage than there is about Jesus. This is a chapter written to people who are sceptical about the resurrection of the dead and Paul leads by spending a great deal of time talking about him and his work.

Why is it important that he spends so much time talking about him and his work? Well let me get you on to point two that I want to make from this passage.

Something that's important this passage teaches. First Paul is a genuine apostle of Jesus that's what this passage teaches. Notice how the appearing of Jesus has a particular focus.

[17 : 49] It seems to be a chronological account. Look at verse five he appeared to Kephas then to the twelve then to more than five hundred then to James then to all the apostles and last of all to me.

It seems to be chronological but not but this isn't an account of all the appearances we have in the New Testament of Jesus. It's a selective account.

Why does he choose these episodes? Well I think the common factor in these appearances is the apostles. Peter and then the twelve and James and then the other apostles and it's very likely that the appearing to the big group in the middle was not without apostles.

This seems to be focusing on appearances of the risen Jesus to the apostles apostles. And then at the end of the list verse 8 there's Paul.

And the point is that Paul even though he's the last in the line is really an apostle. Counts himself in with that group.

[19 : 05] He was made an apostle when the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Do you notice that Paul mentions his message here? Verse 3 a message he received.

And he delivered. And it's the same message that verse 11 they the other apostles have also proclaimed.

Paul is a proper apostle. He makes that point quite strongly here. Why? Well because it seems that the Corinthians have in some way come to doubt that he is a proper apostle.

Doubt that he's the real thing. Doubt that they really do need to hold on to his message. He insists verse 2 that they really do need to hold on to his message.

If they don't hold on to it their belief will in fact have been empty belief. Useless. Belief that's going nowhere. It's his message about the death and resurrection of Jesus that the Corinthians need to hang on to.

[20 : 11] it looks as though they've come to suspect that his message might not be the real thing and is different in some way from the message of the other apostles.

But in verse 11 whether it was me or them we preach the same thing and you believe that. See he holds himself together with them.

Paul is a genuine apostle of Jesus. He makes that point strongly and related to that he makes the third point which is his work is a remarkable demonstration of resurrection power.

Notice how much he talks about his work verse 8. Last of all as to one untimely are born he appeared also to me.

For I'm the least of the apostles. Unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. That's what he once did. But by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace towards me was not in vain.

[21 : 21] On the contrary I worked harder than any of them. That's what he now does. You see the movement of what he once did what he now does. His work is an important subject here.

Do you notice that phrase untimely born? The translators have a bit of difficulty with that phrase because it has in it a word that's not found elsewhere in the New Testament. It might be better translated miscarried or stillborn.

It's a term that's used of a pregnancy that goes nowhere. there. And I think the thing he's saying is this.

My beginnings as an apostle were as unpromising as they could possibly be. As though totally dead and useless I was.

Why? Because I was a persecutor. I was as lacking in promise in terms of apostleship as a pregnancy that ends in no life. But by God's grace that has changed.

[22 : 32] And when God showed his grace to me that grace had a real effect. It wasn't in vain. What did that grace result in? What did the grace of God result in for Paul?

Such an ordinary thing. Verse 10. Hard work. Isn't that a surprise? That's what grace looks like when somebody's life is taken over by it.

Hard work. In fact he says harder work than any of the other apostles. And he isn't blowing his own trumpet. He adds not I but the grace of God that's with me. What did God's grace do in Paul's life?

It made him move from persecutor to hardest gospel worker of all. From death to life.

In fact God's grace seems to have been more efficacious in Paul than in the other apostles. Now why does Paul talk like this at the beginning of this great chapter about the resurrection?

[23 : 34] Well the reason is that throughout this letter all the way through this letter from beginning to end the Corinthians look at Paul's pattern of work and they think it's a pretty poor showing for an apostle.

That's the big problem I think in this letter. Let me give you a couple of examples of that. Look back to chapter four would you please? Here's what the Corinthians think of themselves in comparison with Paul.

Verse eight. Chapter four verse eight. Already you have all you want. Already you've become rich. Without us you've become kings and would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you.

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all. That's an interesting phrase isn't it? He picks the same phrase up in chapter 15. I the last of all.

Like men sentenced to death because we've become a spectacle to the world to angels and to men we are fools for Christ's sake but you are wise in Christ. That's what the Corinthians think of him.

[24 : 50] They think he's a fool in contrast with them. We are weak but you are strong. You are held in honor we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst.

We're poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless and we labor working with our own hands. they don't like his lifestyle.

Especially they don't like his work style. He works hard. He earns his own keep making tents. He doesn't have a home to go to.

He doesn't have enough money. He doesn't have enough food. He has rubbish clothes. He just doesn't look like a really cool apostle ought to look. He's an embarrassment to them.

Turn quickly on to chapter 9. Here's another example of how they think of him in comparison to others. A whole set of questions he asks at the beginning of chapter 9.

[25 : 55] Am I not free? The Corinthians don't think that he's really a free man. Am I not an apostle? They doubt that. Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? They're not sure about that.

Are you not my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I'm not an apostle, at least surely I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me.

Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Kephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?

Once again we see the Corinthian disapproval of Paul's working patterns. He won't take our money. He won't be supported by us.

He insists on earning his own keep. Why does he do that? Kephas didn't do that when he visited. Neither did the brothers of the Lord. Maybe they've also visited Corinth.

[26 : 57] Now turn on to chapter 15. Who are the named apostles in chapter 15? Kephas, Peter, and James, the brother of the Lord.

Almost certainly in comparison with the other apostles, the apostle Paul looks pretty rubbish really. He doesn't impress them nearly so much as those more recent visitors have.

They don't like his style. They don't like the way he does things. they have a slightly less difficult looking life than the apostle Paul.

They have a pattern that the Corinthians would rather have than the apostle Paul's way of doing things. So what does Paul do at the beginning of chapter 15?

He says the sign of being on the receiving end of God's grace is not a life of ease but a life of difficult hard work which actually the other apostles share it with me.

[28 : 11] I'm not the only one. And the sign of having coming to life spiritually is not a life that looks like a wonderful resurrected life free from suffering and death all of a sudden.

No, the sign of coming to life spiritually for Paul is a pattern of living that looks very like Jesus on the road to the cross rather than Jesus after resurrection from the dead.

A life marked by difficulty and suffering, a kind of death-shaped life. Indeed, as we go through chapter 15, he uses precisely that language to describe his work. He says, I die every day.

That's what my life is like. the putting aside of my own concerns for the sake of other people and their salvation. The sign of God's grace at work in a life is that that life begins to embrace the pattern of Jesus on the road to the cross rather than after the resurrection from the dead.

life. A life that puts its own interests to one side for the sake of the salvation of others. A life that does not seek comfort and ease now, but rather looks forward to resurrection on the last day.

[29 : 39] That's the sign of being spiritually alive, that you look increasingly like one who is dying to self. Now, there's a conundrum.

This was very challenging for the Corinthians and it is for us. You see, resurrection lies the other side of the road to the cross.

It did for Jesus and it does for those who belong to him. I would so like to have a comfortable life now, wouldn't you?

I long for comfort. But that is not the life the Lord Jesus lived and it is not the shape of the life heading for resurrection.

It is not the life that the Lord has called me to. He has not called me to a life of comfort and neither has he you. What does the Lord Jesus say? If anyone would come after me, he must get ready for a cushy life.

[30 : 47] It's not what he says, is it? If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. That's precisely what the apostle Paul is saying here. The grace of God leads to hard work, a life that embraces death rather than trying to not think about it and avoid it.

Yes, Paul does say very reassuring things here about the resurrection of Jesus, very reassuring things, but he also introduces some more uncomfortable ideas.

That he, with his pattern of life, is a genuine apostle and that that difficult, demanding, self-denying pattern of living is what a life gripped by resurrection power looks like, this side of death.

And both of those were very uncomfortable in Corinthian ears. And of course they are, in our own age. I need to be reminded all the time that I'm not in this world for my comfort.

That's not why I'm here. Now, I guess for most of us, almost certainly for most of us, ours will not be precisely the life of the apostle Paul's.

[32 : 07] We will not, most of us, be the itinerant cross-cultural missionary far from home and home comforts. that's not what life will mean for most of us. But, the grace of God at work in anyone's life will always push that person towards uncomfortable things for the good of others and for their salvation.

salvation. Whether it's the hard work, the discomfort of being identified as a follower of the Lord Jesus in your workplace or in your classroom, or whether it's the hard work, sometimes very unpromising looking in its outcome, of giving up free time to toil in some sort of gospel work for other people, people, or whether it's the hard work of preparing well week by week for my home group Bible studies, even though they don't seem to make much difference in people's lives, or my Sunday school club.

Sunday school is one of those really belief testing things in life. I used to do Sunday school with my wife. We used to spend all of Saturday preparing.

It was such a headache. I tried to understand the Bible passage. I tried to work out what it means. I tried to work out how to teach it to a bunch of eight to ten year olds. They roll in on Sunday morning.

They look exactly the same as they did last week when they left. I spend 40 minutes trying to communicate this very important message, managing the crowd control thing, and then at the end of the class they roll out looking precisely the same as they did on the way in.

[33 : 49] It doesn't take many weeks of having to do that to think, I wonder if this is going anywhere in the end. Much of Christian ministry is just like that. You do the same thing and the same thing and the same thing and it doesn't look all that good.

Whether it's that kind of hard work or whether it's this Sunday by Sunday hard work of talking to somebody I don't know after church rather than the comfortable person I do know.

at so many different levels following the Lord Jesus means extending ourselves into uncomfortable areas rather than a life of ease.

It's challenging isn't it? On the other hand this is a marvelously comforting and encouraging passage because if you have thought to yourself well surely something about the Christian life ought to look better and more substantial than I feel mine is at the moment.

Welcome to reality. What does it look like? A life gripped by resurrection power embraces the journey towards the cross rather than life after the resurrection.

[35 : 13] That's a wonderfully encouraging thing. If your life has got that cross shapeness to it you can be greatly encouraged that God's grace is at work in you.

Three things then. The resurrection of Jesus really happened. Paul is a genuine apostle and the real sign of resurrection power at work is hard often death shaped work which doesn't look all that fruitful.

But Paul says at the end of this chapter 1558 turn to it please. therefore my beloved brothers be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord knowing rather than seeing knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

let's pray together. Let's pray together. Just a pause to reflect on how to respond ourselves to what God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer.

for a prayer. So . . .

[37 : 02] Gracious God, we thank you for the example of the Apostle Paul, and thank you that we learn from him that the mark of somebody who is alive in Christ is that they embrace the death-shaped pattern full of frustrations and difficulties, the same pattern that Jesus followed on the road to the cross.

We thank you for this great encouragement, and we pray that knowing this to be true, we would be people who give ourselves wholeheartedly to the work of the Lord, even though in the present age that doesn't look fruitful, doesn't look where the action is.

Thank you that just as you have raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, so you will raise those who belong to him and bring to light what has really been of lasting worth.

Help us to encourage one another to give ourselves to this sort of work. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. .

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[38 : 40]